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Singapore: from planned chaos to a distinctive city

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As it seeks its place in the league of global cities, Singapore will need to look beyond the hardware and focus more on what it is that makes the city distinctive and one with distinction for liveability and sustainability.

FILE PHOTO

SINGAPORE is a living laboratory by which its development and urban planning experience and expertise can be studied and harnessed by other cities in the urbanisation and human development journey. What was a survival imperative in the fledgling nation-state has now become an important attribute of Singapore's story of human development and putative soft power.

Last week, Singapore played host to the annual Singapore International Water Week, World Cities Summit, and the CleanEnviro Summit. These powwows brought together government officials, city planners, scientists, academics, and activists from the world over to engage in a series of dialogues on liveability, sustainability, urban planning, and technology in built environments.

These high-level meetings testify to Singapore's successful urban redevelopment experience and our intention to be a thought leader in this field. They also signify the government's intent for the fledgling urban solutions and sustainability sector and urban development and infrastructure to be a key contributor to Singapore's future economy.

The quest for urban solutions to concerns of liveability, sustainability, economic vibrancy, and social cohesion is a very real challenge in the 21st century. It is estimated that 6.5 billion people, or two-thirds of humanity, will live and work in cities in 2050.

This is accompanied by the shift in the locus of economic activity to emerging markets, especially in Asia, and to the cities within these markets. Increasingly, cities will be prominent not merely as sites of concentrated factor endowments but also for the ability to project power in the global political-economic system.

Singapore's physical transformation in one generation from a colonial backwater to an aspiring global city is a feat of urban planning, development and renewal. While the massive transformation is clearly inscribed in the physical landscape, these physical changes also paved the way for economic, social and cultural transformation as well, all integral in the nation-building process.

It is trite that change is a constant. However, change is an existential imperative for Singapore. Singapore's physical landscape continues to change relentlessly, albeit with predictable mundaneness, even after half a century of rapid physical development. This will continue with the population roadmap to year 2030 embodied in the White Paper "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore".

Already one of the world's most densely populated cities, urban planners have to make and execute plans that will enable the city-state to

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be able to house 6.9 million people by 2030.

"Bending" the physical landscape to man's will is an integral, if somewhat neglected, part of the grand narrative of refusing to accept the geographical fate imposed upon Singapore. Due to severe land size limitations, Singapore grew upwards, sideways, and now, increasingly, downwards. Land reclamation was embarked upon to meet its needs for a growing population with even larger dreams and aspirations.

The lack of water self-sufficiency drove the existential obsession to create advanced water technology for potable Newater out of sewage and waste. Landfills were offshored, which in turn created a putative land mass with a new environment with rich, vibrant biodiversity. Today, underground granite caverns are being exploited for a variety of uses to overcome the limits to building sideways and upwards.

These inspiring examples demonstrate the criticality of vision, political will, ingenuity and creativity, and deploying cutting-edge engineering and technology to create a conducive living environment. To be sure, these apparent defiant acts against nature would not be possible had they not been foregrounded by the rapid economic progress that provided the financial wherewithal for which the seeming environmental audacity would not have been possible.

Furthermore, the economic prosperity has allowed Singapore to access state-of-the-art infrastructure, technology, and services that have facilitated our larger efforts in preserving and enhancing its limited natural and man-made habitats and heritage. Clearly, Singapore's physical transformation demonstrates that the economy and the environment are not antithetical to each other.

Less studied is the political will of the government to create a thriving, cosmopolitan city. Even less studied is the role of law that provides powerful levers for the rapid and deep-seated

changes to the urban and associated social landscapes in Singapore.

Urban law, broadly conceived, is the study of the full range of policies, and laws that shape urban development possibilities, processes, and power in the urban environment. It will take on greater importance as urbanisation proceeds at breakneck pace especially in 21st century cities. It has played an important, if vastly understated, role in Singapore's urban planning, development, and renewal, impacting upon a diverse range of critical issues including the regulation of the built environment, governance, social cohesion, spatial identities, and service delivery in the urban context. In turn, the complexity, density and diversity of urban life have shaped urban law.

Singapore's urban planning experience may not be directly relevant to other cities. But its experience suggests that political will with public support, innovation, and boldness can make a vital difference in urban planning outcomes. All these require thoughtful decisions on resource allocation and policy choices that deeply engage all stakeholders.

Renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas once described Singapore as devoid of authenticity, where "even chaos is planned chaos". Yet, the planned chaos cannot take away from Singapore's much envied success in urban planning and the transformation of the environment in the perpetual endeavour to overcome the constraints imposed by nature and by geopolitics. As it seeks its place in the league of global cities, Singapore will need to look beyond the hardware and focus more on what it is that makes the city distinctive and one with distinction for liveability and sustainability.

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