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This volume is the result of both a unique conference and an intriguing collaboration. In December 1990, a conference on "Capital Cities: How to Ensure Their Effective and Harmonious Development" was held in Canada's National Capital, Ottawa. The event was organized by "Canada's Capital Tri-University Study Group," representing the three universities in the capital region: The Université du Québec à Hull, the University of Ottawa, and Carleton University. The Tri-University Group also had a co-sponsor, Canada's National Commission, a federal agency responsible for "national" concerns in Ottawa (an organization that is itself unique and intriguing).

Indeed, the NCC, which has been subject to dramatic changes in its own mandate and modes of operation, provided a context for the conference by asking the organizers to deal not only with the tangible, built capital but also with the intangible, imagined capital. The result is a fascinating collection of views, opinions, and insights.

The conference, and hence this volume, was organized around five themes:
I. What Is a Capital City? II. The Roles and Activities of Capital Cities. III. Capitals: Symbolism and the Built Environment. IV. Capitals for the Future. V. Avenues for Research. Twenty-five presentations under these headings were made by scholars in both French (x 8) and English (x 16) from some 10 countries and twelve academic disciplines ranging from law and administration to planning and geography. In addition to obvious discussions of North American and European experiences, there are interesting articles on Latin America, and West and North Africa.

One of the central threads that runs through the volume is that it is difficult to even talk about "common" patterns or characteristics of capital cities. The fact is, "capitals undergo change in different ways and by different means, even though they are often faced with similar and perennial roles and functions. They can have much in common, but at the same time they are idiosyncratic" (p. x). Put another way, all capitals are profoundly influenced by their histories and cultures, with some acting as formal centres of power and influence, while others exercise power and influence informally, or at least more subtly—a distinction summed up as "head" vs. "heart". Equally critical, of course, is how capitals have changed over time and how they will change in the future; changes that had—and will have profound meaning for and influence on capitals. The point was made by more than one presenter that capital cities may be among the most important institutions of any culture. Beyond this broad statement, no clear definition of what capitals really are is given, but readers are told what they are not. "They are certainly not mere pork barrels to be filled or emptied at the whim of their masters, or even simple reflectors of, or the embodiment of, an existing condition" (p. xi). At the very least, then, capitals are critical elements in nations: "the beginning and not the end of stasis and innovation alike" (p. xi).

This volume is not a primer for students of capital cities; it is too philosophical and disjointed to serve that function. It makes no effort to replace Eldredge's 1975 study, World Capitals: Toward Guided Urbanization. But for anyone who must plan, develop or manage capitals, and for anyone who seeks deeper meaning for what it is all about, this is a refreshing and challenging examination of a complex and under-studied urban and cultural forum.

But problems arise along the front of ideas, essentially because the ideas—of which there are plenty—are not fully developed. Not in the chapters themselves, and not in the three page Introduction or the two page Epilogue. To be sure, the central idea is clear enough, namely that petkeeping offers a window into the world of the French middle class. Having secured entry into this bourgeois