Belmopan: a New Capital for a New Country

Figure 1. **Norman** and **Dawbarn,** Belize National Assembly, Belmopan, 2009, A. Knight

By Shannon Ricketts

AS the British colony of British Honduras prepared for independence, it adopted two important symbols of its emerging identity; the name of Belize was chosen for the new country and a new capital was planned from which this emerging nation would be governed. That new capital was called Belmopan and was to be established inland from the old coastal capital of Belize City. Designed by the British planning and architectural firm of Norman and Dawbarn, this new city followed in the tradition of British Garden City planning, making discrete references to the Mayan heritage of the region, while using the modernist architectural vocabulary typical of so much of the infrastructural development taking place at this time in various nations emerging from colonial status.

New capitals were being designed and constructed around the world: 1954 saw the rise of a new Punjabi capital, Chandigarh, while in 1960 two new capitals appeared, Islamabad (Pakistan) and Brasilia (Brazil). In 1970—the same year that Belmopan was officially opened—Dodoma was begun in Tanzania and Obuja in Nigeria. The designs for these new cities followed established European precedents, usually organized on Garden City planning principles, while the architecture reflected the tenets of the modernist movement in both aesthetic and philosophical objectives. New nations were being prepared for independence with shining new examples of "tropical architecture", providing much-needed amenities such as hospitals, schools, university campuses, and administrative buildings.

While Belmopan was, perhaps, the smallest example of these new planned cities, it followed in the same tradition. This paper will examine the historical, aesthetic and theoretical underpinnings of the work of the architects and planners involved in these designs, comparing the work of continental European architects and their admirers to British-inspired designs appearing in the new Commonwealth countries. Finally, the paper will look at the original plans for Belmopan, its original architecture, and discuss how the city has evolved over the twentieth century to answer the needs of its growing population.

Belmopan: a New Capital for a New Country

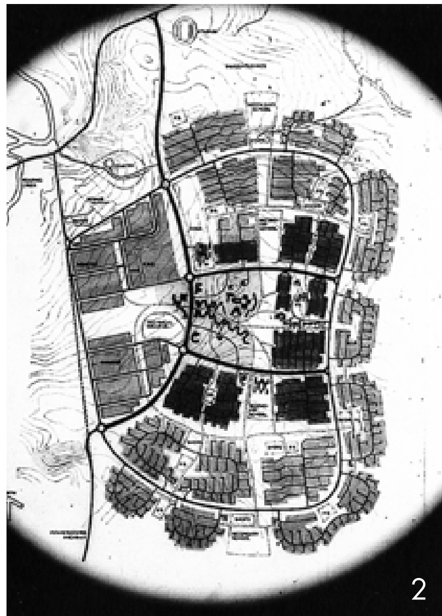
AS the colony of British Honduras prepared for independence in the years following World War II, it adopted two important symbols of its emerging identity: the name of Belize was chosen for the new country and a new capital was planned, to be called Belmopan [figures 1, 2].

Belize in the Era of Emerging Nations

Belize is the single English-speaking country in Central America. It sits just south of Mexico and to the east of Guatemala, facing the Caribbean Sea and those former British island colonies with which it was historically associated. Belize City, reflects this history as it was both the colonial capital and the port from which most of the produce of the colony was shipped. Built on swampy land, virtually at sea level, this city has been swept away by hurricanes more than once. Its architecture and planning reflect its tenuous existence as the city has grown organically, with minimal forethought for the management of sewage, sanitation, or security. In 1961 Hurricane Hattie struck, destroying some 80% of the city's infrastructure and taking nearly 300 lives.[1] Experts were called in to assess the damage and the potential for rebuilding.

Hurricane Hattie had arrived at a critical moment. Like much of the rest of the former British empire, what was then the colony of British Honduras was moving towards independence. Britain was reconciled to this, but wished to ensure continuing links, politically and economically, with her former colonies. In order to protect her single toe-hold in Central America, she needed not only to deal with the environmental threats to Belize City, but also to resolve a major and long-standing territorial dispute with neighbouring Guatemala. Historically, Guatemala had laid claim to all of the territory of British Honduras. The British had long resisted this claim both through ongoing negotiations and the deterrent of its considerable military might. Behind this ostensibly Guatemalan-British Honduran dispute was the reality of British-American competition for trade in the region. In Guatemala, as in much of the rest of Latin America, U.S. business interests had a decisive influence on the economy.

These two major factors—environmental and economic—bolstered long-standing suggestions that the capital be moved. In 1962 a New Capital Committee was tasked with recommending a suitable site and, in 1964, the cabinet approved Roaring Creek Village as the location for the new capital.[2] Situated at the junction of two major highways, 50 miles inland, and midway between Belize City and the Guatemalan border, the new capital would open up the interior to agricultural development in much the same way that the construction of Brasilia had done for Brazil. It also would ensure an increased presence in the lightly populated interior of Belize. After some 150 years of unsuccessful negotiations, agreement on the current boundaries of Belize was finally reached with Guatemala in 1981.[3] The same year, the United Kingdom transferred power to an independent Belize. Both British government representatives and local politicians touted Belmopan as a symbol of the new modern era that now beckoned to an independent Belize. "Progress" was the leitmotif.



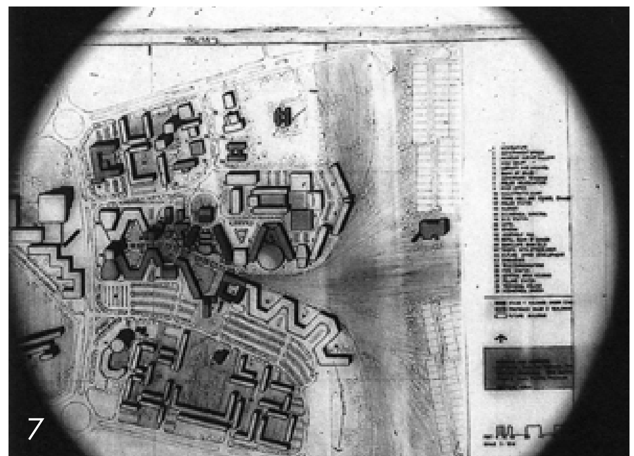


Figure 2. **Norman** and **Dawbarn.** Plan of Belmopan, 1967, Capita Symonds, London, UK

Figure 3. **Norman** and **Dawbarn.** Plan of phase one construction, Belmopan, 1967, Capita Symonds, London, UK

Figure 4. **Norman** and **Dawbarn.** National Assembly Building, Belmopan, Belize, 2009, A. Knight

Figure 5. **Norman** and **Dawbarn.** Departmental Building, Belmopan, Belize, 2009, A. Knight

Figure 6. Ruins of a Mayan temple, Belize, 1994, K. Knight

Figure 7. **Norman** and **Dawbarn.** Norman and Dawbarn, plan of central Belmopan, Belize, 1967, Capita Symonds Co, London, UK

Postwar Infrastructural Development in Emerging Nations

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the imperial powers had accrued considerable experience in the design and construction of administrative buildings, military installations, and residences for their colonial administrators. The existing hospital and schools had often been erected by various Christian missions. However, this infrastructure was often inadequate and, by the 1930s and the lean years of the worldwide economic depression, it became evident that many of the colonies were suffering. Lack of health and educational services, adequate housing, and economic opportunity heightened support for the various nationalist movements that were growing throughout Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Committees were struck: experts travelled, surveyed and reported.[4] However, results had to await the end of World War II, when a newly created Commonwealth Development and Welfare programme began to export planning as postwar reconstruction, sending British architects and planners throughout the devolving empire.[5]

Amongst the myriad infrastructural projects that resulted, completely planned capital cities appeared throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The new capital of Malawi was built in Lilongwe from 1968–1975. It was decided to locate the new national capital of Tanzania in Dodoma in 1973. The capital of Nigeria was moved from Lagos and built anew in Abuja during the 1970s–1980s, while extensions to old capitals also were undertaken, including Dhaka (1971), Islamabad (Rawalpindi; 1960) and Chandigarh (1950s–1960s). Belmopan, which officially opened in 1970, was one of several new capital cities appearing around the world that marked the move from a state of colonial development dependent on private owners both reaping the benefits of colonial labour and providing what amenities they saw fit, to one of government-run services, along the lines of the then-Labour government in Britain. The aims were congruent—security, democratic government, health care and educational opportunities for all. British planners, architects, and engineers played major roles.

Most of the architects and planners involved had trained at British universities committed to the Modernist movement and shared its objectives,[6] believing in the benefits of progress as defined by an emphasis on sanitation, healthcare and education in the service of improved standards of living. Since these aims were to be achieved through western-style technology, the resultant projects not only promised improved living conditions in the colonies but also ensured ongoing reliance on European expertise and training.[7] From the point of view of many of the citizens of these emerging nations, particularly the aspiring middle classes, modernism left behind the colonial architecture and inadequate services with which they were familiar, and promised them entrée into a bright new post-war future. The many infrastructural developments undertaken present a fascinating testing ground for the Modernist philosophy since large-scale infrastructural development projects were more easily implemented in the developing nations than in the heavily built countries of Europe. Less-developed countries with modest urban areas offered a relatively blank slate, allowing the construction of whole new cities. Consequently, the CIAM (Congrès Internationale d'Architecture Moderne) approach to the city as a machine organized around functions including housing, work, recreation, and traffic circulation was easier to realize abroad than it was at home.

The Design and Construction of Belmopan

In the case of Belmopan, there was no clear local planning tradition to challenge the British model since the major urban centre in the country—Belize City—had grown up in a relatively unplanned, ad hoc manner. At Belmopan, as in most other post-imperial projects, any attempt to introduce local context was of a fairly superficial nature. Here, references to the local were limited and based on an ancient Mayan past known primarily through archaeological research, rather than on any lived urban experience of Belizeans. Even these references were restricted to the siting and design of the National Assembly Building. The overall plan for Belmopan reflects the British Garden City model, with buildings designed in the Modernist convention. As in other emerging nations, British planners and architects turned to what was familiar to them—and to what they regarded as universally applicable modernist standards for an increasingly homogenized world [Figure 3].

By the mid-1960s, 8100 acres of land at the Belmopan site had been purchased through grants and loans from the British Ministry of Overseas Development, Caribbean Division. Finances were administered by Crown Agents for Overseas Governments and Administration along with the Reconstruction and Development Corporation of British Honduras.[8] Nevertheless, money was tight and the British team of Norman and Dawbarn (architects and planners), Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick and Partners (civil and structural engineers), Windell and Trollope (quantity surveyors), and Preece Cardew and Riders (electrical engineers) were instructed to create a capital that was a modest, functional creation along austerity lines.[9]

The architectural firm of Norman and Dawbarn was one that had accumulated much valuable experience in designing and building in the tropical zones. The firm's original partners were well-known modernists who had been active since the 1930s. Sir Nigel Norman (1897–1943), a specialist in airport design, had died during the war, leaving Graham Richards Dawbarn (1893–1976) heading the company. Along with most of Britain's aspiring Modernists, the firm participated in the 1951 Festival of Britain, contributing designs for a model neighbourhood (London's Tower Hamlets) in a modernist vernacular mode, prescient of many of the English new towns that followed.[10]

Like many other British architectural firms in the postwar period, Norman and Dawbarn was also active abroad. In 1946, it had been commissioned to design the new University of the West Indies campus in Jamaica.[11] There, strategically arranged, rectangular, concrete blocks are classic examples of mid-century modernism.[12] Set on pilotis, they were adapted to the climate with breeze-block façades and brise-soleils. Sometimes local materials and skills were referenced through the use of cut-limestone facing. During the 1950s, the firm also was occupied with additional projects in Jamaica, including a Terminal Building (now demolished) for the airport at Montego Bay as well as buildings for the Kingston College of Arts, Science and Technology where the firm used the same limestone facing on the Engineering Workshops as well as introducing an expressionistic folded concrete roof.[13] The firm used a similar vocabulary for a library at Makerere College in Kampala, Uganda, and continued to take on significant projects in England, including the landmark BBC Television Centre at Shepherd's Bush in London.

The heart of Belmopan is the National Assembly Building [Figure 4]. Located at the centre of the town, the modestly scaled structure is given an elegant authority by clever optical devices. Dawbarn and his team first created an artificial mound on which to place the building. A series of broad, gently rising steps leads up the mound to the main entrance. Strategically placed diagonal walls on both the façade and along the steps, lead the eye toward the entrance and visually enhance the height of the building [Figure 5]. The building is modest in scale but, with its rigorous symmetry, deep umbrages, and restrained play of textures, it claims its rightful place as the dignified centre of the capital. Along with the flanking low, horizontal departmental buildings, the government complex presents a resonant image, hearkening back to Michelangelo's Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, which in turn inspired contemporary designs such as Wallace Harrison's

1960s master plan for Lincoln Centre for the Arts in New York City. Most immediately, however, the National Assembly building evokes the more local image of a Mayan temple [Figure 6].

It is instructive to compare the approach to urban planning and design employed by Lucio Costa and Oscar Neimayer in their brilliant 1956 designs for Brasilia to the approach followed by Graham Dawbarn and many of his fellow British architects. Brasilia bore many of the hallmarks of the Corbusian approach to both architecture and urban planning. The plan and architectural design for South America's best-known planned city was at once reflective of the expansive open plain on which it was built as well as of Niemayer's fascination with geometry and with the distinctive play of light and shade and dramatic gestures found in Brazil's lavish Baroque religious architecture. The resultant images evoked by Brasilia, while building on the past, look to the future rather than to specific historical sources.[14]

While pre-war British architects often had made reference to the vernacular architecture of the country in which they were working[15], postwar British architects tended to reflect the universalist modernism espoused by the MARS (Modern Architecture Research) Group, the British arm of CIAM.[16] In Africa, for instance, the prolific Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew favoured reinforced concrete building systems with pierced facades to respond to climatic imperatives within a Garden City plan. They and their fellow modernists were convinced that modernist abstraction could provide an international architectural language, despite the fact that when used in developing nations, it resulted in the implantation of a European building technology with which the local community was not necessarily familiar. Attempts to contextualize these designs were often limited to the integration of indigenous decorative materials and artwork.

With Belmopan's Mayan reference, Dawbarn was attempting to use a local point of departure for his design inspiration, even though he chose to reference a pre-contact culture rather than the living one for which he was building. This is not to detract from the inventive conception and aesthetic sophistication of the Belmopan government complex. The National Assembly building shows a willingness on Dawbarn's part to move beyond the strict tents of international modernism into the contextualized so-called Brutalist designs that were being promoted by young British architects like Alison and Peter Smithson.

At Belmopan, Norman and Dawbarn supplied plans for a town complete with schools, a college, a hospital, telecommunications services, churches, and commercial services [Figure 7]. The National Assembly Building, with the flanking long, low-rise departmental buildings, faces a central green which is bisected by a major urban artery that creates a separation from more work-a-day buildings housing essential services such as the Post Office, Police Headquarters, Hospital, Public Works Department, the Court, and a market. Green spaces and a ring road separate residential sections consisting of modest single-family houses and duplexes [see Figure 2]. True to the spirit of British Garden City planning, neighbourhoods were planned to accommodate their own schools, shops and markets.

Given the restricted budget, what was actually built was more limited and buildings constructed in the rest of the town were more severely functional, lacking any notable attempt to achieve aesthetic distinction. While all structures were designed to be hurricane proof, little money was wasted on extras. Houses delivered basic amenities within plain, reinforced concrete shells. Even so, there were eleven differently priced house styles, most on separate lots so that residents could plant their own gardens. A footpath system linked the residential area to the town centre. The industrial centre is located on the western margin of town, nearest the major highway and separated from the city proper by green space. A wide ring road links the main administrative, commercial, residential and industrial districts.

Belmopan Since 1970

As in the case of Brasilia, the move to Belmopan was not immediately popular. In the end, the Belizean government had to put pressure on civil servants to make the move—and not all did. Not only were services and amenities limited in the new town, but people were loath to move away from their long-time communities of family and friends in Belize City. Eventually, this began to change. In 1971, Belmopan had a population of 2300 residents. That number had risen almost four-fold by the turn of the 21st century and now stands at approximately 8,000. The town now has more housing, schools, a hospital, embassy buildings, food shops, a hotel, and a theatre, among other amenities. It has also added some new government buildings—these not always in keeping with Dawbarn's designs—but a sign that the town is developing beyond its original campus-like uniformity. As with many other planned cities of the twentieth century, Belmopan can be seen as a last flourish of empire—an expression of transition to an era in which the local population makes decisions, including those impacting how its capital will look and function. Like other planned cities around the world, Belmopan is maturing in response to the preferences of its own society.

Notes

1. British Honduras Hurricane Assessment Mission Report (London, 1962), p. 2
2. *Belmopan* – A New Capital of Belize (Belize; Government Information Service, 1967), p. 4.
3. See Janine Sylvestre, *The Cost of Conflict: The Anglo-Belize/Guatemala Territorial Issue* (Belize: Website Productions Ltd., 1997)
4. In 1938, following labour riots in Trinidad and Jamaica, a Royal Commission was headed by Lord Moyne who toured the Caribbean, including what was then British Honduras. The findings of Lord Moyne were so embarrassing for the British government that his report was not released until after the Second World War. In short, the British had not fostered sufficient development in the Caribbean. As a result, a Colonial Development and Welfare fund was established for slum clearance and urban planning; but funds were slow in appearing.
5. See Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (London: E&F Spon, 1997), p. 49.
6. Many of the British architects active in such postwar development projects had been trained either at the Liverpool School of Architecture or at the Architectural Association in London—both schools espousing the Modernist philosophy and approach to design. See Valerie Fraser, *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America 1930–1960* (London: Verso, 2000) and Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub., 2003)
7. Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, Building Dominion and the Colonial overseas: the culture of British fabrics of financial intervention in (South) Africa at the end of Empire (Forthcoming).
8. Kevin C. Kearns, *Belmopan: Perspective on a New Capital* in The Geographical Review, vol. 63, No. 2, April 1973, p. 153.
9. *Belmopan – A New Capital of Belize*, p. 4.
10. *Best Intentions*, in The Architects' Journal, 6 Sept. 2001
11. Graham Dawbarn, *The West Indies Project: Planning a University in the Tropics*, The Times Educational Supplement, Oct. 4, 1947, p. 528.
12. Jacquiann Lawton, *Social and Public Architecture in Kingston, Jamaica*, in **docomomo** No. 33, September 2005, p. 60.
13. J.M. Richards, ed., New Buildings in the Commonwealth (London: The Architectural Press, 1961), p. 175.
14. At almost the same time (1956), Frank Lloyd Wright was designing a master plan for Baghdad using circular motifs based on the area's ancient Arabic urban design.
15. See Ron Fuchs, *Public Works in the Holy Land: Government Building under the British Mandate in Palestine, 1917–48*, in Louise Campbell (ed.), Twentieth Century Architecture and its Histories (London: Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 2000)
16. Valerie Fraser, *Building the New World*, p. 6.