

Workshop on “Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: The Convergence of Policies, Research and Practice”

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On 7 April 2017, the Institute of Policy Studies Social Lab held a workshop to discuss how urban planning, neighbourhood infrastructure development and community building can contribute to social unity and stability in Singapore. The full-day [Workshop on “Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: The Convergence of Policies, Research and Practice”](#) was jointly organised with NUS’ Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities (CSAC), featuring three panels. Over 100 participants, including public servants, representatives of voluntary welfare organisations and researchers working on housing, urban planning and social service provision attended the workshop. Each panel featured three presenters, followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience

Panel 1 – Resilient Planning & Design

Dr Malone-Lee Lai Choo, Director of CSAC, chaired the first session on how urban design enhances social interactions. The first speaker, Associate Professor (A/P) Fung John Chye, who is Director of the Centre for Ageing Research in the Environment (CARE), referenced his research on place familiarity and ageing-in-place.

Elderly persons, especially those with dementia, are more likely to experience spatial disorientation. With redevelopment and other physical changes to neighbourhoods, place familiarity is threatened. But this can be mitigated if elderly persons are able to form deep associations with familiar landmarks. A/P Fung suggested looking into architectural design to make it easier for older residents to find their way around their estates and maintain place familiarity even in the face of urban renewal. This can be in the form of distinctive signs, shopfronts, and colour schemes to differentiate spaces.

Assistant Professor Cho Im Sik of the Department of Architecture, NUS presented a study on the impact of the built environment on community bonding, which was done in collaboration with the Housing & Development Board (HDB). The study found that neighbours tend to interact most when encountering one another in common spaces such as lift lobbies and void decks, and while using amenities such as playgrounds and supermarkets. The study thus explored two typologies of public space — neighbourhood incubators and social linkways — that could increase opportunities for interaction. Neighbourhood incubators are flexible community spaces that facilitate ground-up efforts

and initiatives, while social linkways introduce social functions and facilities (e.g., gardens, playgrounds) to linkways to facilitate incidental interaction. These typologies were tested in Tampines, which included residents in the planning process. The result was well-received and pointed to the effectiveness of co-creation in enhancing the living environment.

The third speaker, Siew Man Kok of MKPL Architects, shared his experience of participating in the master planning of HDB estates in Singapore from an architect’s perspective. Citing the Bidadari estate as an example, Mr Siew explained how the estate’s heritage, personal and collective memories, tranquil environment, and land topography were key considerations in the conceptualisation of the new town. He stressed that the architects’ early involvement in any master planning process is crucial for its success. This would facilitate the translation of social agendas into the designs of liveable housing development. In addition, Mr Siew said that in order to create the ambience of “living in a park”, Bidadari estate will feature planned social spaces such as a heritage walk, a man-made lake and a lawn, where residents can interact and participate in community activities.



(L-R) Dr Malone-Lee Lai Choo chairing the first panel discussion with presenters A/P Fung John Chye, Dr Cho Im Sik, and Mr Siew Man Kok.

The panel discussion explored the possibility of an open-ended approach to neighbourhood planning — to let the residents move in and for the estate to mature before planning for their specific needs. Another major concern that was raised was the heavy societal reliance on cars and how this complicates neighbourhood planning. Cars and the roads needed for them

limit the space available for community use, and are also dangerous for the elderly when they intersect with areas frequented by seniors.

Panel 2 – Resilient Infrastructure

The second session explored how features of the built environment influence neighbourliness and resilience. It was chaired by the Head of the IPS Social Lab, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong.

Song Siqi, a PhD student from the NUS Department of Geography, began by describing her [study on Singapore’s transport networks](#). Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Ms. Song examined the relationship between car usage and infrastructural factors such as distance to MRT stations and expressways and walking path density. The study found that investing in MRT lines to increase public transport accessibility, diversifying land use and increasing walking path density are all effective strategies to reduce vehicle usage. However, increased expressway accessibility ironically prompts additional vehicle usage instead of its intended effect of reducing congestion. Ms. Song’s findings have implications for development of infrastructure that reduces car usage and encourages walking, cycling, and public transport, as these forms promote social connections and enhance community life.

The second speaker, Angelia Sia of the Centre for Urban Greenery & Ecology (NParks), spoke about how [green spaces contribute to well-being and resilience](#). Apart from being an avenue for social interaction, studies have established that parks and greenery provide various benefits to psychological health. For example, a controlled study done by NParks found that elderly subjects who underwent horticultural therapy exhibited greater psychological well-being and social connectedness, said Ms. Sia. NParks plans to have at least 85% of Singaporeans living within 400 metres of a park by 2030, and for landscape design of each green space to be a relaxing escape from the stresses of urban living.

Dr Chong Fook Loong, Group Director of the HDB’s Research & Planning Group, detailed his experience in developing the master plan for Punggol town, which gave the audience a special insight into the evolution of HDB’s town planning practices. Punggol pioneered a hybrid carpark system, where carparks are integrated into the housing blocks as opposed to standalone multi-storey carparks. Thanks to the damming of two rivers running around it, Punggol had the unique opportunity of having waterways run through the heart of town, opening up new housing arrangement possibilities and patterns of living. Finally, Dr Chong explained how the Punggol master plan was a living master plan as it was revisited and reviewed every five years, to see if new elements and ideas could be incorporated.

The panel discussion was lively and engaging, with questions raised about the environmental impact of urban development and the availability of certain services or land use types in towns, such as industry. Due to Singapore’s size and land limitations, it is inevitable that the natural environment has to make way for new towns to some extent, but considerations should always be made to compensate by incorporating green spaces.



Dr Chong Fook Loong describing the planning process for Punggol town

Panel 3 – Resilient Communities

The third and final session, chaired by Professor Chua Beng Huat of the NUS Department of Sociology, focused on policies and practices that encourage the forging of tight social bonds among neighbours.

IPS Social Lab’s Dr Leong, who was the first presenter, called for more [attention to be paid to neighbourhood level statistics](#), as such data can reveal potential societal fault lines. The traditional assumption is that Singapore is small and thus neighbourhoods are generally homogeneous across the island, but one should not forget that it is still a country in a city — and an increasingly diverse one at that.

Referencing publicly available data of the different URA (Urban Redevelopment Authority) planning zones, Dr Leong showed how that there were differences in crime rates, income inequality, the proportion of affluent households, elderly, rental flats, and households without a family nucleus across the different planning zones. A check on the HDB website showed that based on the Ethnic Integration Policy, which regulates ethnic and foreigner/local quotas in HDB towns to reflect the multicultural mix in Singapore, there were already areas where significant blocks of HDB flats had too many members from one community. Thus, restrictions in buying and selling flats are in place to maintain ethnic and foreigner-local balance. Another way of looking at this development is that “enclaves” have already started

to form in certain parts of Singapore. Thus, it would be useful to evaluate the relationship between the ethnic profile of HDB estates with social resilience, said Dr Leong, and the implications this would have on neighbourhood planning.

Assistant Professor Zdravko Trivic of the NUS Department of Architecture then presented [preliminary findings of a study he conducted with the National Arts Council on the impact of community arts spaces](#). Surveys and focus group discussions held at selected heartland culture nodes found that people who engaged with arts activities held there mostly did so incidentally. Nevertheless, arts and cultural events play an important role in facilitating neighbour-to-neighbour interaction via familiarisation, mutual recognition and shared experience. This then lays the groundwork for stronger neighbourly bonding and community cohesion.



(From left) Prof Chua Beng Huat chairing the third panel discussion with presenters Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Dr Zdravko Trivic, and Mr Desmond Tan.

The final speaker of the day was Desmond Tan, Chief Executive Director of the People’s Association (PA). Mr Tan described how the [PA’s fosters resilience by creating common spaces to bring people together](#). However, as society evolves, the PA’s methods must also keep up. The PA seeks to deepen their engagement with residents by making events such as Edusave awards ceremonies smaller and thus more intimate. The PA is also increasingly collaborative in its approach, believing that co-creation and a culture of residents-helping-residents is a more sustainable approach towards building social resilience.

The notion of community self-help was discussed during the panel discussion, where some questioned whether it was possible given the heavy reliance on the state that has already been entrenched. Other structural barriers that can limit ground-up efforts were pointed out, such as tight regulations on spaces and amenities.

The panel discussion also explored the relevance of the Ethnic Integration Policy in Singapore today. Concerns were raised about the stress faced by minority group members who prefer to live near their kin, but cannot due to the ethnic quotas. However, others said that the mixture of ethnic groups in each housing block is still crucial for facilitating integration and racial harmony. Some also said that the EIP must be applied equally to all blocks in order for it to be effective.



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Paveena Seah, Eugene Teng and Varian Lim are a Senior Research Analyst and Research Analysts respectively at the IPS Social Lab. IPS Social Lab and CSAC are working to produce a book on neighbourhood resilience, with chapters contributed by the workshop presenters, to be published by the end of 2017.



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