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KNOWLEDGE, CREATIVITY AND THE CITY

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Fundamental shifts have occurred in Southeast Asia’s cities since the decolonization process gained momentum in the mid-20th century. Accelerating rural-urban migration, an explosion in the population in informal employment, the growth in informal settlements and the expansion of industry were significant. Beginning in the 1990s, a global knowledge economy began to attract attention (e.g. Castells 1991). Although its spread is uneven across the region, it has begun to bring about some small but interesting shifts in the way in which people live and work in urban Southeast Asia (Menkhof, Evers, Wah and Fong 2011; Asian Development Bank 2014a, 2014b). The pace and depth of change is highly uneven, being more evident in larger cities, and in those countries with advanced manufacturing and modern services oriented economies. Nevertheless, it challenges the way we conceptualize, theorize and think about Southeast Asia’s cities.

With the sole exception of cities in Thailand, Southeast Asia’s cities all experienced periods of colonial control. The emerging postcolonial cities diverged, driven by socialist governments in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, a strong and recurring military presence in Myanmar and Thailand, and strengthening market-based economies in Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam and Timor Leste. A little over 70 years later vestiges of post-colonial differences remain, but each country is essentially a largely state-managed market economy. Socialism’s impact on the cities of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos has been whittled away, although some vestiges of socialist practice remain, such as state ownership of land and an entrenched governing elite.

The sharpest exponents of critical urban theory over the last 50 years have been from Marxists (or more accurately neo-Marxists) and Postmodernists. Neither has sustained sufficient momentum to be implemented on a large scale, though some, such as Harvey (1973, 1989), remain significant contributors to urban theory. Current critical analysis tends to aim at discrediting theories stemming from the neoliberal market-economy paradigm, but without a serious, detailed alternative that is adopted in urban policies. Most social scientists remain embedded in a single, albeit evolving, multi-stranded paradigm. Good social science demands the continuous connection of arguments to the primary theoretical propositions of the prevailing paradigm. A rigorous and respected social science invariably extracts improvements through corrections, revisions and elaborations based on new insights and evolving streams of thought. Paradigms are rarely discarded but are subject to continuous incremental change.
The dominant urban theories that become implemented in urban policies, including in Southeast Asia, center on the functioning of the city in a market economy, as for example, is manifest in plans and policies to improve competitiveness through expanding the market economy and leveraging global markets. Other strategies emphasize managing the welfare of the population and the protection of the physical environment. The drivers of change are a variable combination of government, economic agents and civil society.

Rapid urbanization since the 1950s has transformed the colonial cities, expanding industry and enabling increased numbers of rural migrants to join the informal sector. Services growth has centered on administration and burgeoning retail sectors. Neoliberalism has been growing in significance since the 1930s, and surged during the 1970s, led by high profile leaders Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Neoliberals placed a premium on competition and the role of the market, minimal taxation, and a reduction in the power and size of government (see Monbiot 2016). Critics of neoliberalism in urban studies work to identify and explore the failings of the market orientation, essentially arguing that the corporate drivers of the economy are excessively powerful and, ultimately, counter-productive. They bemoan the diminished and distorted role of government and the undermining or diverting of the influence of civil society.

Knowledge, creativity and human capital

A relatively recent development in urbanizing Southeast Asia is the strengthening of the knowledge economy. How significant is this, and how might it be situated in, and in turn influence, an urban theoretical framework?

There are four structural components underpinning the knowledge economy: the existence of a suitable institutional structure capable of understanding economic imperatives; an array of innovative firms, systems and institutions committed to developing innovations; an adequate ICT network that is able to keep pace with necessary improvements; and a population with appropriate levels of education, skills and creativity. Human capital, the last of these components, is fundamental.

Many overlapping formulations connect knowledge, creativity, human capital and cities. Modern knowledge cities are the product of a period of accelerated growth in the research capacity of selected American universities fuelled by Cold War defence spending (O’Mara 2004). In The 10 Traits of Globally Fluent Metro Areas McDearman, Clark and Parilla (2013: 20) identify the strategic importance of a ‘culture of knowledge and innovation’. According to UN ESCAP and UN-HABITAT (2015: 63), it is ‘tacit knowledge’ that is most important for cities: ‘knowledge that is collective rather than individual and can only be gained on-site’. Hanushek and Woessman (2015: 1; 2016) strongly argue that ‘expanding quality education is the only feasible way to generate long-term economic growth’. They criticize over-reliance on educational participation per se and argue instead for the quality of education and the measurable acquisition of cognitive skills.

Understanding the complex connections between universities, creativity, human capital and knowledge cities is of growing interest to researchers and urban managers (see, for example, Wildavsky 2010; May and Perry 2011; Menkhof, Evers, Wah and Fong 2011; Perry and May 2011; Forbes 2014). A ‘sustainable knowledge-intensive city that drives growth in the wider city-region’ is called an ‘ideopolis’ (Jones et al. 2006: 5). The creativity and vibrancy of a city enhances its prospects of being economically competitive. In Florida’s (2005: 251–253) formulation, technology, talent and tolerance are central features of creative, economically competitive, cities. The emergence of a diverse ‘creative class’ is central to Florida’s argument, driving economic growth and creating the conditions for more vibrant, liveable cities.
Universities feature in all of these threads, contributing to technology through research, innovation and invention. They are ‘the Ellis Islands of the creative age’ (Florida 2005: 251), attracting and nurturing talent. And universities promote tolerance within communities, by demonstrating in their campus environments the synergy created by ethnic, cultural and socio-economic diversity, open discussion and new ideas. Not unexpectedly, cities and universities increasingly seek to enhance global competitiveness, underpinned by a mutual interest in becoming key nodes in the global knowledge economy and the associated cultural circuit of capital. While their interests are rarely identical, cities and universities increasingly cross paths, prompting them to seek competitive advantages by establishing alliances.

The impact of the creative class, however, needs to be put into context. It also has a ‘dark side’. Urban strategies based on building the creative class did not always succeed; in many instances cities failed to attract sufficient creative businesses to have an impact. In other cities that succeeded in fostering new creative businesses it encouraged urban gentrification, increasing the cost of housing and services, and driving out existing communities. Florida now argues for a more ‘inclusive urbanism’ that ‘invests in residents’ skills rather than yuppifying their neighbourhoods’ (DePillis 2016; Florida 2017).

Knowledge and creativity are inter-connected and overlapping pillars of the knowledge economy and are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive. Knowledge is generally associated with a more formal education and research agenda. Creativity is often a product of knowledge, but knowledge is also sourced in diverse situations of tradition, imagination and, not unusually, contrariness. As a result, creative practices and initiatives are generally only loosely connected to formal knowledge frameworks. Despite their overlap, it is useful to explore these ideas separately in order to understand their significance to the way in which we might look at future urbanism.

Knowledge and the university city

Clark Kerr believed that ‘the wealth of nations now depends on the performance of higher education as never before, through its contribution to building human capital and accumulated knowledge’ (Cole 2009: 109). Much is expected of 21st-century universities, including a clear and transparent view of their purpose. They will continue to build and diversify human capital, from professional science, technology, engineering and medical qualifications to the liberal arts. And they will continue to be about the critical interrogation, circulation and distribution of knowledge. Research is a component of the scholarship of knowledge, but it is not necessary to all knowledge development. Critical commentary, the engagement of the public intellectual and the creative arts are each essential to the university’s ability to build human capital and enhance the knowledge economy, but are not necessarily entirely centered in research.

The steady growth in international education in the 1990s, particularly in the mobile cohort of international fee-paying students, contributed to the gradual re-formulation of the relationships between cities and universities and the potential benefits of being a knowledge city. As international education grew into big business it became a contributor to urban and national economies in its own right. Increasingly, knowledge city strategies address both the expansion of intellectual resources to generate innovation and the attraction of fee-paying international students. The two, of course, are synergistically connected.

Education hub strategies have been devised to supplement and enhance local institutions with universities attracted from abroad. Singapore is one of the best known, having expressed its intentions in the 1990s to be ‘the Asia-Pacific hub for world class university education and
training’ (Ministry of Information and the Arts 1997: 116–118). The Singapore Economic Development Board launched a ‘World Class University’ program in 1997 aimed at making Singapore a global education hub by attracting ten world class universities to Singapore within ten years (Cheung and Sidhu 2003; Forbes and Cutler 2006: 181). The program has been largely successful, although some universities have come and gone. The challenge is to better understand the re-shaping of the modern university and what it means to the imagining of future cities, higher education forms and the relationships between them. Specific and important is the process of adjustment by universities to the opportunities created by a globalizing knowledge economy.

A short case study teases out some significant issues. At the 2009 World Economic Forum the Presidents of the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Yale University met. With the active support of the Singapore Government, they commenced discussions on the setting up of a new college, although a visit to Singapore by Yale’s President attracted substantial criticism, setting the tone for public engagement as the idea developed (Yee 2009). Eventually, on a visit to New Haven by Singapore’s Minister for Education in 2010, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed. Yale–NUS College would be an institution for 1,000 liberal arts students, centered on residential colleges. Breadth of study and critical thinking would be the core of the curriculum, and the three majors would be in the humanities, science and social sciences (Caplan-Bricker 2010: 3). An official launch of Yale-NUS College followed in 2011 and a ground-breaking ceremony in 2012, paving the way for liberal arts education to perceptibly help stimulate a broad spectrum of creative and innovative thinking.

In addition to Yale-NUS College, Singapore hosts a number of American, British and Australian universities, including the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and a Singapore MIT-Alliance. However, other American universities have withdrawn from Singapore. A Johns Hopkins Division of Biomedical Sciences research center withdrew in 2006; the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business relocated to Hong Kong; New York University closed its Tisch School of the Arts and its Singapore Law School; and the University of Nevada at Las Vegas has exited.

The city expects university branch campuses to diversify and strengthen the education provided locally, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, while the government has a strong view about the most appropriate curricula focus. However, curriculum matters proved problematic. Early on the Singapore Minister of Education welcomed the Yale-NUS initiative saying, ‘The Government is supportive of Yale and NUS’s efforts to develop a liberal arts . . . that is contextualized to Singapore and Asia’ (Ng 2010). Contextualized was the pivotal word. Later at the College launch the Yale President, wary of criticism within Yale, optimistically noted that ‘Our agreement with NUS incorporates the language protecting academic freedom . . . and affirms consistency with Yale’s policies on non-discrimination’ (Levin and Salovey 2011).

Criticism mounted steadily through 2011, with the key voices predominantly from Yale faculty. It took off in 2012. It was argued that it was wrong for a liberal arts education to be provided in a state that curbed freedom of speech and trampled the rights of citizens and residents, including the LGBT community. As it gained momentum it has broadened to become an argument that American universities should not establish campuses in foreign countries with authoritarian regimes. This debate has currency well beyond Southeast Asia (Pendras and Dierwechter 2012).

Many significant issues are associated with the Yale-NUS arrangement and its contribution to building the knowledge economy. Questions have been asked about: the benefits of branch campuses, the effect on the number of international students in the city, the impact of the students and graduates, the changing management and governance structures within globalizing
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universities (universities as global corporations), the effect on the global competitiveness of the cities and its attractiveness for business investors or migrants.

Singapore is pre-eminent as a university hub in Southeast Asia, with its National University of Singapore (top 150) and Nanyang Technology University (top 200) the only two universities in Southeast Asia in the Top 500 Academic Ranking of World Universities (2015). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) deemed Singapore as having ‘dynamic local knowledge clusters correlated with high levels of innovation’, which promotes a ‘creative society’ and ‘nurtures the arts, various high tech and research enterprises’ (2013: 68). Singapore’s strategy also has a focus on knowledge architecture and knowledge clusters populated by think tanks, universities and research agencies (Menkoff, Evers, Chay and Pang 2011).

The establishment of a cluster of foreign university campuses has also taken place in Malaysia, for example in Bandar Seri Iskandar, located in Johor, close to the border with Singapore (Yigitcanlar and Sarimin 2011). It is also occurring across other parts of Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam. University city strategies that import branch campuses of prestigious universities strengthen the city’s image as a student hub with a prominent knowledge economy that is good for the city’s brand. How good, and precisely what they achieve, are another matter.

Footloose behavior among university branch campuses appears significant, in part because the fixed costs of infrastructure are often minimal. It provokes questions about the strategic intentions of universities establishing foreign campuses and the sustainability of foreign university precincts. Ultimately, the bigger question is about the level of significance of universities in driving change and improvements in the social, cultural and economic life of the city and its residents and, more ambitiously, the nation as a whole. This is obvious in Singapore, but it is much more problematic in the large and more geographically dispersed Southeast Asian countries.

Looking beyond the explicit role of universities, Southeast Asian nations have mixed approaches to the knowledge economy. Thailand claims to have strengths in city innovation systems and uses the ‘city foresight’ approach that seeks to identify new phenomena and events that could drive significant change. The Bangkok 2033 project has adopted this method (Chairatana 2015). Myanmar has the least well-developed knowledge economy in Southeast Asia, with an absence or limited provision of ICT, mobile phones and the internet before the reform. To make matters worse, in 2010 Myanmar modified internet services to provide more government surveillance options (Ritter 2014).

The formation of the ASEAN Economic Community (ASEAN 2011) will possibly enable improvements in the region’s knowledge economies, but this is a lesser priority compared to trading relationships. Issues such as enhanced cooperation within the ASEAN University Network and strengthening research capabilities and the extension of arrangements for mutual recognition of qualifications in fields such as architecture and medical practice are mentioned. Overall though, the needs of the knowledge economy seem to be a lesser priority in the strategy.

Finally, despite the progress being made in the development and expansion of Southeast Asia’s knowledge economy, issues remain. An example is the challenge to ensure the integrity of graduate qualifications. Bogus qualifications either from real universities or fake universities, and bogus accreditation agencies, are serious concerns. At the institutional level widespread plagiarism and gaming the exam system through the use of substitutes further raise questions about the integrity of tertiary qualifications. The activities are of scale, illegal and fast moving, making them very hard to measure and track. The expansion of online education, and the publicity given to the emergence of MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses), has accelerated the globalizing of the delivery of tertiary education. Southeast Asian countries are vulnerable; many education institutions are not well known internationally, so foreign awards have attracted a premium in workplaces.
Creativity and the city

Creativity is the second force capable of contributing to building and sustaining a modern urban economy. Creativity is an inextricable element of a knowledge focus, while Charles Landry (2003: 12) calls it ‘the currency of the age’. The decision to make the liberal arts a centerpiece of the Yale-NUS collaboration underlines the expectation that it could enhance creative thinking in the Singapore context.

UNESCO’s Creative Cities Network (UCCN) was created in 2004 with the aim of promoting cooperation between cities that identified creativity as a strategic component of sustainable urban development. The decision to join the network is made by the city itself, not the national government, as is the case with registration of a World Heritage site. Seven creative fields have been identified: Crafts and Folk Arts, Literature and Music Design, Media Arts, Film and Gastronomy. The network comprises some 116 cities. The objective of the UCCN is to foster ‘strategies, policies and initiatives aimed at making culture and creativity a driving force for sustainable development and urban regeneration’, and to ‘locate creative and cultural industries in the center of local development plans while cooperating internationally’ (UNESCO 2016). Southeast Asian cities in the network include Phuket (gastronomy), Pekalongan (crafts and folk art) and Bandung and Singapore (both design).

Initiatives such as the Creative Cities Network represent a formalized, state-driven approach. However, much of the strengthening of creative enterprises is driven through businesses, for example in tourism. Some societies in Asia recognize substantial continuity between traditional and more recent innovative, creative activities. In Indonesia, ‘creative city’ has become a buzzword among government officials, consultants and NGOs (UNDP 2013: 71).

Some ‘low productivity yet high skill [creative] activities constitute part of the informal economy’ (UNDP 2013: 71). An example is the manufacture of textiles. These pose a policy challenge in the attempt to bring them to the point where they are capable of generating appropriately remunerated, competitive and sustainable businesses. Innovation and the creative economy in practice could go hand in hand with local culture and religion. In Indonesia fashion label Up2Date caters for the needs of fashionable Muslim clients. Malaysia holds an annual Islamic Fashion Festival that attracts people from throughout Southeast Asia. In Bangkok, there are some 20,000 businesses focused on fashion. Thailand’s Board of Investment provides incentives to creative industries resulting in associations and collectives being formed for handicrafts, comic book artists, animators, performers, costume designers and the fashion industry (UNDP 2013: 75).

While the initiatives of businesses and governments are prominent, the creative arts also benefit from non-government, non-profit organizations driven by the need to connect and improve the arts; for example, My Dance Alliance Malaysia (MDAM) (2016), which is affiliated with the World Dance Alliance. MDAM was launched in 2001 and runs a vibrant program connecting dancers in Malaysia, hosting auditions for professional dance roles, running classes and events. It is building links with dance communities in the ASEAN region and supporting events with dancers from countries including Japan, Australia and France.

Towards a new theoretical architecture

Northeast Asian countries have exerted a disproportionally significant influence on the way we think about and develop strategies to drive economic growth. The post-War success of the Japanese economy, the subsequent emergence of the “tiger economies” in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong (and Singapore) and, in the last decade, the expansion of China’s
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economy, have all been influential in Southeast Asia and many other parts of the world. They have created a powerful model for economic development, with the state playing a role that is more significant than advocated by proponents of the market and private sector driven neoliberal theoretical edifices.

In addition to the significant role of government, a common factor in these Northeast Asian countries’ success has been the emphasis on knowledge and human capital. An indicator is school performance as measured by the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores for 2015 (OECD PISA 2015a, 2015b). Shanghai and Singapore performed best across all three PISA areas of mathematics, reading and science. Together with Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong this group of countries were in the top five for mathematics, the top 11 for reading and the top 20 for science. It reinforces the significance of human capital in the outlook of these predominantly northeast Asian countries. A further illustration of the drive to strengthen the knowledge economy is China’s investment in universities and the huge number of Chinese studying abroad. Another is the considerable effort made in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea to invest and support high quality universities.

There is a very broad range of commitment among Southeast Asian countries to knowledge and creative strategies, but countries do not score well on the most recent World Bank Knowledge Economy Index (World Bank 2012). It is a composite measure based on economic incentives and the institutional regime, innovation and technological adoption, education and training, and information and communications technologies (ICT) infrastructure. Southeast Asian countries span the full breadth of the World Bank Index, though with a marked clustering at the lower end. Singapore (23rd) is the best placed followed by Malaysia (48th) and Thailand (66th). Next come the Philippines (92nd), Vietnam (104th), Indonesia (108th), Laos (131st), Cambodia (132nd) and Myanmar (145th). For comparison, Taiwan (13th), Hong Kong (18th) and Japan (22nd) are all ranked higher than any Southeast Asian country; China is ranked 84th. The ranking exercise needs to be updated, but it reveals the magnitude of the effort that will be needed to strengthen the knowledge economy throughout Southeast Asia. All these data are available based on countries rather than cities, but typically in Southeast Asia human capital in urban areas is higher than in rural areas due to uneven development within a country.

Another more specific ranking of some limited use is the QS Best Student City Rankings 2016 (QS 2016). It assesses global cities in terms of their attractiveness to students, student mix, desirability, affordability and employer activity. This is a partial surrogate indicator of the knowledge status of cities as reflected in the demand for undergraduate and postgraduate education. Singapore is ranked 6th, Kuala Lumpur at 53. No other Southeast Asian countries feature among the 74 listed in the annual ranking.

Theory is a necessary dimension of the social sciences. The emergence of socialist regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the 1970s resulted in a shift of focus to rural and regional development and away from the main cities (Thrift and Forbes 1986; Forbes and Thrift 1987). Urban development was associated with capitalism and posed risks to governing regimes. Drawing on the experience of China and the USSR, city growth was slowed, in part by forcing residents to the rural areas, notably in Cambodia. Since the gradual dilution of the socialist influence in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the 1990s, urban strategies across Southeast Asia have slowly converged.

Southeast Asian countries have increasingly a lengthy list of key aspects in common: migration, urbanization, industrialization, evolving market economies, employment patterns, the informal sector, manufacturing, infrastructure development, urban land and transport, cultural tensions, disempowerment, urban resilience, political structures and the redistribution of power through the enrichment of comprador elites. In Southeast Asia aspirations to build modern socialist cities
have dissipated (see Logan 2000: 221–252 on Hanoi). There is far more recognition of globally applicable perspectives and models for urban development. Southeast Asian regimes have recently been exposed to, or continue to experience, political turmoil (Thailand, Myanmar). Others are governed by entrenched elites (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos). The democracies (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines) have fashioned models of democratic governments with characteristic features across a broad spectrum of practice.

New theoretical propositions and frameworks must re-align and re-balance the emphases of the past. It is a challenge. It means dealing with a complex, fast-moving, often invisible range of processes, technologies, information and flows. In the kinds of economies that are emerging, power must be devolved; it compounds the difficulties of theorizing. At the heart of contemporary critical angst is the argument that power, wealth and status concentrate under neoliberal regimes with the inevitable consequence of an increase in inequality and a reckless indifference to the social good. The solution is a more balanced distribution of power between democratically elected governments and civil society, with a diluted, circumscribed role for the non-state agents responsible for creating and managing the economy and accumulated wealth.

Knowledge and creativity are not solely the outcomes of modernity. There is increasing awareness of the human capital value of knowledge and creativity embedded in and sourced from the traditions and practices of artists, designers, musicians, dancers and performers. These cannot continue to be seen as vestiges of the past, to be only brought out in stuffy ceremonies based in an imagined history. Embedded within them are concepts, ideas and practices that can enliven and enhance conceptual thinking and contribute to a productive, appropriately remunerated and sustainable skill-set and lifestyle. A new theoretical architecture is needed, teased out of the intricacies of this kind of complex urban change.

Florida’s conception of the creative class focuses on the knowledge economy and has its origins in the American experience. Its strength is its empirical focus. New theoretical approaches will need to give significantly more credence to small-scale economic activity. There are similarities with the microenterprises of the informal sector. In one Australian schema a parallel is referred to as the bespoke economy, emerging from a renaissance of the small arts and crafts and resulting in concentrations of artisans in inexpensive central urban precincts (Westbury 2015).

A rejuvenated framing is needed for Southeast Asian cities. The larger countries have advantages because of population size and, up until now, the relatively significant proportions of younger citizens, though these numbers are in steady decline as overall population growth rates slow. The least affected will be the Philippines, and to a lesser extent, Malaysia (Jones 2013: 20–21). Creatively they draw on strong cultural bases but are often hindered by lingering poverty, unstable state control of the economy and excess regulation. Many Southeast Asian cities will have opportunities to expand the creative class, fueled by large and, for a time at least, expanding youthful populations, unlike in the West. Therefore cities are a source of escalating human capital. They are in good locations relative to major concentrations of people in India and China that will be both consumers and competitors.

Demographic change in Southeast Asia creates demand for education. As a consequence, demand will increase for opportunities in both large and small businesses and the support to venture into innovative start-ups, if that recently global trend continues. New theoretical propositions will be shaped by an expectation of youthful urban populations and still fast-growing cities. What form of urban needs will emerge? Urban developments along the Chinese model of vast satellite cities, or a more nuanced and differentiated process of movement into both small and larger cities with varying densities of settlement? The creative class will have increasing opportunities to develop new ideas and innovations. In what niches would they focus? Would it be digital, communications, manufacturing or some other yet to be of significance? Would
Southeast Asia’s knowledge workers be able to find important niches in neighboring countries, focusing on growing demand from a huge, wealthy and Chinese middle class, in parallel with the opportunities stemming from the eventual opening up of the Indian economy?

Lines of theoretical discourse would concentrate on a constellation of processes such as: the reduction of excessive regulation of small business formation and functioning; the removal of barriers to high density areas in cities where there is integration of work, business and residential, supported by strong public transport (as in Singapore); a crackdown on excessively harsh treatment of small businesses, including exploitation, intimidation and bribery; the removal of political and legal barriers to free information flow; the provision of support for urban knowledge strategies, such as public recognition of successful knowledge based enterprises; the design of cities that use publicly funded infrastructure to create a better environment that integrates working, living and connectivity; facilitation of connections between pre-existing small businesses (including the informal sector) and new enterprises; expanding and concentrating broadband infrastructure (noting that some countries, such as Singapore and Thailand, already have quality broadband); the building of a more nuanced and active civil society; and learning from the changes underway in Singapore, Taipei, Shanghai and Seoul. To capture the tone, a Southeast Asian city’s mantra might be ‘differentiate, benchmark and compete’.

A dilemma is embedded in the theorization of the knowledge economy. It manifests as a concern that the steady expansion of segments of human capital, centered on the highly educated and the ‘creative class’, will continue to accumulate wealth and expand the rich elite without making sufficient inroads into improving the distribution of wealth across all of society. The extraordinary and rapid accumulation of wealth by digital economy and social media innovators in places such as the USA and China is well known. The diversion of some of that massive wealth towards community needs, illustrated most significantly by the strategy of Bill Gates, remains the approach of a few; it is far from being the norm for creative class entrepreneurs. A far greater proportion of the wealth generated is directed to outrageous investments in luxury goods, absurdly expensive real estate and the manipulation of democratic politics. There is little surprise that trickle down arguments continue to be vilified by the critics of neoliberalism.

A refocus is needed to avoid economic polarization. Florida argues for a strengthened emphasis on ‘inclusive urbanism’ to ensure that the knowledge economy does not further marginalize poor communities (DePillis 2016). Brenner (2009: 198) says that ‘another more democratic, socially just and sustainable form of urbanization is possible’. May and Perry (2011: 361–365) endorse this view and urge that we ‘see how the research-practice relationship between the university and the city mutually reshapes and defines each other’. Rather than center new theoretical structures around traditional economic categories, thought should be redirected to the emerging knowledge economy and education, creativity and the complexities of building and utilizing human capital. How will knowledge drive the economy, the services provided to urban residents, the physical shape of the city and the artistic and creative pursuits of citizens? In Southeast Asia these matters vary significantly from Phnom Penh or Yangon to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. How might Southeast Asian cities learn from one another and build a stronger, fairer and more resilient network of knowledge-centered Southeast Asian cities?

Theory should embrace the broader complexity of urban development. It should put things in context and assist us to think through complexity and ask the important questions. Cities must be resilient in the face of natural and human made disasters. How does the knowledge economy affect urban resilience? What is the consequence of expanding and strengthening the knowledge economy on each of the opposite ends of the economic spectrum? Will it lead to a further reduction in poverty? How can the reconciliation of a fast moving knowledge based
urban region engage in a productive and strategic way with shrinking small-scale agriculture and the medium and small towns that support it? How do we reconcile these different and distant ends of the spectrum?

There are risks in seeking to reframe theories and analytical strategies of cities around the knowledge economy, creativity and human capital. But it is a risk worth taking.

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