



Singapore's changing spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the socio-spatial environment that is emerging in Singapore with its development of a globalised economy. Using the case studies of two of the city's dichotomised spaces – the spectacular downtown and gentrified heartland – the paper seeks to examine the resulting spatial reconfigurations, challenges and unintended consequences. While the common assertion is that state-led planning is effective at the macro level, at the micro level against the accelerated change and emergence of the multi-layered package of spaces of globalisation, the planning of the city is no longer limited to physical planning. Like many emergent economies of the global south, the challenge of how to expand emerging sectors, support Singapore's economic aspirations and meet social objectives remains.

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Introduction

The contemporary city has often been described as a city of growing heterogeneities, contentions, fluxes and inconsistencies. Marcuse (2002), for example, uses the concept of the 'layered city': layers of residence, work, etc. to identify the plurality created by the class, occupation and ethnicity of urban residents across time and space. Sandercock (2003) and King (1996, p. 2) similarly describe the contemporary city as being made up of "different genders, ethnicities, ideologies, races, classes, sexual orientations, theoretical differences of every shape and form". Others, such as Amin and Graham (1997, pp. 417–8), have proposed "the multiplex city" where "multiple spaces, multiple times and multiple webs of relations" co-exist to connect the local to the global. Far from a uniform trend, there is active debate that globalisation is a fragmented, incomplete and contradictory process (Giddens, 2000; Guillen, 2001; Rennstich, 2008). This paper aims to build upon this growing body of urban studies to document and examine the change that is manifesting over space and time in Singapore.

Singapore offers a particularly instructive case. The city is deeply embedded in the process of globalisation. It is regarded as 'multinational articulations' in John Friedmann's (1986; 1995) world city hierarchy, and has been ranked as the world's most global country (A T Kearney/Foreign Policy Magazine Globalisation Index 2006). Since 2005, the number of non-residents in its population has grown sharply, from an average annual growth rate of 9% in 1990 to 19% in 2008, and currently one in four of the population is non-resident. By contrast, the average annual growth rate of Singapore residents (comprised of Singapore citizens and permanent

residents) over the same period is 1.7% (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009). While Singapore's globalisation process has been the subject of substantial analysis, this analysis has largely been focused on its economic globalisation (see, for example, Yeung and Olds, 1998; Yeoh, 2006) and the sociological issues of globalisation and transmigration (see, for example, Velayutham, 2007; Khondker, 2008). Turning on the spatial planning lens, this paper probes the ways in which global to local urban spaces are emerging as Singapore seeks to further its vision of a global city.

The state's lead role in Singapore's economic and urban development has been described elsewhere (see, for example, Perry et al., 1997; Dale, 1999; Wong et al., 2008). Arguably, Singapore's small land area (700 sq km) and state developmentalism have facilitated comprehensive planning without it being hampered by provincial authorities or sectoral interests. But, the challenge of how to expand emerging sectors, support the country's economic aspirations and meet environmental and social objectives remains. Foremost among these are the conception of public interest and issues of social justice and their concomitant tension, which theoretical arguments continue to preoccupy planning intellectuals (Fainstein, 2008). With the rise of internationalisation, modern globalisation and technological advances, various trajectories of socio-economic development are being inscribed on the urban landscape that are not simply consequences of urban policies but also of socio-cultural networks and patterns of wider urban engagements.

Marcuse (2002), expressing a view popular among global city theorists, asserts that directly linked with the dynamics of globalisation and structural transformation of the economy are processes of 'blurring' and (dis)embedding. Locations and boundaries between 'working world' and 'living world', between work and leisure hours are becoming fluid and increasingly functionally and spatially inter-related. How are these ideas transforming the

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Singapore cityscape? This paper is organised in five sections. The section following the introduction summarises the conceptual aspects and introduces Singapore's ethnic heterogeneity and approach to dealing with diversity. Section 3 examines the changing economy and society and how Singapore is reconfiguring its physical spaces in its engagement with globalisation. Two case studies are highlighted in Section 4 to give a sense of the local variations in the emerging spatial scales and outcomes. The concluding section draws some implications for Singapore's future urban-scape. Like many emergent economies of the global south, Singapore has to provide answers to how the city, with its limited land and resources, can accommodate the increasingly diverse voices of global integration to bring about harmonious living.

Ethnic and spatial heterogeneity

As described by Block (2008), Marcuse (2002) and Thompson (2000) and others, globalisation can bring new waves of change, resulting in increasing cross-flows of capital, culture, people, information, etc. and a multi-layered package of identities and urban spaces. Marcuse and van Kempen (2000) propound two lines of reasoning for this spatial restructuring. The first is founded in Reich's (1991) contention of disappearing 'national economies' and diminishing social solidarities as the new global elites relinquish their dependency on local service provisions. In a similar vein, Harvey (1989) proposes a 'compression' of space and time, a shrinking of the world with globalisation. As Robertson et al. (1995) and Schnell (2002) indicate, individuals of a social group might affect or be influenced by worldviews, relationships and social networks that create interstices with other social spaces, resulting in a multi-layered space with interstices among different socio-cultural layered spaces.

The second is based on the work of Sassen (1994), who posits that globalisation also brings about an increasingly polarised society and greater marginality through immigration, poverty and informality. Harvey (1989) in his discussion of economic restructuring into flexible forms of capital accumulation also warned that as the local becomes saturated with the global, individuals may lose a sense of identity as their unified perspective of past, present and future in their locales becomes weakened. Equally, there are others who argue that globalisation is "the most significant force in creating and proliferating cultural identity" (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 270, italics original). A common strand is to understand contemporary cities in terms of the nature and extent of flows and networks in a variety of domains – economic, cultural, political, etc. as they appear in context.

For Amin, Thrift and many of their colleagues (see, for example, Amin and Thrift, 2002), the literature on transnational immigration is not just about ethnicity; it is also about the contradictory, multi-layered and evolving nature of the formation and experience of multicultures, their spatial differentiation and sense of place within globalising economic, cultural and social dynamics. Globalisation has accentuated feelings of national identity and greater reliance on local identity and belonging, the familiar local and global articulations including cultural 'scapes' of homogenisation and heterogenisation (Appadurai, 1997; Halter, 2000; Movius, 2010).

A growing body of writing has examined the way in which immigrants fit into the urban economy and ethnicities are reproduced in the production, circulation and consumption of commodities and modernity (Brownill and Darke, 1998; Franklin et al., 2000; Block, 2008). The effect both diversifies and enriches cultures, sometimes leading to fear, racial tension and polarisation and at other times to vibrant fusions and celebration of the city's cultural creativity, cosmopolitanism and heritage conservation of ethnic neighbourhoods including turning them into symbols of

multiculturalism in the global cities (King, 1996; Amin and Thrift, 2002; Shaw et al., 2004; Yuen, 2006). The resultant urban structure is characterised by an increasing spatial mix of different groups, which differs between cities according to their particularities.

Cultural heterogeneity resulting from immigration has existed in Singapore since British colonisation in 1819 when immigration policy encouraged the development of a multi-ethnic society. Early colonial town plans segregated different communities. But, post-independence, the policy focus has been on national unity. Differences and diversity, though clearly defined, structured and articulated, are neutralised where possible on the principle of common national identity to build an equal opportunity, harmonious and cohesive nation. The importance of a common identity – unity in diversity in contemporary cities has been widely debated (Habermas, 1989; Massey, 1998). In Singapore, this unity is based on multiculturalism of its four major ethnic groups – Chinese (C), approximately 75%; Malays (M), 13%; Indians (I), 9%; and Others (O).

The multiculturalism of CMIO permeates all aspects of national policy from language, religion, housing to self-help organisations (Kwok, 2007; Siddique, 1990). The national ideology is to preserve Singapore's multicultural Asian identity while building a meritocratic society. Tertiary education and employment opportunities in the civil service are based on merit with no discrimination on ethnic, religious or socio-economic grounds. This has galvanizing potential and opportunity for significant social mobility. Equal opportunity has become an ideological resource to supplement the fundamental of 'consensus instead of contention' and nation-building effort of a middle-class majority. According to *The Straits Times* (12 July 2004), Singapore attained 'middle-class' status, based on evidence of growth, income distribution and social mobility, in the 10 years following independence in 1965. As the Singapore Prime Minister noted, "We discourage ostentation in lifestyles, dress or norms, which will make others who are less affluent feel out of place ... we want a society where gaps are not large" (*The Straits Times*, 20 March 2005).

The treatment of social integration is also evident in Singapore's housing policy and the resultant spatial landscape. Ethnic balance in public housing, where 80% of the resident population live, is maintained through the Ethnic Integration Policy. Implemented in 1989, this policy sets ethnic quotas in each neighbourhood and apartment block to discourage the formation of ethnic enclaves, and minimise socio-economic segregation and visible social polarisation. To what extent can the old mantra and preference for non-ostentation and social integration continue in Singapore with the rise of globalisation and new forms of heterogeneity, differentiated lifestyles and consumption choices?

New waves of change

There appear two broad lines to the increasing urban heterogeneity: the divergent economy and society. Turning to the first issue of the divergent economy, cities worldwide are increasing the flexibility of their economies and promoting openness in hope of attracting foreign direct investment. An expanding body of literature has indicated that countries that have embraced openness to the world have done better than those that have not (see, for example, Srinivasan and Bhagwati, 1999; Whalley, 2000; Florida, 2003; Wood, 2009). Against growing economic realities, Singapore has started restructuring its economy to stay competitive with the promotion of a diversified and entrepreneurial economy to make Singapore the most open and cosmopolitan city in Asia (Report of the Economic Review Committee, 2003).

Entrepreneurship and creativity are seen as the central underpinnings of urban competitiveness, shifting Singapore's develop-

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