

Chapter 2

The State, People and the History of Urban Public Space in Singapore

2.1 Shaping the Singaporean Public

If Singapore breaks up, it will never come back. It's man-made, it's very contrived to fit the needs of the modern world and it has to be amended all the time as the needs change. The moment it no longer fulfils that role, it will begin to decline. I would put it at one chance in five.

Lee Kuan Yew¹

As evidenced by Lee's statement, Singapore—the developmental city-state—is an artificial product custom-made to fit in the modern world. The process of designing Singaporean culture and in so doing, shaping the Singaporean public, has been a highly self-conscious one. The history of Singapore's nation building can be described as a series of periods and juxtaposed events, punctuated by “founding moments” (Bishop 2004). The prevailing thread of continuity in its relatively short history of nationhood is the persistent state of crisis that the nation perceives itself to be facing.

Singapore is essentially a small country, a city-state borne out of a traumatic past and facing an uncertain future in a rapidly changing region in the world; occasionally Singapore is sport for a bout of ‘Singapore-bashing’ from its neighbors in the region, such as China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, or even from superpowers such as the USA. However, it is difficult to dismiss Singapore as pastiche, such as the labels that describe Singapore as “Disneyland with a death-penalty” (Gibson 1994, p. 51) or that “the city resembles a clean and efficient theme park” (Branegan 1993, p. 36). At many levels, one can discern the existence of a coherent Singapore society, despite the presence of multiracial tensions underlying the harmonious, multiracial society as reflected in the national rhetoric.

¹This is a quotation by Lee Kuan Yew from Han, Fernandez and Tan's book, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (1998).

Although a ‘prehistory’ of Singapore exists, the history of modern Singapore undoubtedly began with its British founding, for the colonial occupation of Singapore effectively wiped out the traces of its earlier ephemeral empires and rural Idyll.

2.1.1 Occupations and Influx: Colonial Singapore, Immigration, and the Japanese Occupation

Singapore, under the British colonial government from the 1819 to the Japanese Occupation of 1942,² was not different from other such colonies where the practice of ‘divide and rule’ prevailed. Stamford Raffles, then Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen and agent of the East India Company, identified the strategic importance of Singapore as a hub sited between the trade routes of the western and eastern worlds. Singapore’s urban development under British colonial rule was to facilitate its role as such a shipping hub. However, Raffles first had to deal with the native population and the greater problem of rapid migration from other parts of Asia into the newly founded Singapore in the nineteenth century.

The Jackson Plan for Singapore of 1823 segregated the colonials from the indigenous and other ethnic groups to control and supervise the behavior of these groups. This spatial segregation helped to maintain the power relations between the ‘dominant and dominated’, and at the same time, keep distinct the existence of the various ethnic groups to help the colonial authorities to anticipate how each group would behave (Hee and Ooi 2003, p. 82). Each immigrant group was designated an area under the new plan: the Chinese were settled west of the Singapore River, with Chinatown further divided into plots for various dialect groups; the *temenggong* (Malay ruler) and his followers were settled west of the commercial district; while affluent Asians and Europeans lived in a residential area adjacent to the government quarter.

The segregation of the races occurred not only in space, but also in time as it was occupied through the vocations of these groups. Many migrant workers, mostly males, hailed from the region in search of a better life, and found jobs as menial workers. Some had come from China,³ to escape poverty and natural calamities such as floods and droughts; some came from India, the Malay Archipelago and

²Although Singapore attained self-rule from the British in 1959, the colonial reign was effectively over by the time of the Japanese Occupation.

³The largest Chinese dialect group in the late nineteenth century (and now) were the Hokkien who were traditionally involved in trade, shipping, banking and industry. The next largest group, the Teochews, dealt with agricultural production and distribution, as well as the processing of crops such as gambier, pepper, rice and rubber, etc. The Cantonese worked as artisans and laborers. The two smallest groups, the Hakka and the Hainanese were mostly servants, sailors or unskilled laborers. Historical information regarding the occupations of ethnic groups can be obtained from the very comprehensive report of Country Studies: Singapore, Dec 1989.

Indonesia to work on plantations; at the same time, the British sent convicts from India to provide labor for the construction of infrastructure in the new city. In time, the ethnic and sub-ethnic groups, through their networks and associations, established themselves in occupational and trade specializations.⁴

While the British administration did not attempt to foster any form of 'nation-building instincts' in its subjects in Singapore, the legacy of the colony continues to affect Singaporeans till today. Not only did the British bequeath forms of democratic government to the state, such as the establishment of a Parliament, the judicial system and municipal structures; but also the education system, especially the use of the English language as the language for business and trade and a basis of 'neutral' communication among the races. The other enduring legacy was the classification of Singaporeans as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Others, a practice that continued to foster a racial consciousness in Singaporean society.

The plurality of Singaporean society tended to be divergent in nature, and the laissez faire British administration did not try to foster harmonious relations between the groups. On the contrary, the British administration preferred to keep these as disparate, disunited groups. During the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore (1942–45), the Japanese capitalized on the lack of social capital in Singaporean society at that time, and used the Malay police against the Chinese and Indians (Quah 1990, p. 12). The Japanese were especially cruel to the Chinese population, as the Chinese had fought fiercely against the invading army. In one particularly notorious campaign, known as the *Sook Ching*, an estimated 5000–25,000 Chinese males between 18–50 years of age were massacred (Han et al. 1998, p. 22). The harsh treatment by the Japanese in the early days of the Occupation undermined their later efforts to enlist the support of Singapore people for the Japanese vision of a 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere', which was to comprise Japan, China, Manchuria, and Southeast Asia (Library of Congress 1989).

When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, riots broke out in both Malaysia and Singapore before the returning British were able to control the tense situation (ibid.). This was a time when the certainty of British rule was replaced by widespread disdain for the colonial government, as the British could no longer resume their authority after having abandoned their subjects in wartime, as well as uncertainty about the future of the colony. This was a time when Singaporean society found itself ready for some kind of revolution in order to survive: in other words, the people of Singapore found themselves at the brink of the second founding moment.

⁴The smallest community in the late nineteenth century was the Indians, comprising Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. While the South Indians made a living as shopkeepers, laborers, stevedores, boatmen or bullock cart drivers, the north Indians worked as clerks, traders and merchants. The Malays were not very successful as traders and merchants, losing out to Chinese and European competition, and became shopkeepers, religious teachers, policemen, servants or laborers.

2.1.2 *Rough Times and Independence*

...this one climacteric which triggered off a Singaporean entity. It started with the riots in 1964 when the police were out of our control and the army was not at our disposal; when we realized how vulnerable we were. So we learned to be patient but to be firm on gut issues – issues involving race, language, religion, culture. It is necessary to remind our young that when we started, in 1954 and when we formed government in 1959, we did not have the basic elements of a nation. The attributes of nationhood were missing: a common ethnic identity...a common language.⁵

The post-war transitional period marked the end of British authority and the move towards self-rule and independence for Singapore (1945–1965). The suppressed racial hostilities under the Japanese regime, and the dissatisfaction with British rule and the disruption of communitarian life were some of the reasons that led to riots and unrest in Singapore during this time.

Immediately after the Japanese surrender in 1945, anti-Japanese communists, who hid in the jungles during the war, embarked on a ruthless campaign to exterminate suspected Japanese collaborators (Han et al. 1998). The communists, organized under the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) took to the jungles again in 1948 after clashes with the British government, and fought the then government with guns and bombs in an armed insurrection called the “Emergency”. Angry young people from the Chinese schools joined the communists to revolt against the British government.

There were also four riots linked directly to racial aggression, namely the Maria Hertogh riots of December 1950⁶; the July and September 1964 racial riots⁷; race riots in Singapore in 1965 blamed on Indonesian agitators, and the unpublicized racial riots which occurred in Singapore as a result of the spillover effects of the 13 May 1969 racial riots in Kuala Lumpur (Quah 1990, p. 58). During those and the following years, the Chinese in Singapore felt threatened because of the large Muslim presence in the surrounding countries (ibid., p. 79).

Chinese school students rioted against the government between 1954 and in 1956, not only on account of social justice but also for Chinese culture. In 1964, Malays rioted when the new housing program resulted in the destruction of their traditional *kampong* settlements (ibid., p. 7). These riots usually took place on the streets, involving violent clashes and sometimes damage to properties through fires. The Malay riots of 1950 and 1964 played out in large public open spaces such as the Padang and the open spaces at Empress Place.

⁵This is a quotation by Lee Kuan Yew from his January 1980 speech at the PAP 25th Anniversary Rally, titled “History is not made the way it is written”. In the speech, he expounded his views on that which has shaped the Singapore entity.

⁶The Maria Hertogh riots occurred over a court decision to send a Dutch girl, adopted by Muslim parents and converted to Islam, to a convent, when her natural parents claimed rights to their child. Eighteen Europeans were killed and many more injured.

⁷These riots occurred when the print media reported the suppression of minority rights of the Malays, which led to suspicion and tension between the Chinese and Malays.

It was during this period of uncertainty that the political career of Lee Kuan Yew, eventually Singapore's first prime minister, took off. Lee was the founder and also the Secretary General of the People's Action Party (PAP) from 1955–1992. The PAP won the first general election in 1959 and every election since then, and in between 1968 to 1984, there were virtually no opposition members in Parliament.⁸ Lee's motif was 'survival' right after Independence,⁹ and this had actually never ceased to be part of his political rhetoric thereafter (Barr 2000, p. 32).

In order for the inchoate nation to survive, Lee devised, in 1965, the motif of the 'rugged' society, meaning strong effective government, uncorrupted civil service, a stable economy and political system poised to attract foreign investors (*ibid.*). The 'rugged society', however, was not like the western idea of rugged individualism or rebelliousness; on the contrary, this notion saw society as a whole being resilient, more as a 'herd' whose cultural instincts make them effective members of the collective. In other words, the idea was communitarian in nature (Barr 2000, p. 150). At the same time, the government clamped down hard on communal violence by dispersing Malay *kampongs* and curtailing Chinese activism.

2.1.3 *Lee Kuan Yew, Values and Culture*

In describing the processes through which the Singaporean public is shaped, it is useful to relate them to two defining themes of its developmental history—the leitmotifs of survival and multiracialism. Although the story of Singapore's development extends through complex trajectories, I believe that these are the dominant concerns influencing many others. One of the important sub-themes that emerge from the dialectics of survival and multiracialism is the notion of meritocracy—the idea that Singaporeans should be rewarded on the basis of competence, and not on aspects of their racial background or identity.

Singapore's recent history of founding moments implies that in the wake of each moment, a reminder of the need for survival re-surfaces. The nature of the survival leitmotif changes with time, along with the stage of development of the nation-state as well as the nature of the challenges facing Singaporeans. Meanings of survival have ranged from basic survival, as in living from hand to mouth; to survival as a people, as an independent country; to economic survival, as well as survival as a competitor in an increasingly globalized world. The various guises of survival in

⁸In the Singapore government, the Cabinet, led by the Prime Minister, controls legislative process. Matters of the state are debated in Parliament. The Cabinet is, however, the most powerful body that controls Singapore. Today, Singapore is still under one-party rule although a few opposition members have been elected into Parliament.

⁹Singapore gained self-rule from the British in 1959, but joined the Malayan Federation from 1963–65. The city-state became an independent republic in August 1965, when it became clear that it was no longer tenable to remain as part of the Malayan Federation.

the context of Singapore's history continue to shape the notion of the Singapore public.

What does 'multiracialism' mean in the Singaporean context? The term has been used in various ways to mean rather different things at different historical moments (Quah 1990). It sometimes refers to the equal treatment of the races by the government; at other times, it means that the various races should revert to ethnic heritage as inoculation against negative Western influences to Singapore's open society; it sometimes means that racial boundaries should be kept distinct, and that Singaporeans should organize themselves in racial communities for support (*ibid.*, p. 16). Depending on the stage of cultural integration in the country, the meaning of a multiracial society had continued to change.

The concept of meritocracy is one borne out of the need for the survival of the multiracial society. As the notion of reward for good performance in order to ensure continued survival of the nation, meritocracy had been the unchallenged tenet of Singapore society, with the government and the people embracing the concept. To a great extent, the concept and practice of meritocracy had shaped the attitudes of the Singaporean public.

2.1.3.1 The Architect of Modern Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew is arguably the architect of modern Singapore. Politician and social engineer extraordinaire, he had been described by biographers variously as: a progressive, an elitist, a geneticist, a cultural evolutionist, a Confucianist, as well as a pessimist (Barr 2000; Tamney 1996). Although fundamental beliefs guiding his actions have remained steadfast throughout his political career, his ideas on shaping the nation and his ways of shaping Singaporean culture to achieve progress had changed—sometimes drastically, so that he seemed to be fraught with contradictions at times.¹⁰ Above all, Lee believed that culture was malleable—a point which he freely admitted—which therefore could be used to shape people's habits, practices and ideology in order to achieve prosperity for the nation:

Genes cannot be manipulated, right? Unless you start tinkering with it as they may be able to do one day. But the culture you can tinker with. It's slow to change, but it can be changed – by experience – otherwise human beings will not survive. If a certain habit does not help survival, well, you must quickly unlearn the habit...So I've got to try and get Singaporeans to emulate or to adopt certain habits and practices which will make Singapore succeed (Han et al. 1998, p. 179).

After stepping down from Prime Ministership in 1990, Lee became much more reflective of his life, such that in his 1998 authorized biography (Han et al. 1998), he sought to explain in his own words ideas and key experiences that shaped his view of the world. His changing notions, in particular, about the use of culture that

¹⁰Barr described him as: a socialist (from Cambridge days) who transformed Singapore into a capitalist economy.

followed him throughout his political career, are well documented in his numerous speeches and interviews with the media,¹¹ giving us a good picture of the man and his ideas.

Lee was highly aware that at the point of separation from Malaysia,¹² Singapore's resources were few and the survival of the nation depended on having a productive and dedicated workforce. As he prepared Singapore in the late 1950s to merge with the Malayan Federation, Lee leant towards an egalitarian "Malayan culture" that encompassed a blending of Chinese, Malay and Indian culture,¹³ a rendition of multiracialism with Malay as the national language that would inoculate the large Chinese population from being influenced by a powerful communist China (Barr 2000, pp. 137–139).

However, after Independence from Malaysia, Lee adopted a western-style of governing and a western-oriented culture for Singapore society, with English as the medium of instruction in many schools and as the language of business. In fact, the Chinese in Singapore were often perplexed by the western style of governing of the PAP—it was only in the 1970s that "Asian values" again became incorporated as part of the PAP ideology (Tamney 1996, p. 8). The early 'melting pot' idea of a Malayan culture had been resigned to make way for a more pragmatic one, to allow Singaporean culture to develop over hundreds of years. Until then, and in order to insulate the citizens from becoming influenced by negative western cultural trends of the 60s, such as hippyism, casual attitudes to sex and drug-taking, the racial communities had to draw from their cultural heritage: a community-based "cultural ballast" to fuel the multiracial society towards progress (Barr 2000, p. 145). Lee's application of his ideas to shape Singaporean society became increasingly holistic to encompass more and more aspects of Singaporean life, often blurring the distinctions between public and private realms.

¹¹There is a good selection in Han, Fernandez and Tan's *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (1998). See also Lee Kuan Yew, *Prime Minister's Speeches, Press Conferences, Interviews, Statements, etc. 1959–1980*, Singapore: Prime Minister's Office. Also Lee Kuan Yew, *Senior Minister's Speeches, Press Conferences, Interviews, Statements, etc. 1990*, Singapore: Prime Minister's Office.

¹²Singapore was part of the Malayan Federation from 1963–1965. The reasons for the separation will not be dealt with here, but one of the most fundamental reasons was cultural difference between the Malaysian polity and the Singapore politicians.

¹³"Although the ethnic categories were meaningful in the Singaporean context, each subsumed much more internal variation than was suggested by the term "race". Chinese included people from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as Chinese from all the countries of Southeast Asia, including some who spoke Malay or English as their first language. The Malays included not only those from peninsular Malaya, but also immigrants or their descendants from various parts of the Indonesian archipelago, such as Sumatra, the Riau Islands south of Singapore, Java, and Sulawesi. Indians comprised people stemming from anywhere in pre-1947 British India, the present states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and from Sri Lanka and Burma. Singapore's Indian "race" thus contained Tamils, Malayalis, Sikhs, Gujaratis, Punjabis, and others from the subcontinent who shared neither physical appearance, language, nor religion". (Excerpt from "Ethnic Categories" in *Country Studies*: Singapore 1989.)

2.1.3.2 A Culture of ‘Campaigns’

The late 1970s and 80s were punctuated with numerous nation-wide campaigns to bring about desired habits, practices and values. These included the “Use Your Hands” campaign of the late 70s to inculcate the importance of blue-collar work to prepare the population for large-scale industrialization; the “Courtesy” campaigns, initiated in the early 80s with the modest aims of promoting courteous behavior towards tourists, have grown into more ambitious programs to promote a ‘gracious society’, spawning also in its wake, the “Kindness Movement”.

Lee came to realize in the 1970s that the traditional cultures of Singaporeans (Chinese, especially) embodied an ethos that was useful for modernizing Singapore: they valued education and hard work, gave respect and status to state bureaucrats, and embodied faith that the state would be responsible for society’s progress (Tamney 1996, p. 8). Lee set to devise his own version of Chinese culture, language and Confucianism as central features of Singaporean life (Barr 2000, p. 33). One of the most ambitious and enduring campaigns in Singapore’s social engineering program must surely be the “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, now called “Mandarin for Chinese Singaporeans”. Initiated in 1979, the campaign was a project to replace the many dialects used by Chinese Singaporeans with the ‘mother tongue’. The goals of the campaign were to improve communication between Chinese dialect groups and to promote Confucianism (Country Studies 1989). The surrender of the use of dialects was not only a language reformation, but also “implied a major transformation of the social structure of the Chinese community, because the associational and commercial structure of Singapore’s Chinese-oriented society rested on (and reinforced) dialect distinctions” (ibid.).¹⁴

With this frame of reference, Lee’s harnessing of Confucian values was seen as a move to ensure consensus and support for the extant government (Barr 2000, pp. 33–34). Lee put forward his argument that for Asians, the needs of the collective had always taken precedence over the individual:

Nobody doubts that if you take me on, I will put on the knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul-de-sac...Anybody who decides to take me on needs to put o the knuckle-dusters. If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way you can govern a Chinese society (Han et al. 1998, p. 126).

2.1.3.3 Neo-Confucianism and Shared Values

Lee’s strong stance on how a Chinese society should be governed led many political commentators to view his promotion of Confucian values as a further

¹⁴Some academics also questioned the restriction of Chinese values to Confucianism and recalled that in the 1950s and early 1960s Chinese was the language of radicalism and revolt rather than of loyalty and conservatism.

justification to his authoritarian style (Han et al. 1998, p. 195).¹⁵ Confucianism, as advocated by Lee at this point in Singaporean history, did not really appeal to Singaporean society. It was reworked into the more generic ‘national ideology’, elaborated as ‘Asian values’, and eventually approved by Parliament in 1991 as Singapore’s “Shared Values”.¹⁶

The four core values were:

- Community over self
- Upholding the family as the basic building block of society
- Resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention
- Stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony.

The ideal society, as spelled out in the Shared Values, was one in which individual happiness and needs were subsumed under the collective good. As the family was recognized as the basic unit of society and not the individual, the overall happiness of the family outweighed benefits to individual members of the family. Divorce, single parenthood and singlehood were frowned upon—the family should not be sub-atomized.¹⁷ Regarding the favoring of consensus over contention, critics had argued that the government simply would not tolerate criticism and contention, and that consensus meant going along with the government on all issues. But as Lee had said:

...My job is to persuade my flock, my people, that that’s the right way. And sometimes it may be necessary not to tell them all the facts because you will scare them. What the crowd thinks of me from time to time, I consider totally irrelevant...The whole ground can be against, but if I know this is right, I set out to do it, and I am quite sure, given time, as events unfold, I will win over the ground... (Han et al. 1998, p. 229)

2.1.3.4 Media and Censorship

There had long been a criticism of the Singapore mass media, especially from foreign media, that it did not put forward independent views on national issues (Tamney 1996, p. 61). With the legal structure supporting restrictions placed on publications that did not work within the realm of non-contention,¹⁸ outspoken

¹⁵Singapore society is considered by Lee as a Chinese society, and he makes little pretense to hide this view.

¹⁶A National Ideology Committee was established and headed by the younger Lee, which produced the “Shared Values” report in 1991. Drawing from Chinese, Malay and Indian cultural traditions, the national ideology was drafted to counter undesirable traits from the West, namely individualism, self-centeredness, not working hard, and being suspicious of political leaders (and thereby limiting their powers), casual sexual relationships, and single parenthood.

¹⁷These values are also embedded in the rules for purchasing public housing flats.

¹⁸Under the Newspapers and Printing Presses Act (NPPA), passed in 1974 and amended in 1986, the government could restrict—without actually banning—the circulation of any publication sold in the country, including foreign periodicals, that it deemed guilty of distorted reporting.

foreign publications such as the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and *Time* magazine's Asian edition had suffered suspension of circulation within Singapore in 1987. The government had also restricted the circulation of *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek* in 1987 for "engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore".¹⁹ At the 40th World Congress of Newspapers Publishers held in Helsinki in 1987, then Minister of Trade and Industry Lee Hsien Loong justified the action against foreign press:

The reason Singapore is so concerned about foreign press involvement in domestic politics is that we have seen how the media may bring in undesirable values, how newspapers can be used to carry out covert subversion, and how inflammatory reporting can lead to racial riots (Quah 1990, p. 59).

However, it did surprise some of the elder Lee's biographers that Singaporeans rated press freedom lowly on their list of priorities and did not find it particularly imperative that the press should provide a check on government—foremost on most Singaporeans' minds was that the government should bring wealth and progress to the nation (Han et al. 1998, p. 217). In other words, Singapore, in the early years, exemplified the "developmental state"—a condition in which "the state manages the economy and is relatively free from having to meet short-term populist demands" (Tamney 1996, p. 59).²⁰ Lee had anticipated the political sentiment of the time and advocated an 'Asian' style of democracy when he said in 1991:

Simply modeling a system on the American, British or West European constitution is not how Asian countries will or can go about it. The peoples of Asia want higher standards of living in an orderly society. They want to have as much individual choice in lifestyle, political liberties and freedoms as is compatible with the interests of the community. After a certain stage of advance in education and industrialization, a people may need representative government, however chosen, in order to reconcile conflicting group interests in society and maintain social order and stability. Representative government is also one way for a people to forge a rapid consensus, a social compact, on how a society settles the trade-off between further rapid economic growth and individual freedom.²¹

2.1.3.5 Asian and Modern

Singapore's national ideology was conceived to maintain Asian societal norms. But this ideology, especially from the view of those from the 'outside', is also "radical

¹⁹This information can be referenced to the Ministry of Communications and Information 'Press Release' page on their website '<http://www.mci.gov.sg/web/corp/press-room/categories/press-releases/content/circulation-of-foreign-newspapers-in-singapore>'.

²⁰Singapore is often described as a developmental city-state, in that "it establishes as its principle of legitimacy its ability to promote and sustain development, understanding by development the combination of steady high rates of economic growth and structural change in the productive system, both domestically and in its relationship to the international economy". In other words, economic growth is prioritized above all else as an indicator of government performance.

²¹This quotation is from Lee Kuan Yew's address at the Ashahi Shimbun symposium, on May 9 1991. Also cited in Han et al. (1998), p. 372.

because it is such a basic attempt at social design: to create a culture that is not Western, is modern, and is Asian” (Tamney 1996, p. 19). Singapore’s leaders have never described themselves or the form of government as authoritarian (a term commonly bandied by foreign media) but have continued to defend their style of government as a necessarily Asian style of democracy, steeped in Confucian norms (Tamney 1996, p. 57). In fact, Lee had described himself as a liberal:

Today, I would describe myself as...between socialists and conservatives. I would put myself as a liberal. As someone who believes in equal opportunities so that everybody gets and equal chance to do his best and with certain compassion to ensure that the failures do not fall through the floor...A liberal in the economic sense of the word...Not a liberal in the sense of the American word “liberal”...But a liberal in the classical sense of the word, in that I’m not fixated to a particular theory of the world, or of society. I’m pragmatic. I’m prepared to look at a problem and say, all right, what is the best way to solve it that will produce the maximum happiness and well-being for the maximum number of people, You call it whatever you like (Han et al. 1998, p. 130).

The last of the four points of the Shared Values stressed the premium placed on racial and religious harmony. This remained quite a powerful motif in light of past racial and religious conflicts—discussions in the public realm bordering on race or religion issues treaded, so to speak, on sacred ground and were quickly extinguished when they were deemed to be harmful to the harmonious co-existence of the different groups.

2.1.3.6 Ethnic Identity

The ethnic categories, referred to as ‘race’ in the Singapore context, continued to be a conscious organizing structure of society, such that beyond the family, the ‘race’ community formed the next level of support for the individual. The Singapore identity was defined as membership of the ‘natural’ groups of Chinese, Malay, Indian or Others, assuming that these were homogenous groups and that the boundaries between the races remained indefinitely (Country Studies 1989).

The government, right from Independence, had worked to break up ethnic enclaves, as these were believed to be the breeding grounds for racial incitement and communitarian violence, and to reshape communities through the distribution in public housing and through community centers throughout the island-state. However, the consciousness of racial difference continued to be reinforced in the government’s specified racial quota of residents for every block of public housing flats, and celebrated through different public holidays allocated to the different races and religious groups within the calendar year. Nevertheless, although Singaporean society had a “high level of racial consciousness”, it had a “low level of racial tension” (Barr 2000, p. 205).

Ethnic identity played out in everyday life through community structures such as the mosque, sharia (Muslim law) courts, Hindu temples, as well as religious bodies. Historically, the Chinese in Singapore had the densest network of ethnic

associations, achieved through clan organizations, and business,²² religious and recreational associations.²³ Membership of Chinese clans used to be restricted to those speaking the same dialect, or those who could trace their ancestry to the same region of China. However, clan memberships have since declined, as younger generations of Singaporeans have little affiliation to dialect group (thanks to years of “Speak Mandarin” campaigns).²⁴ They were not aware of their ancestral origins in China, or were indifferent to these. Since then, these associations have changed in form and content, promoting Chinese culture in general. They have also been active in the larger community by organizing charitable events or taking up endowment and advisory and sponsorship roles to the schools, scholarship funds, etc.—as did the Ngee Ann Kongsi, one of the most influential of such associations in Singapore.

2.1.3.7 Social Engineer Extraordinaire

By the end of the 1980s, most Singaporeans would describe themselves as middle class,²⁵ owning a HDB flat with secure savings in the Central Provident Fund; having a steady income (or two incomes, with a working wife) and a well-stocked home; and spending time on hobbies, sport or holidays abroad. They would probably use public transportation, though many would still like to own a car (Country Studies 1989).

Lee had no doubt that prosperity had to come through hard work and social discipline, taking always the best available course for economic growth without letting ideology, religion or cultural prejudice exclude any option for achieving economic success (Tamney 1996, p. 10). He would also not hesitate to create the social conditions to favor such growth, making him social engineer extraordinaire. It was a national obsession to be ahead in rankings for business performance, service, education, efficiency, and other kinds of indexes, especially if these had impact on economic growth. Despite the perceived authoritarian approach to

²²The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, founded in 1906, was the overarching association that represented the entire Chinese business community. A federation, its constituent units were not individuals or individual businesses, but associations. Its basic structure consisted of representatives of seven regional associations (Fujian, Teochiu, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainan, and “Three Rivers”) and ninety-three trade associations, each one usually restricted to speakers of one dialect.

²³According to Country Studies: Singapore, these number more than 1000 still, in the late 1970s.

²⁴Up till the 1980s in Singapore, many Chinese-run businesses still fell into the traditional occupational groups particular to the different dialect groups. For the proprietors and employees of many small and medium Chinese businesses, it continued to be fruitful to identify with the powerful clans and associations of the dialect and sub-ethnic groups, as the social solidarity proved economically advantageous. This effect has to a certain extent been eroded by the rise of multi-national corporations in Singapore in the 90s, and the powerful government-linked corporations that encompass many industries and businesses in Singapore.

²⁵In 1987, then Prime Minister Lee declared Singapore a ‘middle-class society’, based on the criterion that more than 80 % of Singaporeans owned the property they lived in.

politics, the superlative transformation of Singapore's economy, society and physical environment, and the corruption-free government, attest to Lee's leadership and visionary skills.

2.1.4 'The Next Lap': The 1990s, 2000s and Beyond

When asked to name the most important invention of the 20th century, Lee Kuan Yew had, without reservation, singled out the air-conditioner. The air-conditioner, a machine enabling Singaporeans to remain cool in Singapore's humid tropical weather, is emblematic of the Singapore government's desire to provide economic growth and material comfort for Singaporeans. This desire is reflective in the adaptive stance taken by the government in its adoption of economic strategies that changed along with the economic climate of the times.

In the 1980s, when Singapore's growth was on the fast track, the promotion of the Shared Values as a way of life was widely accepted in exchange for the steady growth of the economy, and the stable environment of the city-state. However, especially in the wake of the post-1997 Asian economic downturn, these 'values' were transformed. In place of these Shared Values, the new horizon of Singapore Vision 21 (Century) became another new 'founding moment', so as to prepare the ground and the workforce to populate a "knowledge-driven economy". As Singapore strode into the 1990s and the increasingly globalized realms of economic, political, and social relations between borders and domains, there was a "state transition", a form of adaptation of the government and its political structures from "authoritarian taskmaster" to "venture capitalist" (Ong 2004, p. 178).

Entrepreneurship and innovation will be key ingredients of economic success. The more developed we become, the less we can merely follow the path blazed by others. Singaporeans need to venture forth on their own, to grow activities in the region, to create and develop key product and knowledge niches to maintain our competitive edge.²⁶

With 50 years of economic development since its independence, Singapore now had a maturing economy but its achievements had been in many ways state-led. The government had played a major entrepreneurial role through the setting up of many government-linked companies (GLCs) such as the national airline, telecommunications provider and the creation of Jurong Island as the new chemical hub of the city-state. Innovation and enterprise, mostly from private sector initiatives, were needed to build the engine of further growth in an increasingly competitive and globalized world economy.

This required some kind of strategy to both attract and retain international talent and expertise, as well as for the population to remain "socially cohesive and nationally resilient" (Ong 2004, p. 178). A new kind of Singaporean was needed—one who was adventurous, a risk-taker, independent and innovative—an

²⁶This quotation is by then Deputy Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, in 1998.

entrepreneur. Public discussion had been nudged from the need for discipline and good work ethics to the need for creativity and risk-taking (Tamney 1996, p. 70). Schools were in fact criticized for producing risk-adverse conformists at a time when the economy needed innovators and entrepreneurs (*ibid.*). Singapore needed these on top of the hardworking, frugal, disciplined and loyal worker. However, political commentators have observed that it would be naïve to imagine that these values should be confined to the workplace, and that traditional “Asian values” would still prevail within family and society (Ong 2004, pp. 185–186).

The Singapore that marches into the 90s is not the same Singapore that was thrust into independence in the 60s. The electorate is more affluent, more secure, more confident, more educated, and less tolerant of governmental paternalism, however well meant that paternalism may be (Woon 1991; Tamney 1996, p. 69).

Clearly, these changes to the make-up of the Singaporean would require a different style of governing, allowing independent-minded and well-educated citizens to take control of their own lives and even to be able to criticize public policies. It was not difficult to anticipate that, “(t)he desire to be independent, once fixed in personalities, cannot be limited to only economic matters... The new Singaporean is less content with a paternalistic, pseudo-Confucian style of governing. This state of affairs is not a result of capitalism itself but of the stage of capitalism that Singapore is entering” (Tamney 1996, pp. 70–71).

2.1.4.1 The New Guard

Lee handed over the premiership of Singapore to his successor, Goh Chok Tong, in 1990—a changeover from the Old Guard, who had nurtured the state since its independence, to the New Guard, who would bring it into the ‘Next Lap’.²⁷ Since 1985, moves had been made by the government to be more inclusive (Tamney 1996, pp. 71–74). These included the setting up of the Feedback Unit in 1985, which collects opinions, views and suggestions from the public in writing and through public forums; the introduction of Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) in 1990, who have limited voting privileges and act as ‘sanctioned opposition’, representing varied interests and groups such as youth, women, and the environment; expanding the role of the elected President in 1991 with powers over the use of state fiscal reserves and veto powers in the appointment of top civil servants; and the establishment of Town Councils in 1989 by way of decentralizing the control of new towns—these constitute mainly maintenance activities.²⁸

While not actually letting up on economic development, Goh Chok Tong’s government of the 90s was committed to the concept of a ‘caring nation’. One of the ways of achieving the ‘gracious’ society and ‘caring nation’ was through the development of the arts in creating a cultured people. Culture was also deemed to

²⁷The term Goh coined to mark his term of office.

²⁸Council members are, however, not elected by members of the new towns.

be an area of viable economic growth. It was also acknowledged that Singapore needed to improve upon its image of being culturally sterile, so as to persuade expatriates to work and stay in Singapore, and at the same time, prevent a brain-drain of culturally-minded Singaporeans. The defining difference of Prime Minister Goh over Lee was his emphasis on the building of a 'gracious' society:

If Singaporeans are rich but crude, rich but selfish, rich but uncaring, the society cannot hold together for many years because we are going to have internal conflict, tension, and very quickly, the whole place will fall apart (The Straits Times 1996).

Under the New Guard, the importance of social order still preceded the expression of individual views: street protests were still outlawed, and assembly of over five persons in public spaces still required a license or permit to be obtained. In other words, there was a move towards popular participation in the political process, but in a controlled manner.

2.1.4.2 Beginnings of a Civil Society

The government continued to co-opt brilliant and talented Singaporean elites into its folds, including those who had no political ambitions but were willing to head statutory boards, organizations and trade unions. Through the leadership of these non-political bodies, the influence of the government percolated deep into the various structures of society, forming a collaborated civil society. The PAP, the dominant political party since independence, did not have credible opposition leaders. Opposition parties in Singapore failed to attract good candidates, representation of minority groups, or resources for successful election campaigns (Tamney 1996, p. 63).

Another reason for weak civil society was that the dominant Singaporean Chinese society was built upon low social capital due to the numerous dialect groups, as well as the fact that Chinese enterprises were traditionally family-run businesses, with the *kongsi* being the association serving the dialect group. The realms of trust extended first within the family, then the dialect groups or clan association, and then to the larger Chinese community. The existence of Malay and Indian ethnic groups further compounded the problem of a 'low trust' society. The government's initiatives, including the use of common languages and reinforcing the tenets of the multi-racial society as well as religious harmony were based on building a harmonious nation while preserving ethnic identities within a heterogeneous society.

2.1.4.3 A Multicultural Society

Although standardized education and equal treatment of the different races by the government have resulted in more shared attitudes between the different races, this shared existence is one of proximity than of a real 'melting pot', as underscored in a reflective speech in 2004 by the then much-mellowed Minister Mentor Lee Kuan

Yew, made in response to a Parliamentarian's argument for the emergence of a Singaporean consciousness that would transcend ethnic and cultural urges. He believed that ethnic identities are deep-rooted and it would take a long time before people felt Singaporean above their own racial identity:

...he made his point with a stark scenario that, in multicultural Singapore, is increasingly commonplace. "Ask yourself this question: if you have a child and he brings back a boyfriend or a girlfriend of a different race, will you be delighted?" "I'll answer you frankly - I don't think I will. I may eventually accept it," he said (The Straits Times 2004a, b, c, d, e, f, g).

2.1.5 *Political Trajectories*

With the handing over of the premiership of Singapore in 2004 to Lee Hsien Loong, the current Prime Minister, change seemed imminent, but not in the form of a revolution of the political culture that had prevailed since the inception of the city-state. In an interview with *Fortune* magazine, the younger Lee had promised to "cut the apron strings of a nanny state"—he cited the already lifted longstanding bans on bar-top dancing and bungee jumping as signs that the new regime was "prepared to take the plunge and make even deeper changes in society" (Kraar 2004). Lee even urged Singaporeans to speak freely, as "(d)isagreement does not imply rebellion" (ibid.). As Lee pointed out in his interview, this vision of freedom would more likely entail citizens' participation in the shaping of public policy, with the ultimate decision still made by the government.

In 2004, the elder Lee assumed the role of Minister Mentor—a position specially created for him—to serve as an advisor during a period of political transition. Lee remained an influential figure in the background from frontline decision-making until his retirement from politics after the 2011 General Election. Lee Kuan Yew's passing in 2015 immortalized him as a national hero and he was heralded as a visionary among the founding fathers behind Singapore's success story. As his son and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared in his eulogy, "To those who seek Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's monument, Singaporeans can reply proudly: 'look around you'".²⁹

2.1.6 *Cultural and Social Trajectories*

In the mode of continually adapting the course of action to deal with an ever-changing world, a new wave of structural changes embodied in "Remaking

²⁹This quotation is from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's eulogy for his father, Lee Kuan Yew. Source: <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/transcript-eulogy-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-funeral-late-mr-lee-kuan-yew-29-march>.

Singapore”—a series of structural changes that would support a more competitive city-state in the age of globalization—was proposed in 2003:

We have concrete ideas on how to deepen the ties of Singaporeans to Singapore, and to each other. We have signaled that globalized Singaporeans must be considered full-fledged members of our society. We have proposed important changes to our education system to help meet the aspirations of Singaporeans and make us a more adaptive people. There are specific proposals aimed at nurturing a culture of expression and participation, of graciousness and compassion. We also point out particular policy shifts that would equalize the treatment of Singaporean women and men, and recommend how to strengthen family life, deepen our heritage roots and make Singapore a fun place to live in.³⁰

In addition, the report of 2000 for turning Singapore into a “Renaissance City” aimed to transform Singapore into a “highly innovative and multi-talented global city for the arts and culture”.³¹ This ambition served to animate existing public spaces as sites for artistic expression. In addition, the proliferation of arts venues such as the Esplanade—Theaters on the Bay, as well as the establishment of Marina Bay, brought with them ancillary public spaces that increased the variety and choice of public spaces in the city, and enhanced the overall vibrancy of the city.

The trends already in place will continue, such as the increasing number of foreigners in Singapore, at either end of the global flow of labor. There is also an observable trend in the increasing vocalization of ‘multiple publics’ such as women’s groups, LGBTs, foreign workers, nature protectors, and consumer groups. One way to see this is that there is an emerging critical public, which, empowered as organized groups, are able to articulate grievances more persuasively than if they had acted as individuals in voicing their complaints. These groups have continued to push for representation and for their causes in different mediums of public representation, one of which is, of course, public space.

Organized activism, such as the 2004 organized ‘protest’ of breast-feeding mothers at the Esplanade, the ‘Pink Dot’ event held every year since 2009 in support of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community in Singapore, and organized ‘spontaneous’ behavior in public such as flash mobs, a phenomenon seen in other major cities of the world, have made their appearances in public spaces in Singapore. With the increasing tolerance of the state towards the

³⁰This quotation is from a speech by Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Chairman of the Remaking Singapore Committee, at the Remaking Singapore Report Presentation and Appreciation Lunch, 12 July 2003. Its report, submitted to Prime Minister Goh in July 2003, proposed recommendations around four themes for renewal and change, viz. A Home for All Singaporeans, A Home Owned, A Home for All Seasons, and A Home to Cherish. 2. Collectively, these recommendations aimed to (i) unleash the creative potential of Singaporeans and attract discerning talent to live and work here; (ii) fine-tune Singapore’s safety nets and engender a more compassionate society; (iii) expand common spaces and strengthen social cohesion; and (iii) create more opportunities for Singaporeans to contribute to the country and strengthen their emotional bonds to Singapore (Apr 2004).

³¹The report outlined two main aims: to establish Singapore as a global arts city and to provide cultural ballast in the ongoing nation building efforts, and was endorsed by the government, to be implemented over five years.

expressions of views in public, a move towards less ‘muted’ forms of spatial practice in public space is perhaps in the making. There are also signs of an emerging and active civil society in the form of independent interest groups who discuss issues in public and create awareness of the issues at stake, and then put forward their argument to the state through persuasion instead of outright dissent.³² It is also a fact that with the availability of the Internet and the free flow of information that many Singaporeans now have access to, information can no longer be controlled by the so-called ‘nanny state’.

At a speech to University students in 2003, the younger Lee emphasized four major challenges facing the nation that have persisted into the 2010s.³³ The first focused on maintaining racial and religious harmony, as it was observed that Singaporeans have become more religious and tended to form friendships and associations within religious groups, leading to less interaction with people of other beliefs. Friendships also tended to be formed within limited racial communities.

The second dealt with international terrorism and the threat posed by extremist groups in the region. With the arrest within Singapore of members of extremist cell, Jemaah Islamiyah,³⁴ it was inevitable that a general climate of insecurity prevails, and the local Muslim population is regarded with some degree of suspicion. Singaporeans are also constantly reminded of historical events involving antagonism with its Muslim neighbors: the 1964 racial riots, the Confrontation with Indonesia, and the separation from Malaysia. Lee especially warned against the forming of racial enclaves within the ‘private’ domains of the home communities, at work and in schools. Talk regarding these issues is encouraged within government-initiated focus groups called “Harmony Circles” and “Inter-Religious Confidence Circles”. The issue of international terrorism becomes more acutely important in 2016 with the rise of the Islamic State and religious fundamentalism around the world.

The third challenge involved the building of social cohesion, as he observed that the opportunities offered by globalization might not benefit Singaporeans equally, and that Singapore society would become more stratified. He advocated the upholding of meritocracy as the paradigm to prevent a divided society. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong echoed this sentiment in 2015, when he warned that Singapore must be wary of “dissolving into globalization” and emphasized “strengthening the national identity” (Today 2015).

The fourth challenge was political, in that he felt Singaporeans needed to be “informed, engaged and committed to Singapore”, and that there was a need for “broad, political consensus” in building strategies for Singapore’s survival. He

³²One such example is ‘The Green Corridor’ preservation project, which was successful due to the persuasive efforts of The Nature Society, which put together a proposal for the conservation of a 173.7 ha rail corridor running through the island.

³³The speech by the Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was at a Pre-University Students’ Seminar in June 2003, called Singapore@WAP (Singapore at Work and Play).

³⁴Members of the group were accused of hatching a plot to sabotage American military interests in Singapore.

pointed out though that this should be achieved via “national education”, i.e. through information and persuasion, instead of “indoctrination”.

While Lee spoke in 2003, it is interesting to observe the parallels in his thinking, in relation to the elder Lee’s, who had socialized Singaporeans to the idea of a multiracial society, Shared Values, meritocracy, and the value of “consensus” for Singapore’s continued survival, some thirty years ago. Albeit, the style of the younger Lee’s delivery was more persuasive than the allegorical “knuckle-dusters” approach of a generation ago.³⁵

2.1.6.1 Assimilating the ‘New Normal’

The 2011 General Elections was heralded as a ‘new normal’ for Singaporean politics. The elections ushered in a more contested political space and a more demanding electorate, as evidenced by debates over developmental trade-offs such as the Bukit Brown Cemetery, the demolition of Rochor Centre, as well as the environmental impact of the Cross-Island Line MRT running under the Central Nature Reserve. Even though the 2015 elections were cautiously described as a return to more established norms (The Straits Times 2015a, b, c), it was clear that wider social media participation and new forms of citizen engagement had established their roots in the broader perception of the Singapore public—especially with a new generation of voters growing up post-Independence. The 2013 Population White Paper reported Singapore’s birth rate as steadily falling over the last three decades, with its total fertility rate sinking under the optimum replacement rate of 2.1. Singapore’s life expectancy was also reported to have increased from 66 years in 1970 to 82 years in 2010. Falling birth rates coupled with increasing life expectancies have ultimately resulted in an aging and shrinking citizen population and workforce. To mitigate this, Singapore has put in place enhancements to policies that encourage marriage and parenthood, and a friendly immigration policy (for both for high and low-skilled labour) to add diversity and age-balance to the citizen population (NPTD 2013). Singapore accepts approximately 15,000 and 25,000 new citizens per year to supplement its citizen population, and by 2030, Singapore would have to plan for a population scenario of 6.9 million (ibid.). Despite the balanced recommendations of the paper, emotive debates over the erosion of the Singapore core resulting from the inevitable need to increase the foreign workforce spelt the need for government agencies to engage the citizenry much more than in the past in enacting development policies for the future.

These challenges would appear to benefit from an increased publicity of Singaporean life, so as to bring into the public domain racial relations, and bring to public discourse the previously tabooed issues of racial harmony. The concept of meritocracy makes visible the achievements of individuals, while the emphasis on

³⁵The elder Lee made a speech in which he said that he would not hesitate to confront dissenters with knuckle-dusters in a back-alley.

consensual politics through information and persuasion would necessitate bringing increased levels of political discussions and debate into the public realm. Public space may indeed be one of the avenues to provide the publicity necessary to articulate these challenges and become the site of spatial discourse towards a more pluralistic and adversarial ‘consensus’, rather than a homogenization or glossing over of differences to create an appearance of harmony. The emergent public space-in-the-making could be a contributing force towards a new standard of transparency in democratic process.

2.2 A Brief History of Urban Public Space in Singapore

The nature of government in Singapore, the pragmatic economic emphasis on many fronts, the adoption of neo-Confucian ethics in the forging of national values and the phenomenon of a national middle-class constitute a particular political and social milieu in which the production of public spaces has taken place in the last few decades. However, the provision and use of public space in Singapore shifts through a history tied inadvertently to national ideology, national development and control exercised by the state.

Far from the sedate image conjured up by the notion of Singaporean public space, the history of such had been as traumatic and crisis-loaded as any in many developing countries in uncertain and trying times. The particular type of agoraphobia exhibited by the state in relation to the provision of public spaces had its roots in such a history, which has had a lasting impact on the built environment of Singapore. The range and types of public spaces that emerge within the rapid urbanization of Singapore is tied as much to its social history as to its national aspirations, etched onto the urban template.

2.2.1 *Public Space in Singapore: A Short History*

2.2.1.1 Lawns, Far from the Madding Bazaar

The compartmentalization and ordering of districts in the nineteenth century plans for Singapore provided the colonial administration with the desired segregation of the European Town and the native quarters. Public spaces included lawns like the Padang, promenades like the Esplanade or Queen Elizabeth Walk (as it was later named), and squares like Commercial Square and Empress Place in the city center. The Padang³⁶ served as the visual foreground for the important municipal buildings

³⁶Originally named the Padang Besar, (*padang* is the Malay word for “playing field”) it is the open green space of the British colonial plan for Singapore, as the *maidan* (Bengali for “field”) is to Calcutta (now Kolkata).

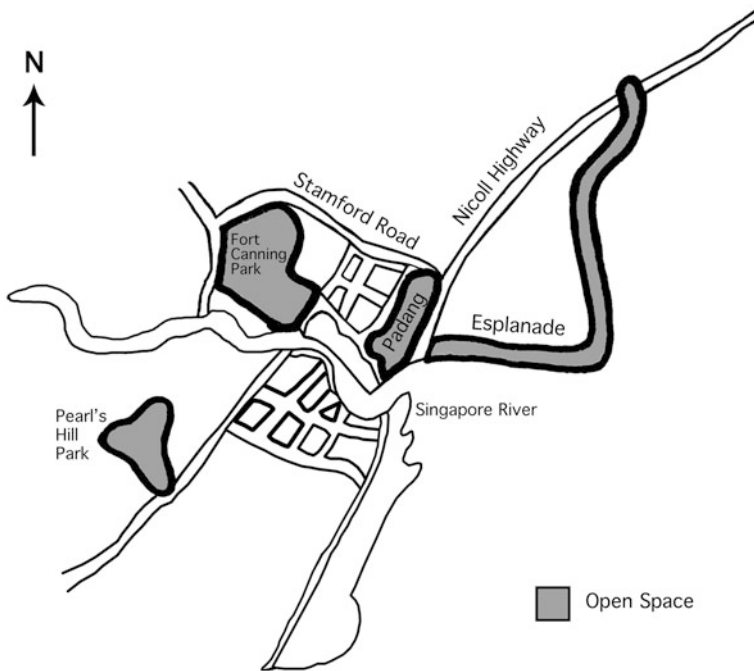


Fig. 2.1 Open space in the Raffles Plan. *Source* Author's Collection

of the British administration. It was also spatially the social center for colonial life in Singapore, forming the nexus of European public space from the Esplanade to Fort Canning Hill. Ironically, the Padang was the site of assembly of the POWs after the surrender of the British to the Japanese during World War II in 1942. The Australian and British troops were subsequently made to march 22 km to their internment in Changi Prison (Fig. 2.1).

The Padang also served as the symbolic venue of the surrender of the Japanese a few years later in 1945³⁷—with an elaborate victory ceremony and celebratory march-past, culminating in the public punishment of the Japanese prisoners-of-war who were made to dig trenches on the Padang, which served no real municipal purpose. Following soon after, the Padang was once again the venue of the victory rally of the first elected legislative council of the new self-governing nation in 1959.

The open, green spaces of colonial Singapore served not only as foreground, but also as separators of the ruling class from the native and immigrant population of the island. While large compounds and high fences surrounded residential properties of the colonials, the urban substance of the ethnic wards in the city consisted of cramped city blocks of two to three storey 'shophouses'—the arcaded, terraced blocks with commercial usage on the ground level, and residential quarters 'above

³⁷The Japanese occupied Singapore from 1942–1945.

the shop'. Public spaces in the crowded bazaar-like conditions of the wards consisted of the streets, verandahs or 'five-foot ways' and the back alleys of the shophouses. Activities of everyday life spilled onto the streets as much as they were confined to the interiors, such as eating, sleeping, gambling, selling, buying, playing, praying, weddings and funerals. The blurred boundaries of public and private spaces in the shophouse districts were often the site of contestations of rights between enforcers of colonial rules and the defiant immigrant population (Yeoh 1996) (Fig. 2.2).

Entertainment and amusements for the early nineteenth century Chinese immigrants were primarily religious in nature, rather than to do with commercial consumption evident in modern Singapore (Yung and Chan 2003, pp. 153–154). Examples of these include the staging of different genres of Chinese opera, performed on temporarily erected stages on the streets in Chinatown and by the Singapore River, on festivals and special occasions.

The street theater, held in honor of the gods, were often also the site of deviant activities such as gambling, murders, fights and elopement—and so were occasions when women were discouraged to be in public, to stay away from the predominantly bachelor immigrant workers (*ibid.*, p. 158). Puppet theaters and public storytelling were also important events of the social calendar of the time. Until the



Fig. 2.2 Chinese Wayang, circa 1950s. *Source* Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Fig. 2.3 Maria Hertogh riots, 1950s. *Source* Kenneth Chia Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

1940s when leisure activities moved within amusement parks, theaters, dance halls and cinemas, public spaces such as streets and alleys served the multi-faceted function of social spaces, activity focal points and cultural repositories.

2.2.1.2 Taking to the Streets

Post-war Singapore was a time of transition that was marked by flashes of violence, rioting and street protests. The uncertainty of the future after the Japanese surrender, the resentment towards the colonial government, the Communist insurgency and the rising of previously suppressed racial tensions to the surface, were all contributing factors to the outward expressions of anger. There were street protests and riots, which stemmed from racial and religious conflicts, anti-British and workers' protests, as well as those arising from perceived cultural discrimination,³⁸ all taking place in public spaces such as in the streets and at the Padang. Visually

³⁸These included the Maria Hertogh Riots (1950), the anti-British riots and street curfews, the Hock Lee Bus workers riots (1955), the race riots of 1964 (which led to the expulsion of Singapore from the Malayan Federation) and the Chinese students' rallies of 1965.

well-documented as a period of insurgency, the period of turbulence had been used by the state as the dominant discourse to portray the defiance of authority as instances of chaos and loss of control (PuruShotam 2003, p. 47) (Fig. 2.3).

An alternative reading of the series of events may yield instances of civil society in action—attempts by the “body politic” to shape governance, or to “un-silence” repressed views (*ibid.*). These expressions of defiance challenging the dominant view in public space had been cast as representative of an undesirable period of Singapore’s history, not to be repeated by citizens under a democratically elected government. These images have been evoked as the reason for not condoning public protests. These instances of insurgency and public shows of anger made a deep impression in the minds of Singaporeans, and had important effects on the future of the provision of public spaces in Singapore. It is an unwritten but well-known fact that subsequent planners of public space in Singapore had in mind not to provide large spaces for public gathering—as is the case in planning for urban renewal in the city, in the design of new towns and in the planning of the University of Singapore (which was completed in 1977).

The 1950s and 60s were an interesting era from the point of view of the Padang, which became a ‘people’s place’ and a ‘site of representation’. It became the venue of symbolic confrontation between the masses and the government, in the case of the *Nantah*³⁹ students’ rally and the march of banned societal groups. At the same time, the space was ‘appropriated’ socially, with roadside stalls accessible to the masses such that the Padang functioned not just as a symbolic venue, but also as a social venue in the city.

2.2.1.3 From the Streets to the ‘Garden City-State’

Socialism had been born in crowded conditions – the street, the tenement, and the dormitory – and, in order to continually recreate itself, it needed to architecturally reproduce community...the street and the square, not the house, was the natural environment for the politics of progressive reform...By the time the Left “took to the streets” of Singapore in a last bid for power in the mid- and late- 1960s, “the street” was in the process of disappearing (Clancey 2004, p. 44).

The urban renewal policies of the 1960s and 70s basically led to the enforced mass exodus of the population from the central areas to the peripheral new towns, so that the Central Business District could be developed as the commercial heart of the city. There were also attempts to break up potentially insurgent communities who lived in squatter camps and *kampongs* in the central areas. The residents of such communities were often thought to be recruited by Communist insurgents, or were ethnic enclaves prone to acting within ethnic interests or inciting religious unrest (*ibid.* p. 45). So while Singapore’s public housing programs had the official rhetoric of “building communities”, the early housing of the 1960s tended also to split up

³⁹Nantah is the shortened name of Nanyang University, the only Chinese university in Singapore, that was widely used in local lingo.



Fig. 2.4 Toa Payoh New Town, circa 1960s. *Source* Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

“pre-existing communities of the same race” to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves (ibid., p. 45). However, policy-wise, the concept of distributing the races even at the level of each block of flats was crucial in the building of a multiracial society and achieving social integration.

Spatially, the street-based city blocks of the central district and the close association of many squatter camps with the street were being replaced in the new town environments by open, green areas between buildings. Blocks of flats no longer front the street, such that the once close relationship of living spaces and the street became dissociated. Elsewhere in the city, the informal economy of street vendors, hawkers and other temporary inhabitants of the street were evacuated to sanctioned accommodations, such as in markets and food centers, with proper licensing and sanitation facilities. Streets were widened to ensure smooth traffic flow and served as transport arteries. They were aesthetically re-modeled with landscaping and footpaths in line with the imaging of the ‘Garden City’.⁴⁰ Public space in the city was the visual embodiment of the modernization of Singapore, and metaphorically announced the arrival of “clean government, clean civil service”⁴¹ (Fig. 2.4).

⁴⁰The Garden City concept here is not the notion as proposed by Ebenezer Howard. The term ‘Garden City’ in Singapore was more apt to mean the literal introduction of plants into the city to procure a green mantle and a pleasant environment.

⁴¹This was a catch phrase of the 1970s.

The separation of home and the city saw some significant changes. Public space provision in the central area was based on a framework devised in 1972⁴² by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and adapted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)⁴³ in 1976 to become the Central Area Open Space Plan. Parks and gardens were developed as areas of relief from the crowded city center, and new towns were planned with a host of hierarchically descending range of public spaces (Hee and Oi 2003). By incorporating land-use and transportation in accordance with the Singapore Masterplan,⁴⁴ the government planners opted for a new spatial and social order for public spaces in the city and in the new towns (Hee and Ooi 2003, pp. 88–89).

Singapore's 'Garden City' idea was attributed to the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who, in 1963, initiated the first Tree Planting Day to mark the beginning of the campaign for the greening of Singapore. There were important political and economic rationales behind the long-lived program. Due to the shortage of land for development and faced with the need to create massive alterations to the natural landscape due to the urbanization programs, the government had adopted a pragmatic environmental ideology. The early rationale for tree planting had been seen as a means of providing shade and shelter, trapping dust and reducing noise for public housing flat dwellers. In the 1960s and 70s, pragmatic concerns like the provision of shade and cooling of the environment were of topmost concern. The 'Clean and Green' city was also a boost for the thriving tourism industry.

In the three decades of the 'Garden City' campaign in Singapore, its emphasis had shifted somewhat from its original concerns. The success of greening the highly urban cityscape was such that by the 1990s, "Singapore (had) become a green, shady city filled with flowers, a city worthy of an industrious people whose quest for progress is matched by their appreciation of the beauty of nature".⁴⁵ There was a move to color the landscape and to create an aesthetic environment in the imaging of Singapore, seen as crucial to attracting foreign investment. Singapore was to exemplify efforts in taming the tropical jungle. Plants were introduced to cover

⁴²The first Concept Plan of 1971 envisaged a Ring Plan, where the population was to be housed in satellite towns laid round the island—circumventing a green 'heart'—that would be connected by high capacity transportation routes, while the city center was to be hollowed out and redeveloped for commercial purposes. This move was to lay the foundation of the physical base for the economic development of Singapore.

⁴³The conceptualization and implementation of the planning of Singapore fell under the auspices of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), a statutory board initially instituted as the Urban Renewal Department (URD) in 1966, with immense powers in shaping the physical landscape—and until recently, answerable directly only to the government.

⁴⁴The underlining basis of land use had been the concept of regulatory control through zoning, as crystallized in the Master Plan. This remains the basis of the Master Plans of 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985—right up to 1993, the latest Master Plan. To be read in relation to the Masterplan, the Concept Plan is an advisory and not statutory tool. It embodies the coordinating framework for public agencies and was flexible enough to accommodate changes in population growth trends.

⁴⁵This was said by Lee Kuan Yew in 1980.

concrete structures like bridges and flyovers, while ornamental plants and shrubs graced roadsides and expressway planters. Instead of just wrapping the urban environment in foliage, it was necessary to cultivate nature as a 'playground' with easy access for residents.

Public parks and neighborhood gardens were created for the enjoyment of Singaporeans. The area allocated to parks and gardens covered 3 %, or a planning standard of 0.8 ha of parkland per 1000 of the population.⁴⁶ Although this figure is modest when compared with other major cities, it reflects the growing realization that as Singapore's population become more affluent, aspirations for a better quality of life would demand the provision of new recreational grounds and a pleasant green living environment.

This realisation has been matched by ambitious goals to 'bring people closer to nature'.⁴⁷ Singapore's Population White Paper, released in Singapore in 2013, outlines plans for at least 85 % of households to live within 400 metres of a park by 2030. These plans come with a paradigm shift in how the environment is perceived in the city. Singapore's plans to create a 'garden city' has now evolved into Singapore striving to become 'a city in a garden'—an augmented version of Ebenezer Howard's original ideal. To achieve this, Singapore has set greenspace targets and promoted community initiatives which allow people to have daily interactions with nature. The URA and NParks (National Parks) have pursued the concept of 'pervasive greenery,' a process of inserting greenery into every nook and cranny of a city's urban composition—from pavements and road dividers to vertical building facades and rooftops. Furthermore, urban gardening initiatives, such as the successful 'Community in Bloom' project, have also been encouraged as they help residents cultivate neighbourly bonds over the use of their common spaces.⁴⁸

These green initiatives have been accompanied by 'blue' initiatives, which seek to 'bring people closer to water' by harnessing the potential of the water bodies on the island to provide clean waterways and aesthetically pleasing spaces of recreation for all (PUB 2014). In 2006, PUB (Singapore's National Water Agency) and URA launched the 'Active, Beautiful, Clean (ABC) Waters' master plan, which integrated drains, canals and reservoirs and redeveloped their surrounding physical landscapes. On top of performing their primary functions of drainage, flood control and water storage, these integrated waterways now serve as community spaces, as people can enjoy a more intimate connection with a resource that is vital to Singapore.

⁴⁶This figure is outlined in the URA's 1991 Concept Plan.

⁴⁷This is one of the principles in the Center for Liveable Cities' publication on '10 Principles for High-dense and Liveable Cities' (2013).

⁴⁸The National Parks 'Community in Bloom Project' is a community gardening movement. There are now close to 1000 community gardens tended by over 20000 residents. See <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/gardening/community-in-bloom-initiative>.

2.2.1.4 New Landscapes of Public Spaces, Within Limits

With the economic boom of the 1980s boosting the growth of the city, there was on the one hand, an increasing interiorization as well as privatization of public space, as reflected in new typologies of spaces—the large air-conditioned atrium spaces of hotels and shopping centers, corporate plazas and atriums, as well as ‘paid-for’ public spaces like curbside cafes, shopping malls and cavernous discotheques. On the other hand, with the growth of public transport infrastructure, there was a proliferation of transit-type spaces, or “non-spaces”, where one passed through instead of staying in, such as the foyers of mass rapid-transit stations, station platforms, bus interchanges, and pick-up or drop-off points for vehicles (Fig. 2.5).

As a player within the Castellan “global space of flows”, Singapore played host to expatriates and guest workers who moved within international flows of labor and talent. Although foreigners have never been scarce in Singapore, the famed emporium of the East and the land of immigrants, the instability of the landscape of mobile people was of an unprecedented extent. The presence of groups of foreigners in public space on weekends was also a peculiar phenomenon of 1990s Singapore. These groups of guest workers form ‘Sunday enclaves’ which have a great impact on the public spaces in the city that they occupy. The attachment of these different groups with particular places and spaces in the city have become common knowledge—the Filipina domestic workers in and around Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road; the south Asian male workers in Little India, the Thai workers outside the Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road, and the Burmese workers around Peninsula Plaza on North Bridge Road.

2.2.1.5 The “Renaissance City”

With Singapore’s rapid growth manifested in its built environment, the decade of the 1980s to 90s was a ‘historical moment’ of the arrival of the ‘nation’ in the economic sense. But the city became somewhat removed from its fleeting past, which some had perceived as a certain intangible lack of spirit and soul (Kong and

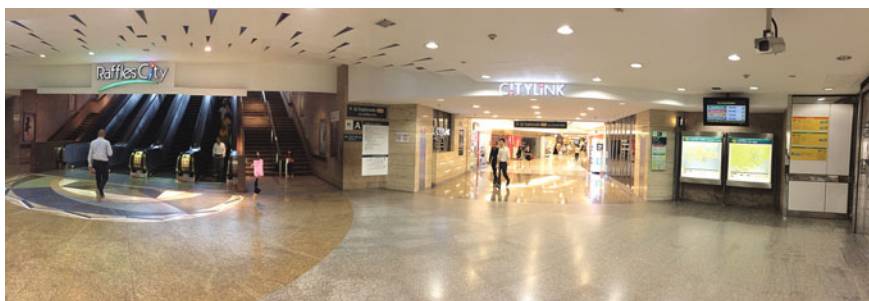


Fig. 2.5 Panorama shot of Citylink—a space of transit, “non-place”? *Source* Author’s collection

Yeoh 2003, p. 132). Concurrent with the national drive to instill the neo-Confucian ethics embodied in the Shared Values for Singaporeans that guided citizens with the ‘moral compass’ drawn from traditional wisdom, the URA announced its Conservation Masterplan in 1989 to retain old city fabric of historical value. Attention was turned to the need to cultivate a ‘softscape’, with cultural areas centered on heritage buildings and historic quarters to create place-holders within the space of the global flow of people and ideas through Singapore (Ong 2004). The conservation of buildings and places also made sense for the growing tourism industry—visitors to Singapore would not be confronted with a global-city with no historical buildings and districts. The value of public spaces as venues for the appreciation of art and the performance arts was also emphasized in the Renaissance City Report of 2000—a long-term plan to unleash Singapore’s art and cultural potential and to ultimately cultivate a gracious and cultured society (Fig. 2.6).

The location of the Padang in the area identified by the URA as the Civic and Cultural District in 1988 gave the space its new role as a site for culture. Events like the “New York Philharmonic Concert”, “Merlion Week Concert”, among others, took pride of place on the Padang. High profile recreational events like the Davis Cup tennis finals (1985) were broadcast to the world, with its backdrop the City Hall, Supreme Court and towers of the Central Business District—announcing to the world that Singapore had arrived in the global arena. It is not surprising that the Padang was featured as the ‘poster space’ of the URA’s 2001 concept plan, with its



Fig. 2.6 Central Business District, featuring the Padang, 1982. *Source* URA Library Archives



Fig. 2.7 Panorama shot of Marina Bay. *Source* URA Library Archives

banner of “Towards a Thriving World-class City of the 21st Century”. The backdrop of both historical buildings and skyscrapers created just the right mix of ‘history’, ‘identity’, and ‘modernity’ in a single package.

More recently, this ‘poster space’ distinction is arguably held by the Marina Bay area in Singapore, home to spectacular urban infrastructures such as the Esplanade Theatres, the Singapore Flyer (conceived by Kisho Kurokawa and DP Architects⁴⁹), the Marina Bay Sands (designed by Moshe Safdie), Gardens by the Bay and the Marina Barrage. The Marina Bay area transformation was also part of the URA’s Concept Plan of 2001, and it was realized in the later 2000s. The physical provision of public spaces also occupied an important place in the URA’s agenda for the urban development, with its incorporation of its 2003 “Public Space and Urban Waterfront Masterplan”⁵⁰ within its strategies for improving the city center. The transformation of the Marina Bay waterfront includes mixed and multi-use developments, such as commercial, residential, and entertainment sites in the area as part of the URA’s ‘Live-Work-Play’ vision. Marina Bay and its iconic features have raised Singapore’s international profile as a hub of economic modernization, and positioned it as a tourist hotspot for years to come (Fig. 2.7).

2.2.1.6 A Short History of Speakers’ Corner

As a response to popular pressure for some form of free speech, a Speakers’ Corner—a la Hyde Park Corner in London, was launched on 1 September 2000, at Hong Lim Green, a small and nearly forgotten park in the city. Historically, the space at the edge of Chinatown was popular as a ‘place for storytelling’ during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. In post-war days, members of the Singapore

⁴⁹The Singapore Flyer is an attraction that was marketed to rival urban icons such as the Eiffel Tower and the London Eye. See Singapore Flyer website. <http://www.singaporeflyer.com/about-us/design-concepts/>.

⁵⁰This was launched in conjunction with URA’s new mission to “Make Singapore a Great City to Live, Work and Play”—an exhibition was held in June to August 2003 on “Our City Center—a Great Place to Live Work and Play!”.

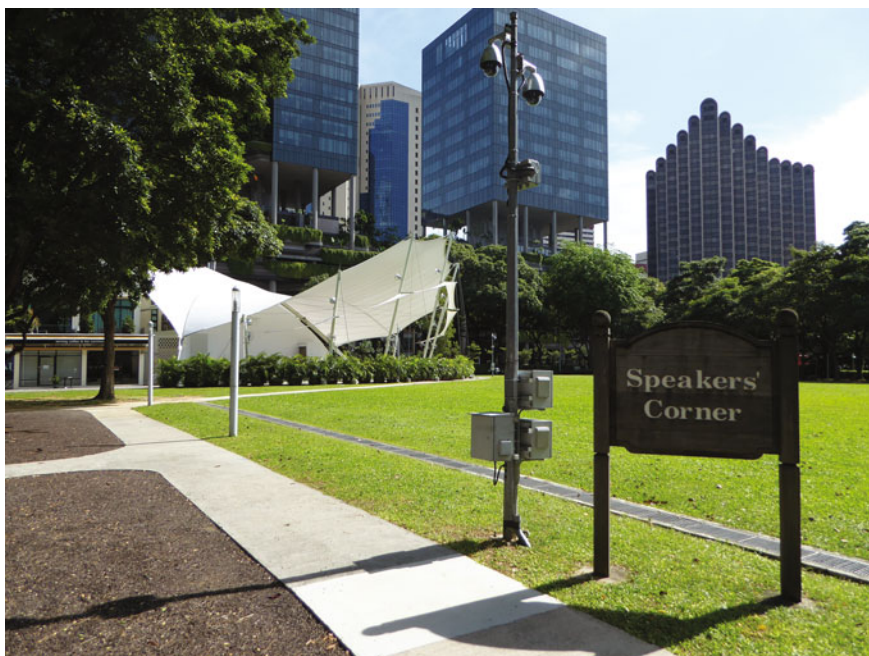


Fig. 2.8 Speakers' Corner (2016). *Source* Author's collection

Recreation Club and the Singapore Cricket Club used it as a cricket ground. But in the 1960s and 70s, it became popular again as a community space where Chinese operas were performed on a makeshift stage, and also for political rallies.⁵¹ This tradition was recognized when it was designated the “Speakers’ Corner”. It was available for use on application for performance or public speaking and demonstrations, if the rules that regulate the space are complied with. Interesting events that have since taken place in the park included the annual Pink Dot SG event organized by the LGBT community of Singapore, as well as the arrest of young bloggers in September 2014 for staging an unapproved demonstration and disrupting a YMCA charity event at the park (Fig. 2.8).

2.2.1.7 At Home in Public

With the unqualified success of the public housing program, approximately eight out of ten Singaporeans now live in public housing, a hallmark of success in how public housing is now no longer perceived as low-income housing, but rather

⁵¹See the National Parks Board’s website on Hong Lim Park. <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/gardens-parks-and-nature/parks-and-nature-reserves/hong-lim-park>.

homes for the national middle-class. The comfortable and roomy interiors of public housing flats were perhaps in part responsible for the low use of the space immediately around the flats. The popularity of TV and the Internet in Singapore meant also that to some extent, an abstracted and reduced concept of ‘public space’ could be brought to the home.

The public spaces that continue to attract the public are more ‘concentrated’ in its attractions. In new towns, such public spaces are found in the Town Center hubs and along busy nodes and routes, rather than in the quiet precinct public spaces. While new spaces in new towns become the public spaces of everyday life, overly prescribed spaces, such as the residential public spaces shared by eight blocks of flats that are called precinct spaces, are valued more as space markers and for their aesthetics than as actual lived space.⁵²

2.2.1.8 Big Brother Is Watching, and Taking Your Temperature Too

Increasing levels of electronic surveillance in public spaces in Singapore, as in other cities in the world, from London to Los Angeles, have been justified under different agendas. These include occurrences of crime in popular public spaces like Boat Quay and Little India; cases of vandalism and littering, especially in the new town spaces such as corridors, lift lobbies, void decks and multi-storey carparks; and traffic congestion that is prevented with the Electronic Road Pricing System,⁵³ which work with both transmitters from devices installed in cars and video surveillance cameras at road gantries.

During the SARS epidemic of 2003, not only were thermal detection devices for body temperatures installed in public space, but individuals under strict home quarantine had surveillance cameras installed in their homes by the authorities as well (The Straits Times 2003a, b, c). Despite the high degree of surveillance, a survey conducted by the Straits Times in 2000 apparently found that most Singaporeans readily agree with the need for monitoring in public space: “It’s like your big brother is watching you all the time. But if having a big brother means that I am safe from robbers and thieves, then I don’t mind” (The Straits Times 2000). The privacy concerns were not considered an important issue, because, as one Member of Parliament explained, “you shouldn’t be doing anything embarrassing in public” (ibid.).

With aspirations to become the world’s first ‘smart nation’, Singapore has put forth the Smart Nation initiative to ‘attract capital, talent, ideas’, and to build an

⁵²These are findings from a funded research project, “Design, Use and Social Significance of Public Space in Public Housing: Singapore and Hong Kong”, National University of Singapore, for which I was the principal investigator.

⁵³An extensive Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) system for monitoring road usage went into effect in 1998. The system collects information on an automobile’s travel from smart cards plugged into transmitters in every car and in video surveillance cameras.

‘outstanding urban environment’.⁵⁴ During his keynote address at the Smart Nation launch in November 2014, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong outlined his visions for Singapore to be a nation “where people live meaningful and fulfilled lives, enabled seamlessly by technology”. He concluded his speech with the following remark:

If I may go back to what Mr Lee Kuan Yew said when first we became independent and take it one step forward, update it, today perhaps this is what he would say: 50 years ago, we built a modern city. Today, we have a metropolis. 10 years from now, let’s have a smart nation!

Singaporeans have already begun to embrace technology in their everyday lives, and these new advancements and abilities to harness big data can have many productive outcomes in enhancing public space. For example, many public events are now app-enabled, with users able to crowd-source real-time information to aid in decision-making, creating more efficient travel schedules. However, with the infusion of ubiquitous smart technologies into everyday life, issues of personal space and privacy become in need of protection, so boundaries between the public and private may need to be redrawn again.

2.2.1.9 Now in Public—The Breastfeeding Mothers of Singapore

In a way, the development of public space seemed to have come full circle. Within the framework of the developmental state’s successful ascent to comfortable middle-class status, and in the absence of strife, political unrest or racial conflicts, one increasingly finds instance of public activism or even behavior bordering on civil protest in public spaces. Although not at the intensity of the post-war street protests and rioting, some of these events in public space certainly warrant one’s attention and appreciation of the definite stirrings of organized civil society:

A performance art of a different vein took place at the Esplanade Mall on Saturday. Onlookers gawked as about fifty mothers breastfed their babies and toddlers at Haagen-Dazs, an ice-cream cafe.

Members of the Breastfeeding Mothers’ Support Group and the Asia Parents E-Group, an online discussion group for parents, were gathered there to nurse their children. They were there in response to a recent incident at the Esplanade, when a woman breastfeeding her three-month-old daughter in the foyer was asked by a security guard to leave.

The mum, Dr Hoe Wan Sin, wrote to The Straits Times. Her letter, published in the Forum page last Wednesday, prompted the two groups to organize yesterday’s trip to the arts center.

A spokesman for the Esplanade said: ‘We’re more than happy to have them here. The Esplanade is for everyone, including nursing mothers. We can empathize with their plight in public places, and we appreciate the difficulties they face’. It was an isolated incident, she said, and the security guard involved had since been briefed by the management (The Straits Times 2004a, b, c, d, e, f, g).

⁵⁴These phrases were taken from the transcript of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s speech at Smart Nation launch, Prime Minister’s Office on 24th November 2014.

Calls for more public activism, though not yet cries of protest, are distinct and audible. These calls persuade authorities to view them as positive acts of civil society rather than as signs of dissent. Volunteerism and civic involvement are understood by Singaporeans and the polity alike, as “working quietly behind the scenes” within welfare or community organizations, instead of bold, organized acts in public space (The Straits Times 2004a, b, c, d, e, f, g).

2.2.2 *Urban Trajectories*

The mission of the URA, with the unveiling of the Concept Plan 2001, was “to make Singapore a great city to live, work and play...to build a vibrant, sustainable and cosmopolitan city of distinction”. It has become apparent that the city-state needs to attract not just investment capital but “world-class” human capital to form the support base for the new “information society”. The environment of strictly zoned environments decentralized throughout the island before the 1990s hardly inspired the ‘vibrancy’ sought after as the symbolic economy of a global city—the “street ballet” Jane Jacobs had lauded of New York City, or the bustle of downtown Tokyo—in contrast to the sterile business and industrial parks, lifeless business districts after dark and the ubiquitously bland environments of public housing estates in Singapore.

Clearly, Singapore has to re-imagine itself as a global city that would attract the international business elites or the jet-setting techno-preneurs to set up Singapore as their home-base for a while. Recognizing that the boundaries between business and services were blurring, the URA’s key idea in the Concept Plan 2001 was to have a new zoning system in which industrial and business activities would be grouped according to “their impact on the surrounding environment”. This new “impact-based” zoning approach allowed businesses to incorporate different usages under one-roof and change activities without resorting to the need for re-zoning applications, and was intended to create the potential for mixed-use environments in which to *work, live, learn and play*.

Within multicultural Singapore, public spaces are regarded by its politicians as important “hubs of activities, common grounds for forging community bonds, and a foundation upon which social cohesion and national identity can be built”.⁵⁵ Public spaces are also seen as opportunities in the urban realm for imaging and creating Singapore as a global city, as exemplified by this vision:

A stroll around the city centre will bring one to many parks and open spaces, linked by a pedestrian network of covered walkways, surface and underground links, and pedestrian malls along key activity belts such as Orchard Road and Singapore River. Streets of Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam and Bugis have become popular places where

⁵⁵This was expressed by Vivian Balakrishnan, a Singaporean Minister, at a forum on “Civic Spaces in the Cities of the Asia Pacific” in March 2002.



Fig. 2.9 URA's PubliCity Event, 2015. *Source* URA Library Archives

diverse cultures intermingle and communities congregate to celebrate. The Padang plays host to celebrations of Singapore's independence. Other attractive spaces such as Merlion Park, the “window” through UOB Building, One Fullerton's promenade, the atrium in Singapore Exchange, and Ngee Ann City Civic Plaza also enrich people's experience of the city (Skyline 2003).

One initiative by the URA is *PubliCity*. Part of the URA's Draft Master Plan of 2013, it seeks to activate public spaces in the city through good design, active programming and community engagement. The programme supports the concept of a “Street for People” and seeds community-initiated projects to transform streets into temporary public spaces.⁵⁶ Projects that have materialised include “Door to Door at Everton Park” (2015) where community members transformed a backlane in Everton Park into a temporary public alley and invited neighbours to join in a mini street festival (Fig. 2.9).

Plans are underway to enhance key activity areas in the city with a variety of public spaces through collaboration with private sector developments, the extension of linear green connectors within the city, an introduction of new urban waterfront parks with continuous promenades—plans that take into account aspects of programming, accessibility, climate, landscaping and public art. In September 2014,

⁵⁶The URA makes a “Streets for People” how-to guide available for download on their website here: https://www.ura.gov.sg/MS/CarFreeZones/Events/Streets-for-People/~/_media/CarFreeZone/Streets_For_People/PDF/Streets_For_People_How-to_Guide.ashx.

the URA invited members of the public to turn car parks into temporary public spaces, as part of the annual worldwide PARK(ing) event.⁵⁷

These initiatives stem from the efforts of the state to capitalize on Singapore's status as a regional hub and global city and to enhance the city through new plans for integrated live-work-play communities with "vibrant street life". At the same time, these initiatives are locally grounded in the built heritage of the city. These are part of the state's strategy to attract and retain global talent in the face of global competition, as well as to retain its now more cosmopolitan and sophisticated citizens who could now choose to move to other cities. The new live-work-play environments espouse overlapping networks of spaces related to these different functions and networks of people. They create new opportunities for 'meeting' in the city and encourage a more cosmopolitan character in the city's public spaces.

⁵⁷PARK(ing) Day is an annual event where people transform parking spaces into temporary public parks. See the URA's press release: <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/media-room/news/2014/aug/pr14-47.aspx>.

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