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Sleepless in Singapore

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SLEEPLESS IN SINGAPORE

Is it time for Singapore to adopt a new social and business model? Jack Sim, the inimitable founder of World Toilet Organization, unveils his 'not-so-wild-and-far-fetched' vision of a timeless zone in Singapore.



The trajectory of Singapore's economic growth, since its independence, is a model of excellence. Witness its distribution of wealth, low crime rates, first-world living standards, good health and educational standards, almost full home-ownership, world-class infrastructures and economic powerhouse – all on a little island of 700 square kilometres.

This growth has been the result of Singapore's usage and adoption of models and best practices from other developed nations. In the process, Singapore has developed our own model of growth that others are now learning and copying from. However, as we embrace globalisation and as foreign money pours in, new issues are emerging for which new models must be developed. These issues include the growing income gap between the rich and poor; limited space to distribute between industries, housing, shopping malls, schools, infrastructures and services; the under-utilisation of national resources at night such as roads, machinery, office space, and other public infrastructure; heavy reliance on the American and European economies; and the higher cost of living fuelled by skyrocketing property prices.

To deal with these issues, my view is that we develop a long-term sustainable model for continuous growth; prevent residential property prices from affecting the competitiveness of commercial and industrial properties; provide improved income and living standards for lower income groups; attract more tourism dollars; invest in foreign and domestic talent; maximise our use of national resources; and provide investors and entrepreneurs with a competitive environment where they can maximise their capital expenditures.

And since we cannot grow more land significantly, I feel the only way forward is to make Singapore a timeless zone: one where all our offices, factories, civil service, public transportation, banks, shopping, leisure and entertainment centres run round the clock.

This might strike some readers as absurd – perhaps even wild and far-fetched nonsense. But it is not. Believe it or not, a vibrant night economy already exists in our society. Think of our hospitals, hotels, Changi airport, taxis and even shops like

Our new model must include the development of a long-term sustainable model for continuous growth; preventing residential property prices from affecting the competitiveness of commercial and industrial properties; providing improved income and living standards for lower income groups.

Mustafa Centre. All are open 24 hours. And with the upcoming two casinos and resorts which will be readily built in a few years' time, we need to facilitate more of such services.

In this 'New Singapore', nothing shuts down. Everything – except for your home, of course – is open in a series of eight hour shifts. Only the sun is absent at night. There is no extra burden on our worker's personal lives. Rather, we are just maximising our use of our real estate and capital resources.

I can see many huge payoffs. For starters, we can pay lower income earners significantly higher salaries for the same work if they decide to shift their entire families into the night zone. Most people do not like night shifts because the rest of their families are working in the day. However, they would be more attracted to working at night if they are fully integrated with the lifestyle needs of their families.

And because our commercial and industrial real estate rentals will never be unoccupied, operating overheads will be lower. This can translate into lower inflationary pressure for the economy and

better profits. Meanwhile, having a timeless zone to service all time zones will make us a truly global city with a significant competitive edge. Management operating systems will become systems-based rather than person-centric as work-teams take over seamlessly. Based on my experience, I feel that managing staff turnover is less stressful in a systems-based operation.

Inefficiencies also become hard to camouflage. With constant workflow, any negligence or dysfunctional results will surface immediately. Efficiency and greater transparency will result. And obviously, tourism will boom as we become a unique and vibrant city that truly never sleeps. Tourists can choose to sleep, work or play regardless of the time they arrive in Singapore and jet-lag will never be an issue for them. Hotels will enjoy 100 percent occupancy rates as checkout times are more evenly spread out.

Other benefits are evident. The crime rate will fall due to busier streetscapes. The young have wider lifestyle choices. Roads become less congested since peak hours are distributed more evenly. More taxes are collected as the same land can absorb more economic activities. This means we have more subsidies to support social gaps that come with an aging population.

Are there downsides? Yes, but none that cannot be sensitively addressed.

Turning into a 24 hour economy will take time. It cannot be rushed. Rather, we need to facilitate the demand for such services so that the process becomes demand-driven rather than one implemented by a strong policy push. We will need to begin with new urban planning models to preserve 'quiet' zones for those who wish to retain their current lifestyle. Perhaps, we can experiment the idea in a small area like Little India where such 24 hour activities are already going on. But, let's be the first to do this before Hong Kong and Tokyo beat us to it.

Ultimately, this proposal is underpinned by my hope that we will start to think outside the box, for no other reason than that, financially, we will be able to benefit from the multiplier effect of a city that is awake round the clock. This is particularly important when we consider our potential to reap rewards that go far beyond our limited geographical boundaries. And for once, size really doesn't matter at all. □



Jack Sim is a social entrepreneur and founder of the World Toilet Organization. He is also a recipient of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneur Award (2006) and Ashoka Global Fellow (2007).