

The Garden Metropolis: Maintaining a Delicate Balance in Singapore

The Background

In 1819 Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in the small port of Singapore to establish trade for the East India Trade Company, and within a few decades Singapore had grown from a small entrepot town to a strategic trading port in the Far East, helped by its deep waters and naturally sheltered harbours favoured by the British colonists and their steam powered vessels. Its influence continued to grow over the next century until World War II. The trading that has brought such wealth to this city stagnated after the war and the fledgling nation struggled for self-sufficiency, and faced problems including mass unemployment, housing shortages and the lack of land and natural resources like oil.

In the subsequent years, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, the government set upon to implement a set of strategies to counter the worsening effects of the faltering trade. Some of these strategies focused on the physical development of the city. Described as “massive re-ordering of living, industrial and commercial spaces as well as the transport systems laid down to connect urban activities at the everyday level.”¹

The Process

In the 1960’s Singapore’s government passed the Land Acquisition Act that allowed the mandatory acquisition of lands from private owners for the benefit of the public. This act allowed for stronger central planning and less hindrance of the government’s plans for urbanization. The [Housing Development Board](#) (HDB) initiated bringing “the physical form of the city into line with the ambitions of the Singapore government to make the city a modern and efficient metropolis.”² and “the first developed city in the equatorial belt by the turn of the century”³. The structure for the delivery of this dream city however was never fully developed and government planning agencies such as the HDB, the [Urban Redevelopment Authority](#)

¹Peggy Teo, Brenda S. A Yeoh, Ooi Giok Ling, Karen P.Y. Lai. *Changing Landscapes of Singapore* (Mcgraw-Hill Education (Asia), 2004.)

² Richard Marshall. *Emerging Urbanity: Global Urban Projects in the Asia Pacific Rim.* (Spon Press, 2003)

³ Ooi Giok Ling and Kenson Kwok. *City and the State: Singapore’s Built Environment Revisited.* (Oxford University Press 1997)

(URA) and the [Jurong Town Corporation](#) (JTC) approached the task in a piece-meal fashion that lacked coordination.

In the 1980s Singapore adapted a planning model that reflected the top-down nature of the planning process in Singapore. Many developments were created without consultation with the community or the private sector. These developments therefore did not reflect the identity of the city nor the “environmental legibility to the people for whom such landscapes had been developed.”⁴

This practice of pragmatic development superseded the need for conservation and many landscapes that once defined Singapore were removed. The disappearance of historical sites brought about a downturn in the number of tourists that ventured to Singapore, the city now is experiencing another downturn in economy, but this time it was brought upon by itself.

This had the effect of highlighting the problem of the whole planning process within the government over the decades, and the government implemented the long required reforms. By the late 1980’s a holistic approach and improved coordination became the signature characteristic of the state’s urban development programme. This may however be starting to be challenged by the increasing diversity of needs and global demands that are driving development decisions more recently: in 1989 the government allowed the private sector to prepare developmental plans as an injection of new concepts in urban development.

Singapore River

A case in point about the close coordination that was achieved among the government agencies was the cleaning up of [Singapore River](#).

During the colonial period, the most prominent promenade the most attractive places along harbourfront in Singapore were mainly no-go zones for Asians or the Asiatics as they were referred to by the colonial administration. Here the colonial life for the European administrators and their families was quiet, staid and well-ordered. In the quarters where the Asians had been allocated land for their settlements, life was wholly different and was often described as “ferociously Asian” in terms of the vitality, level of noise and activity. A large part of this life was carried out along the banks of the Singapore River.

⁴ Peggy Teo, Brenda S. A Yeoh, Ooi Giok Ling, Karen P.Y. Lai. *Changing Landscapes of Singapore* (Mcgraw-Hill Education (Asia), 2004.)

Once described as the life-line of the country, by the 1960's the Singapore River had deteriorated into little more than a major sewer, rendering it biologically dead by the households and economic activities lining its banks. The [cleaning up](#) of the river took ten years starting from 1978. This exercise was a multi-agency programme led by the [Ministry of the Environment](#). It involved agencies including the HDB, the URA and the JTC because of the resettlement of residents, hawkers, cottage industries and even pig farmers then located along the riverbanks.

Today, riverine life has been restored to a large extent and the banks of the Singapore River are lined with luxury hotels, eateries and shops, upmarket and glamorous buildings like the Esplanades – Theatres at the Bay – as well as the financial centres and banks. Properties along the River are now amongst the most expensive in the city.

Throughout the history of Singapore, the Singapore River has been shared by its people, rich and poor, Europeans as well as Asians although they may have been living in different places along the river. The challenge now is to enable the harbourfront and river to become an integral part of Singaporean life and to provide a sense of place and place identity.

Results and Benefits: A Peaceful Haven for Everyone

The 1990's saw more focus on attracting tourists and international clients to Singapore as a way to promote its place as an international city. New projects for land [reclamation](#) were begun in [Marina Bay](#) for the revitalizing of the downtown area. The 'Downtown Core' is 690 hectares of reclaimed land and is designed as the focal point for the 21st century Singapore. The [reclamation](#) project, led by the URA, includes a promenade for tourists and citizens, commercial properties, residential properties, international business centres and green areas. The 'Downtown Core' reclamation proposal was opened for public feedback in 1992 and was marketed as a development "to further project our Garden-City image, and to provide a haven for office workers, weary shoppers, tourists and casual strollers."⁵ Today's Singapore harbour can handle much more than international freighters because it has developed its waterfront into a travel destination for tourists from around the world.

Can Sustainable Development be Maintained?

⁵ Ooi Giok Ling and Kenson Kwok. *City and the State: Singapore's Built Environment Revisited*. (Oxford University Press 1997)

The design epitomizes a compact city that reduces the amount of land needed for future development through urban intensification. But, although Singapore has successfully implemented a policy of being a clean and green city through urban land use and ecological conservation, the URA's position on nature's place in the city is "at best ambivalent."⁶

While economic practicality still prevails for the government's plans of urban development, the private sector has been receptive to city planners' "intention of introducing more flexibility"⁷ for their inclusion on decisions about new developments. Singapore's improved planning process resulted in developments more reflective of the public need than the pragmatic 'top-down' policies of the 1980's.

Singapore's concept for the future is aimed at building "a world-class city by adopting a pro-business approach to planning, and strategizing to further enhance the quality of life for Singaporeans."⁸ While the Singapore River and harbourfront are no longer part of the economic lifeline of the country that they once were, Singaporeans need to develop a sense of pride in what the river and harbourfront have been in Singapore's history. More importantly, the Singaporeans need to develop a sense of the importance of the river as a lifeline that nature has provided for the city and treat it with the respect that it should be given.

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⁶ Peggy Teo, Brenda S. A Yeoh, Ooi Giok Ling, Karen P.Y. Lai. *Changing Landscapes of Singapore* (Mcgraw-Hill Education (Asia), 2004.)

⁷ Ooi Giok Ling and Kenson Kwok. *City and the State: Singapore's Built Environment Revisited*. (Oxford University Press 1997)

⁸ [The Ministry of National Development, Singapore.](#)