

# Globalization and Urban Transformation in Singapore: A City That Works?

Hans Luu



In the past four decades Singapore has undergone intense economic and urban restructuring in response to ever-increasing pressures of globalization, economic development, urban transformation, and social change.

It has successfully confronted these forces of change to emerge as a regional economic superpower and world class city; in the relatively short span of forty years the city-state has managed to emerge from developing nation status to achieve economic leadership in Pacific Asia. This rapid growth has been a product of the interplay between global economic restructuring and local urban planning and management strategies. Given the ever-increasing intensity of global economic integration and interaction, the lessons to be learned from Singapore's planning experience are important not only for newly industrializing nations in Southeast Asia, but developed countries as well.

Several changes and trends have been instrumental in transforming the urban face of Singapore. Globalization, economic changes, urban changes, and social changes have all necessitated continual physical and functional restructuring of not only Singapore, but indeed all modern cities. One of the most prominent characteristics of the postindustrial world is the ever-

increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of regions and countries. This globalization is primarily driven by the frenetic pace of international economic development, and effects profound changes in the development of cities. Singapore has successfully adapted its urban policies to exploit the numerous opportunities presented by globalization, and has been able to sustain a steady level of economic growth without compromising the social responsibilities of its urban planning.

Singapore's economic development was initially founded on labor-intensive, export-oriented industrialization. The timing of Singapore's industrialization initiative coincided with the transfer and expansion of manufacturing production from developed nations to cheaper locations in Asia, and by the 1970s, the country was firmly locked into the global manufacturing circuit. During the 1970s through to the 1980s, Singapore had also steadily expanded its skilled-services sector. Financial and business services enjoyed extensive government support and by 1980, growth in the service sector outpaced manufacturing. A practical outcome of this rapid industrialization was a stabilized economy and political atmosphere. By successfully meeting the basic economic needs of its citizens and training a highly-skilled labor force, increased attention could be focused on other development issues such as urbanization and planning.

Urbanization and the urban planning of Singapore have their roots in the colonial town envisioned by its founder, Sir Stamford Raffles. Order, forward planning, centralized decision-making, and project planning were the buzzwords of the day, and continue to characterize contemporary planning practices. The practical outcome of this efficient, centralized, and forward-looking planning has been the successful management of high-density urban restructuring through efficient housing and infrastructure development schemes.



The benefits of economic and urban changes induced by increased globalization are not without their problems. Often, negative social ramifications can arise as a result of these changes. National borders have become

blurred to the extent that identity defined by nationality is no longer a given, and market forces have penetrated everyday life to create “consumption-based identities”; culture and identity are no longer certainties. This so-called crisis of identity is a persistent trend in Singapore, and has given rise to a moral/ideological debate that illustrates two aspects of Singapore’s economic and urban transformation: the sustained drive for national economic development also brings with it improved material quality of life through increased consumption. This dilemma will likely persist as Singapore continues on its path of economic development.

The foregoing changes and trends have affected Singapore’s urban development in two key areas: housing and open space planning. In the relatively short period of time since Singapore gained independence in 1959 to the present, the country’s housing development efforts have shifted from dealing with problems of overcrowding and poor hygienic conditions to a committed effort to provide quality housing and services. Quality is currently measured in physical and social terms; on the one hand, housing must adequately meet the physical needs of residents within the constraints of the environment, while at the same time creating cohesive neighborhoods that foster social bonding and interaction. Planning for open spaces and recreation has similarly enjoyed increased attention as a result of the increased affluence brought

about by global and national changes. The noteworthy development of open space planning was the move from haphazard, *ad hoc* greenspace allocation practices to fully integrated planning with increased emphasis on quality of life considerations.

Singapore has come a long way from its colonial roots. Insofar as it has managed to balance high-density urban growth and severely constrained land resources with economic development needs, the city does indeed “work.” Considering its evolution from economically-driven planning to socially-responsible planning, Singapore stands as a successful example of world city development. The city’s planning experience over the last four decades is certainly relevant for other developing nations in Pacific Asia.

While the urban transformations Singapore has undergone in response to global and national forces of change are impressive, there are still many issues to be addressed in the future. The needs of the urban poor, an aging population, changes in family structures, the needs of youth, regional political changes, and energy consumption are issues commonly identified to be important in future planning. Globalization is certain to be an on-going trend, and Singapore has locked itself into the process of keeping up with a globalizing world. If the city is to continue to “work,” it must continue to evaluate its planning experiences and explore innovative new approaches to balancing local urban development needs with larger forces of globalization.