

Overview

GREAT BRITAIN

The case for a new capital city

In light of the increasing centralisation of wealth in London, imagine the prosperity that a new political capital city in the centre of the country could bring, writes *James Dunnnett*

This year, 2011, marks the centenary of Britain's most recent venture in building a capital city. On 12 December 1911, the King Emperor George V announced at the Delhi Durbar that the capital of the British Indian Empire was to be transferred from Calcutta to Delhi, and a new city built to accommodate it. He laid a foundation stone, and New Delhi – a real garden city – was duly inaugurated 20 years and one World War later in 1931. Is it time to consider emulating this feat? The reasons for moving the Indian capital were many, but the aim to achieve greater geographic centrality was certainly one – especially in relation to pre-partition India. This consideration was also important in the building of most other recent new capitals: Brasilia, Islamabad, Abuja. It would, *prima facie*, be a first reason to consider relocating the British capital, London being tucked in the south-east corner of the country and eccentrically placed in contrast to capitals of comparable European countries.

London is, in fact, composed of two distinct cities – the Cities of London and Westminster, the centres of commerce and government respectively – and it is arguable that they should be further separated. In the 11th century, King Edward the Confessor established his palace-cum-monastery of Westminster on a marshy island in the Thames at some distance to the west of the commercial city of London, which stood on higher ground near the best crossing point in the river. Westminster became the base initially for a peripatetic administration. As the government gradually became fixed there, major medieval cities such as Norwich and Bristol grew to provide a regional commercial counterbalance to London. With the Industrial Revolution, the Midlands and the North, South Wales, Central Scotland and Northern Ireland experienced dramatic development and surges in population. By the end of the



Foster + Partners' Thames Hub vision offers an integrated transport strategy for London

19th century, the wealth and population of the country was fairly widely and evenly distributed, balanced between government and commerce in the South East and industry in the North and West.

In the 20th century, industry began to decline as a result of a variety of factors until today, when the overwhelming economic power in the land lies in the South East, with large areas in the formerly wealthy North and West in serious decline. This process can only be exacerbated by the convergence of the British economy with that of the rest of the European Union across the Channel. Recent figures put the average price of a home in London at about £450,000 and in the North at about £150,000 – a threefold difference. The town centre of West Bromwich near Birmingham is reported to be the most depressed in the country, with almost 45 per cent of retail floor space vacant. Meanwhile, development pressures in the South East are intense: a major new shopping centre with almost 2 million square feet of retail floor space has just opened in Stratford, east London, prompted by the forthcoming 2012 Olympic Games nearby; the tallest tower

in Europe, the Shard, is nearing completion in Southwark opposite the City of London; and, although Heathrow is already the busiest international airport in the world, there is intense study of the options for much increasing London's airport capacity (such as Foster + Partners' Thames Hub vision, which was launched at the start of November). This amounts to quite a lot for one corner of the country.

The government has for many years sought to spread its spending outside the South East by moving certain departments to the regions, such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to Swansea and HM Revenue and Customs to Newcastle upon Tyne, and has now persuaded the BBC to move many of its operations to Salford near Manchester. But it should go further and consider moving itself, shifting 'Westminster' out of the South East, leaving behind the City of London. Nothing less will carry sufficient weight to significantly alter the balance in wealth between the South East and the rest of the country. Whether this move should be to the West Midlands, perhaps the centre of gravity of the country in terms of population, or further north,

the geographic centre of gravity, would remain to be argued.

A government based in an area such as one of these would perforce have a different perception of the country as a whole. It would be further from the centre of banking and commerce, which in light of recent history might be considered desirable, and nearer to the remaining industrial areas. It would be seen as belonging more to the country as a whole and less to the prosperous South East. It would be more a 'professional' capital where politicians would go specifically to govern, rather than to enjoy the lifestyle of a wealthy area.

A new capital should not be built on a greenfield site – the UK's problem is not, as Brazil's was perceived to be, an undeveloped jungle hinterland.

The country's problem is precisely the decayed former industrial areas. The new city should be built there, erasing at the same time the site's faded amorphous unplanned residue. I have never been to West Bromwich, for example, but it lies near the motorway hub of the land – 'Spaghetti Junction' – and, with its decayed centre, I find it hard to imagine there is much worth keeping. It might be the place to start – and we need to start afresh. There will be many other potentially suitable locations. But York, though it has been suggested as suitable, should be avoided: not only does it not need regeneration, but by analogy with New Delhi, a capital there would have to be called 'New York'.

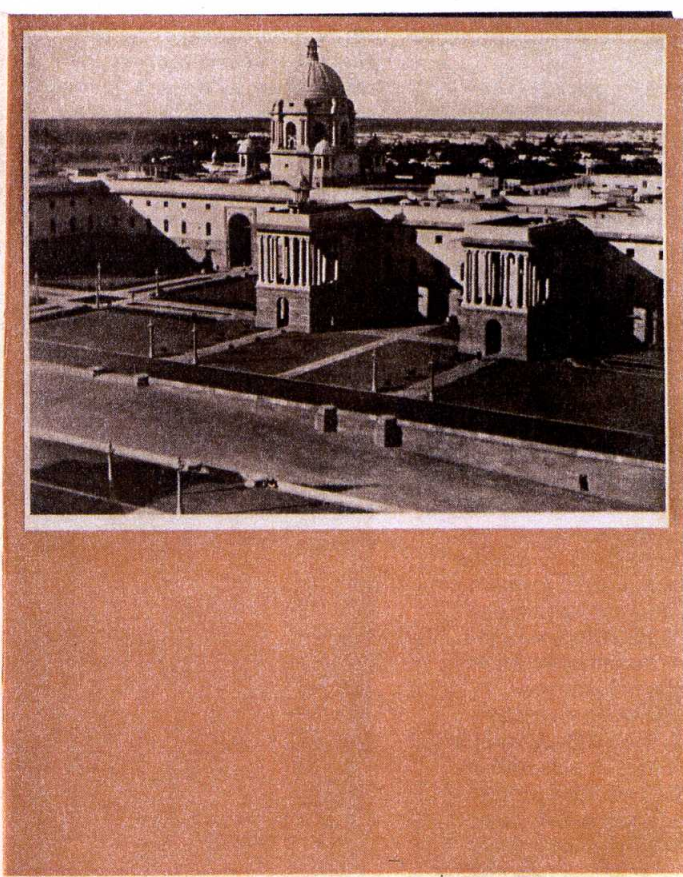
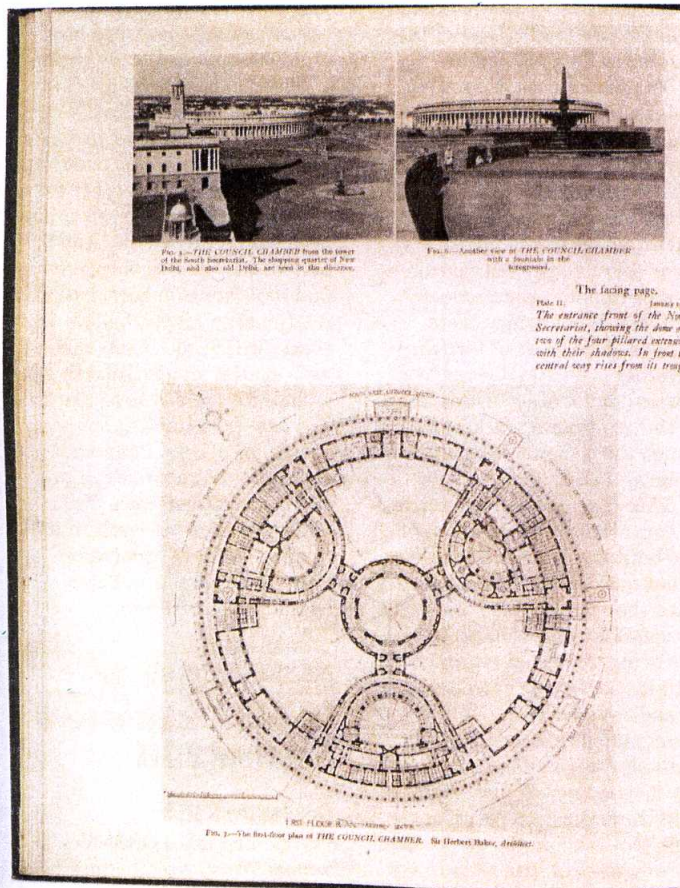
A move of the capital might, of course, have constitutional

implications, on which I would not like to speculate, but with growing pressures for regional government, such a move might open up the possibility of beneficial new constitutional arrangements. There would be the question of what would happen to the 'iconic' buildings of the present seat of government – the Houses of Parliament, Number 10 Downing Street, even Buckingham Palace (since presumably the seat of the monarchy would have to move with the government).

Such problems have accompanied every move of a capital and have not proved insuperable. If the move were to coincide with the foundation of an English regional government, for which some have argued, the 'icons' might suit that purpose. Tourism would adjust to the new

realities, as it has done in Brazil, where Rio de Janeiro is no less desirable a destination since the establishment of Brasilia.

This, of course, may all appear totally fanciful, the wrench with history too great, but unless something radical is done to counter the lopsidedness of wealth and development in the country, the present problems of dereliction and over-development will continue and worsen. A new capital away from the South East could throw a different light on the need for the HS2 high speed rail link and for more airport capacity in the area. The London 2012 Olympic Games, apparently on track and on time, show that we can handle a major project. A new capital would be a project on a far larger scale again and provide a new national focus for endeavour. It would give the



Britain's decision to build a new Indian capital city was made a century ago this year. In 1931, the AR visited the completed New Delhi (see architectural-review.com/NewDelhi)

country an entirely new image
– one not tied to the legacy of the
Middle Ages. The opportunity
would exist to design a new
capital along rational lines,
drawing on the work of the
advanced thinkers about
urbanism of the last 100 years.

Back in the 1970s, a northern
MP asked in parliament whether
the government would consider
building a new national capital
'on the Yorkshire Moors' to
which the Prime Minister,
Harold Wilson, simply answered
'No'. Is now the time to reconsider
that verdict if not that location,
and recover the boldness of the
government of British India
one hundred years ago?
