Why do we need to study urban development in Southeast Asia? Most of the world’s population is now urban (UN-Habitat, 2017); rapid, widespread urbanization is not unique to Southeast Asia. Moreover, there has been plenty of research on various cities in this region, so why should we need more of it? I argue that studying urban development in Southeast Asia is important for at least two reasons: first, to contribute to larger conceptual understandings of urban development; and second, to shape a new vantage point that reconfigures the relationship between academia and planning practice in contested urban landscapes. In other words, we need to critically revisit the “what” and the “how” of studying cities, as well as the extent to which the “what” and “how” are connected, and Southeast Asia provides valuable examples with which to do so. Many cities in Southeast Asia remain subjected to prescribed best practices from elsewhere, a symptom of insufficient conceptual development from studies in and of this region to build a comprehensive and robust understanding of urbanization. We face an urgent need to reshape studies of urban development in Southeast Asia in light of the consequences of urbanization for everyday lived experiences.

What is it about Southeast Asia that has most influenced the shape of cities, urban life, and urbanization? Is there anything distinctive about urban development in Southeast Asia? Much of what we find in Southeast Asia is not distinct to this region. More than two decades ago, Howard Dick and Peter Rimmer warned that “any attempt to explain either the historical or contemporary urbanization of south-east Asia as a unique phenomenon is ... doomed to absurdity” (1998: 2319). It was Terry McGee’s concept of desakota (1991) – a mixed village-city, agricultural-urban landscape – as a distinctive urbanization pattern in the region that Dick and Rimmer (1998) viewed as a variation of urban sprawl that can be found elsewhere. To this day, desakota continues to be influential in studies of urbanization in developing countries, including in China and India. The expansion of the application of the concept beyond the region in which it emerged indicates that the phenomenon may not be distinctively Southeast Asian. Therefore, the key reason to study urban development in Southeast Asia is not to look for its distinctiveness. Rather, studying urban development in Southeast Asia is important for identifying patterns and processes of city life that are not sufficiently explained by existing theories and concepts.

Understanding the patterns and processes of Southeast Asia’s urban development is part of a larger effort to build knowledge about cities, urban life, and urbanization. The range of studies of urban development in Southeast Asia...
today reflects Margit Mayer’s concerns in her observation of urban studies in developing regions of the world: There are many case studies of local efforts and comparative analyses of various issues – such as poverty, social housing, evictions, and resistance movements – but there is not yet a comprehensive picture out of such a “fragmented map of . . . hard-fought contestations” (2020: 45). However rich the literature on Southeast Asia, like studies of urbanization elsewhere it warrants a refocus, given rapidly changing realities on the ground and the need to better align academic perspectives, planners’ assumptions, and lived experiences.

A major challenge in refocusing studies of urban development is the emphasis on pragmatism in research, as urbanization has become the world’s recipe for economic growth. Such a pragmatic focus on delivering bread-and-butter issues obscures the need for critical analysis of political power inequalities inherent in development strategies. In other words, the ends of developments justify the means, and scholars are caught in this process. These urbanizations assume certain images of a desirable future, to be achieved through prescribed strategies for development. The problem with these future images is that, while they are normative in terms of to where and how to progress, they come with technocratic and investment-driven narratives that exacerbate power inequalities in urban development (Ghertner, 2010; Harms, 2012; Padawangi, 2018c). In a socially fragmented landscape with increasing complexities cultivated over several decades of rapid urbanization, urban development becomes an arena in which “progress” for some comes at a cost of displacement of others, often the socially and economically marginal.

Yet not only are urbanizing landscapes of Southeast Asia places of social marginalization and environmental destruction in the name of development, but they also present alternatives to the state’s official narratives. These alternatives are indicative of actions on the ground that reflect communities’ human agency and political life. Active participation of disenfranchised communities in urban development opens avenues to understanding cities, urban life, and urbanization as political terrain on which socially and politically active communal enclaves coexist with top-down planners.

By proposing a new vantage point that critically examines urban development, this Element helps to meet this important need for a deeper understanding of urbanization, one that captures how power inequalities manifest materially in urban spaces. First and foremost, this Element fully recognizes that urban development is political, and therefore studying urban development must be critical. This recognition is key to shaping one’s perspective on urban development and consequently influences the methods one selects. The methods that scholars and practitioners adopt – whether ground-up or top-down – ultimately
structure the ability of urban development to address core challenges of social justice and environmental justice in real-life settings. Therefore, the choice of perspective is not just “academic” but has real implications for the future of cities in Southeast Asia.

1.1 Southeast Asia as a Postcolonial Region

To study Southeast Asia’s urban development, the extent of its complexities, and its contradictions, one must understand the scope of the region itself. Mostly emerging in its current geopolitical form after World War II and decolonization, Southeast Asia is a relatively “new” region in the field of urban studies, and studies on urban development here grew along with the increasing role of the region in the world economy (Rimmer & Dick, 2019). Reflecting the fact that Southeast Asia is a postcolonial region, thus far its urban development has two contradictory realities: first, in extending colonial systems; and second, as stages for nationalist projects.

Urban development as an extension of colonial systems comes from the formation of Southeast Asia’s nation-states as “by-products” of colonial states (Anderson, 1983) in terms of their categories and territories, as well as the “cultural” positions of the residents as postcolonial subjects. Colonial urban planning was a tool to sustain order, contain disorder, and modernize as the “rational choice” to achieve the public good, but it did so to “incorporate colonies into the capitalist world economy” (Kusno, 2017a: 219; Yeoh, 1996). Such objectives continue in the postcolonial era, as urban planning applies technocratic approaches to gear cities to become gateways for global capitalism. Postcolonial urban planning extends to more all-encompassing scales, however, as contemporary capitalism requires participation of the whole landscape in the market economy (Yeoh, 1996).

We see the second frame, of urban development to showcase nationalism, in modern buildings and monumental projects in postcolonial times. Newly independent countries often rely on these buildings and projects to paint an image of a nation free of colonial subordination, but their now-sovereign leaders continue to preserve some legacies of the colonial era (Kusno, 2017b: 231). These monumental projects appear in official maps, but self-built, semi-autonomous enclaves do not appear in detail. In the colonial era, such semi-autonomous enclaves functioned as spaces for the Indigenous population but also contained those populations, albeit allowing a degree of self-governance. In the postcolonial era, these enclaves continue to absorb populations and buffer the government’s incapacity to provide affordable housing, but they continue to be underrepresented in cities’ official maps, which instead highlight flagship
projects and larger buildings. Moreover, their capacity for autonomy has declined as subsequent regulations and structural transformations have brought more spaces into the capitalist economy. Over time, urban development planning has tended increasingly in favor of technocratic planning, which provides spatial engineering tools for societal control and discipline to support economic growth, in the name of national progress.

These two contradictory realities share a core attribute: both are top-down. Nonetheless, contestation and negotiation also shape the city and urbanization processes in Southeast Asia, not just overarching control of the state. In her seminal work *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, Brenda Yeoh (1996) points to the importance of examining the role of urban actors in these challenges. In other words, although urban development seems to be a rational-technocratic vehicle to achieve public good, what gets built is a result of political processes, and it is important to understand these political processes to be able to obtain a comprehensive view of the seemingly fragmented city. This is a difficult terrain to navigate because it requires mapping political actors and linkages onto the built environment. Yet this navigation is necessary to allow in-depth understanding of urban development dynamics in Southeast Asia. An assumption of a linear progression of development is problematic, as the evolution of cities through various historical eras reflects a mix of continuity and discontinuity in urban systems. Such a situation requires scholars to focus on “distinctions between what is residual and tenacious, what is dominant but hard to see, and . . . what is emergent in today’s imperial formations – and critically resurgent in responses to them” (Stoler, 2008: 211).

1.2 Urban Development as Power Contestations

Urban development in Southeast Asia is a manifestation of power contestations. Property developers have emerged as dominant actors in the making of urban spaces in Southeast Asia, following the ascendancy of technocratic approaches and investment-driven planning in decades of postcolonial industrialization. Although several countries – namely Indonesia, the Philippines, and, to a certain extent, Thailand and Myanmar (before the latter’s military coup in 2021) – have undergone waves of democratization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, even the democratization process “did not sufficiently address the urban development course that allowed over-corporatization of urban spaces” (Padawangi, 2014: 47).

The continued hegemony of technocratic planning in global-capitalism-plugged economies has converted built environments into spaces that celebrate consensus while stigmatizing dissent. Beautiful, tidy landscapes embody
aspirations for a “good city.” For instance, Erik Harms (2012) observes in Ho Chi Minh City the extent to which those who were displaced by city beautification projects had internalized aspirations for neatly manicured spaces and therefore resigned themselves to the fate of being evicted. Beautification is part of many cities’ urban development practices, intended to project their competitiveness in the globalizing economy. Those projects pursue convenience and beautiful landscapes at all cost, as prescriptive strategies to facilitate economic growth. When urban spaces become economic assets, the concept of public space fades, as political discussions in such spaces are seen as obstacles to safe orderliness (Bayat, 2012). Forced displacements for these projects become pragmatic decisions, taken to implement projects framed as necessary interventions to modernize the city.

The increasing implementation of these neoliberal practices as “the new orthodoxy within urban governance” (Paddison, 2009: 8) raises questions regarding the maintenance of political spaces within rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia. When contemporary urban development and governance regimes constrain the political spaces that societies have relied upon thus far to participate in the making of cities and urban life in Southeast Asia, what are the consequences for urban development trajectories in the region? The question also applies the other way around: What are the consequences of these urban development trajectories for politics in the region? And to what extent do scholars take those consequences into account in assessing urban spaces, projects, and governance?

1.3 Structure of the Element

This Element dissects patterns and processes of urbanization in Southeast Asia to demonstrate that these have always been political and to chart an agenda for future studies of urban development. Section 2 follows historical trails to analyze aspects of urban planning in the past that still characterize Southeast Asia’s urban development in the present. The discussion continues in Section 3 by dispelling the “lack of planning” myth as a stereotype of urbanization in Southeast Asia. The section’s emphasis on the mismatch between urban plans, implementation, and everyday life on the ground, which bears the consequences of injustices that urban development exacerbates, leads to Section 4, on the “how” of studying urban development. Since top-down perspectives in practice are limited in their ability to address injustices, studies of urban development require groundedness for a more complete picture of power inequalities and their impacts on urban life. This section examines innovative research methods and approaches to connect scales from the micro to the macro and to critically
question the limits of administrative boundaries. It should no longer be accept-
able to rely only on official data and formal channels, as such an approach obscures reality on the ground. Section 5 continues with the consequences of these approaches for understanding social and environmental justice in urban development. The discussion connects social and environmental issues with urban politics, in which stakeholders and the power inequalities among them have real impacts on lives and livelihoods and make the city a political stage in pursuit of (and against) justice.

Section 6, on the region’s urban futures, discusses potentials and possibilities for Southeast Asia’s cities and the study of them. This section covers aspirations for and imaginations of the future of the urban, from multiple perspectives. Given the misalignment of interests that the preceding section identifies, these perspectives from various urban development actors diverge, yielding fragmented visions of the city, notwithstanding points of convergence. As neoliberal government regimes constrain political spaces and present urban development as a series of pragmatic fixes for the built environment, aspirations for the future city take the shape of assemblages of imagined interventions that appear technical and still reflect the hegemony of technocratic planning in the city. Paying closer attention to the role of activism in directing urban futures, though, highlights the importance of observing alternative urban development programs and projects as counter-, yet inseparable, narratives to technocratic and investment-driven official ones. Such an emphasis recognizes the human agency that continues to shape cities and urban developments in Southeast Asia. Studies of urban development in Southeast Asia require clear awareness of power inequalities to avoid aggravating them. One challenge that lies immediately ahead is the availability of data to study and to conceptualize alternative development projects, and therefore the Element concludes with a call for engaged scholarship on urban development in Southeast Asia.

2 Historical “Debris” in Southeast Asia’s Urban Development

Southeast Asia took shape as a geographical region in urban studies mostly after World War II as the countries involved underwent rapid industrialization. Yet urban development in Southeast Asia has a significantly longer history. This section presents urban development as an ongoing process that both dismantles and repurposes “debris” of the past (Stoler, 2008), not exactly in a linear progression but more through continuous power struggles among actors ranging from those who hold high political power to ordinary citizens. The built environment, as a result of (and as a record of) these processes, becomes a set of physical manifestations of the political nature of urban development.
Historians and archaeologists have noted the existence of societies in the region with relatively diverse social and economic activities since the first millennium. Adding to this variation was trade, including within and among Southeast Asia, China, India, and Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries (Reid, 1993). Trade in commodities such as spices and wood spurred the growth of port cities and, consequently, urban centers in relation to these port economies. Islam and Christianity also grew in Southeast Asia during this period, which transformed the cities’ religious, social, political, and cultural landscapes (Reid, 1993). Even prior to the fifteenth century, trade and cultural exchanges with China and India had played a role in Southeast Asia’s commerce. Denys Lombard (1995) argues that Southeast Asia was not just a “crossroad” of two oceans and two continents but a lively region of trade with established Chinese networks, Muslim networks, and Christian networks within the region. Records of maritime trade missions to China’s Song Dynasty show voyages as early as 947 AD, noting official trade missions from Srivijaya, Champa, Java, Brunei, and Cambodia, among others (Wade, 2012). Traces of urbanization and trade in the first millennium showed cultural influences from India; the existence of pre-Indianization towns, although possible, is still a subject of debate among archaeologists (Savage, 2019).

Although trade was important to the sustainability of Southeast Asia’s kingdoms, cities in the region at the time connected functions of inter-kingdom trade with a “cosmic city” concept, in which the city became the ceremonial center, surrounded by the kingdom’s agricultural lands (Savage, 2019). These cosmic cities collected agricultural surpluses and functioned as the political and cultural core of the kingdom, as the king was both the political and the spiritual leader. Urban plans revolved around this leadership, with the ceremonial ground, palace, and temple located at the center. This urban plan and societal structure were among the legacies of Indian religious influence in the region, dating back to the first millennium.

Parallels of the “cosmic city” concept can still be found in today’s cities in Southeast Asia. They are not exactly similar, but the social, cultural, political, and physical constructions of cities and urban life in the region have not fully shed the “debris” of that history (Stoler, 2008). These expressions of political culture appear in the built environment, and assertions of power are apparent in cultural beliefs and practices (Anderson, 1983). National monuments and symbolic projects, such as the National Monument and the Miniature Park in Indonesia, are examples of how politicians ensure cities physically embody tropes of national symbols. The story of nation-building in Southeast Asia is
often a story of urban development that is infused with the notion of an imagined community of the nation, oriented symbolically around the capital city.

But what about the technocratic side of cities that seems to disenchant societies from such cultural symbolism? In spite of its technicalities, postcolonial industrialization does not reduce symbolic orientation toward and around the capital city; rather, industrial development gradually infuses infrastructural projects as national symbols. Instead of making symbolism obsolete, the concentration of buildings, industries, and their related infrastructures have evolved to be the new face of nationalism. An observable practice of urban development as nation-building appears in the case of Singapore, where infrastructural projects for urban living have been integral parts of national pride. High-rise buildings and advanced transportation infrastructures as symbols of progress stand as orientations of aspired progress as national identity.

Singapore is currently the city with the highest per capita income in the region, and it is also a country that is officially “100 percent urbanized” (UN Population Division, 2018). Provision of basic infrastructure services such as water and public housing has illustrated the city-state’s development as a sovereign nation with a government that is capable of providing services to the people. Yet Singapore’s development is also one of urban expansion, as the “city” area used to be only the downtown area nearer to the port, governed by the municipal authority, while most of the main island and the smaller islands that surrounded it was rural, composed of various village settlements. Eventually most of these areas became residential neighborhoods to house the urbanized labor force, as the economy industrialized after its national independence. The city also annexed surrounding islands, reorienting the nation as a city-state rather than the sprawling archipelago of seventy small islands that it was prior to land reclamation. The story of Singapore’s progress is a story of urban development, with expanding transportation services, housing provision, industrial parks, and a financial center. Capacity to deliver pragmatic results in Singapore’s urban development is still an important source of political capital until today. Members of parliament campaign for elections based on their perceived ability to maintain cleanliness, build neighborhood centers, and administer other development projects.

Recent evolution of political life echoes the “cosmic city” concept as cities continue to function as political, economic, and cultural centers of power. In the case of Thailand as a constitutional monarchy, Bangkok as the capital city is also where the king is seated, and it continues to be the orientation of cultural, political, and religious symbolism. Nevertheless, Chiang Mai as an old cosmic center of Lanna Kingdom has now also become a center for the red shirt
political camp vis-à-vis the yellow shirts in Bangkok. One might argue that the second-order city just happens to be the hometown of the opposition Shinawatra family, but Chiang Mai has a history of being the center of political power in northern Thailand, felt across continental Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, some nation-states in Southeast Asia have transitioned into democracies, but the centralization of economic activities in cities has made them fertile grounds to build political capital. Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines and Joko Widodo of Indonesia are examples of contemporary politicians who capitalize on the legacy of the city as accumulation of power. Both contested for the presidency as local figures – problem-solving mayors of second-order cities – but have since built populist followings by marshaling the power of the center: they present themselves, like the capital cities from which they now govern, as the center and embodiment of the nation. In the case of Widodo, he served as governor of the capital city Jakarta for less than one term as a stepping stone toward seizing the presidential seat, garnering popular support through widely shared images of technocratic progress in the capital city. Duterte, on the other hand, relied on the claims of progress in Davao for his presidential campaign. Progress in second-order cities – ranging from basic needs fulfillment to ensuring the convenience of city living, safety, and security – serve to augment the political power of such national leaders to take over the center.

2.2 The “Debris” of the “Colonial City”

The historical political, social, and cultural debris that still shapes Southeast Asia’s contemporary cities comes from various eras, but the one that has been most studied in relation to urban development is the European colonial era. Scholars have argued that the colonial era, in which trade intensified with imperial Europe, was a precursor to the immersion of cities into global capitalism (Yeoh, 1996). Although intercontinental trade preceded colonial forces’ arrival in the region, what made this era distinct was the shift of power relations in urban development decisions. Political negotiations, conflicts, and the accumulation of wealth in the European colonies contributed to the shaping of racially diverse, yet unequal, societies through the development of infrastructure and the urban fabric.

The earliest colonial trace in the urban fabric in Southeast Asia was from the Portuguese in Melaka, starting with the arrival of their traders in 1511. Later on, some European colonies in the region had fortified towns, with the Europeans within the walls and others outside, reflecting segregation and fear of the local population. These forts were usually in port cities that were important for trade connections. Remains of these European forts still stand
in several cities, such as Jakarta’s Batavia and Manila’s Intramuros. In cities without forts, the differentiation of European colonial sections from the rest of the city was still apparent in aspects of European engineering, such as infrastructure and building techniques. That spatial segregation reflected both racial and class inequality in urban life, as the wealth from intercontinental trade was unequally distributed.

However, it is too simplistic to assume that colonial-era urbanization only led to segregation, as there is historical evidence of integration in practice. Official planning documents might have designated specific ethnic quarters, but local acts of desegregation were possible. For example, under the Dutch colonial rule in Surabaya, *Wijkenstelsel* applied as an ethnicity-based zoning policy, coupled with the *Passenstelsel* policy that required members of the Chinese ethnic and other “foreign oriental” groups to obtain permits for travel outside their quarters. As restrictive as these policies might seem, their implementation was not so effective – as evidence of, for instance, intermarriage between prominent Chinese officials and Javanese royalty suggests (Sutherland, 1974). Furthermore, the designation of the *kampung* as the quarters for “other natives” of the city at the time allowed *kampung* in Surabaya to welcome new migrants without ethnic restrictions and to accommodate interethnic families (Perkasa, Padawangi & Farida, 2021). Although this does not automatically indicate seamless ethnic integration, the possibility of forming ethnically diverse neighborhoods despite the implementation of ethnic segregation regulations suggested common practices that might be hard to see if one only looked at official policies.

The misalignment between official policies and everyday lived realities indicated an assertion of human agency amidst bureaucratic control. There were also more open displays of challenge to the ruling powers in the colonial era, such as the resistance that led to the strike of Chinese businesses in Singapore against new legislation on political representation and municipal reform in the second half of the nineteenth century (Yeoh, 1996: 32–33). Even though there was an impression of relatively strong bureaucratic control of urban planning in Singapore in the hands of the municipal authority at the time, the bureaucratic management reflected power negotiations “more commonly articulated through strategies of evasion, non-compliance, and adjustment, or channelled through Asian leaders” (Yeoh, 1996: 67). This is not to suggest that colonial powers failed to influence urban development; in fact, the example of ethnic segregation illustrates how adherence to and ways around policies might coexist. Such incomplete alignment (and misalignments) between official policies and the spectrum of everyday lived realities continues to shape today’s urban development in Southeast Asia.