

The limits to “SHARED SOLUTIONS”

by Chua Beng Huat

Singapore may be a popular model of development for many developing cities, but there are limits to how well other cities can adopt Singapore’s urban solutions, argues Professor **Chua Beng Huat**, who is Provost Chair Professor at the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He also heads the university’s Sociology department and is Research Leader, Cultural Studies in Asia Research Cluster, at the Asia Research Institute. Prior to joining the university, he was director of research at the Housing & Development Board.

Every new arrival to Singapore, whether as a tourist or someone taking up residence, is immediately visually impressed – by its green lushness, orderliness, smooth-functioning transport system and, beyond the city core, its high-rise public housing estates. Singapore’s successes in economic development, urban planning and management and a national public housing programme, which houses practically the entire nation, have received frequent praise and accolades internationally.

As it becomes more and more apparent that, with few exceptions, European and American cities do not face the same level of density as Asian cities and, therefore, hold few lessons for a rapidly urbanising and economically rising Asia, urban planners, developers and politicians in Asia are turning increasingly to their own continent for points of references in their professional practices. Singapore has emerged as an eminent point of reference.

Singaporean urban planning and governance practices have thus travelled internationally to developing economies. In this travel and knowledge transfer, the Singaporean experience, which was wrought under specific historical conditions, particularly at the point of its political independence, had to be disassembled into its technical and social-political dimensions. However, since the historical conditions are not replicated (nor are they replicable) elsewhere, only the skills and technologies can be, and are, transferred and reassembled in the new locations. The result is that only the physical and material structures that resemble the Singaporean “model” are realised. The political and social dimensions of the Singaporean “model” have to be, perforce, deleted. The result is something quite different from what is going on in Singapore.

Take, for example, the high-rise housing estates that Singaporean architects and developers are producing in the region. In Singapore, it is a solution that is comprehensive and highly efficient in land use and energy consumption, because of the reduced necessity to travel far to access daily needs and routine services. Singapore’s planned new towns also accommodate a cross-



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section of the national population in terms of social class, race and status. But in its developing neighbours, such high-rise housing estates reappear as relatively small-scale, gated communities for the privileged new rich. The social redistributive aspects of the Singapore public housing programme, which are so critical to social and political stability and the legitimacy and longevity of the ruling government, have completely disappeared – it is not so much ignored as it is non-replicable under different political regimes.

A place can also become a point of reference through other ways, from extreme adulation that leads to the “cloning” of parts of

Singapore in a new development, to sheer rhetorical invocation. For example, the developer of Citra Raya in Surabaya, Indonesia, was so enamoured with Singapore’s urban planning, he reproduced the national icons of Singapore, including the statue of Raffles, the colonial founder of Singapore, and the Merlion, a tourist attraction, in the housing estate. A different example involves a former mayor of Bangalore. After a visit to Singapore in 1970, he tried to spur local developers to collaborate with the city, to transform Bangalore into the “Singapore of South Asia”, but without a programme of actions to produce concrete results.

Regarding referencing Singapore, China deserves particular mention. The late Deng Xiaoping visited Singapore in 1978. He was so impressed with what he saw that in 1992, during his famous “southern tour”, he instructed the Chinese bureaucracy thus: “Singapore’s social order is rather good. Its leaders exercise strict management. We should learn from their experiences, and we should do a better job than they do.” This may be read as a shaming and chastisement of the Chinese bureaucracy and its actual performance on the job.

Deng's remarks were, arguably, the background to the development of the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), which adopted industrial and residential planning guidelines developed in Singapore. Although its success is a qualified one, it was apparently very well received by mayors all over China. According to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, during his visit to China in 2010, in every city he visited, "the local Chinese government leaders want an SIP-like park of their own." In recent years, Singapore government-linked companies have been active in collaboration with their Chinese counterparts in developing comprehensively planned industrial cities, including an Eco-city in Tianjin and a Knowledge City in Guangzhou. Both private and state-owned Singaporean architectural and urban planning companies have also benefited, receiving commissions and consultancy work, from stand-alone building projects to planning of entire housing estates, from not only the region but further afield, in the Middle East and Africa.



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Even as the Singaporean model travels to other cities via public and private parties, “Singapore as reference” should best be not taken too literally as a “reproduction” of the city, even in small measures. Rather, it should be taken as an evocation of the possibility of a better future and a provocation to achieve it, by and for others – if Singapore, a small island-nation without natural resources could succeed, “we” should be able to do the same, if not better.

That, I believe, is the spirit of Deng's exhortation to the Chinese bureaucrats.