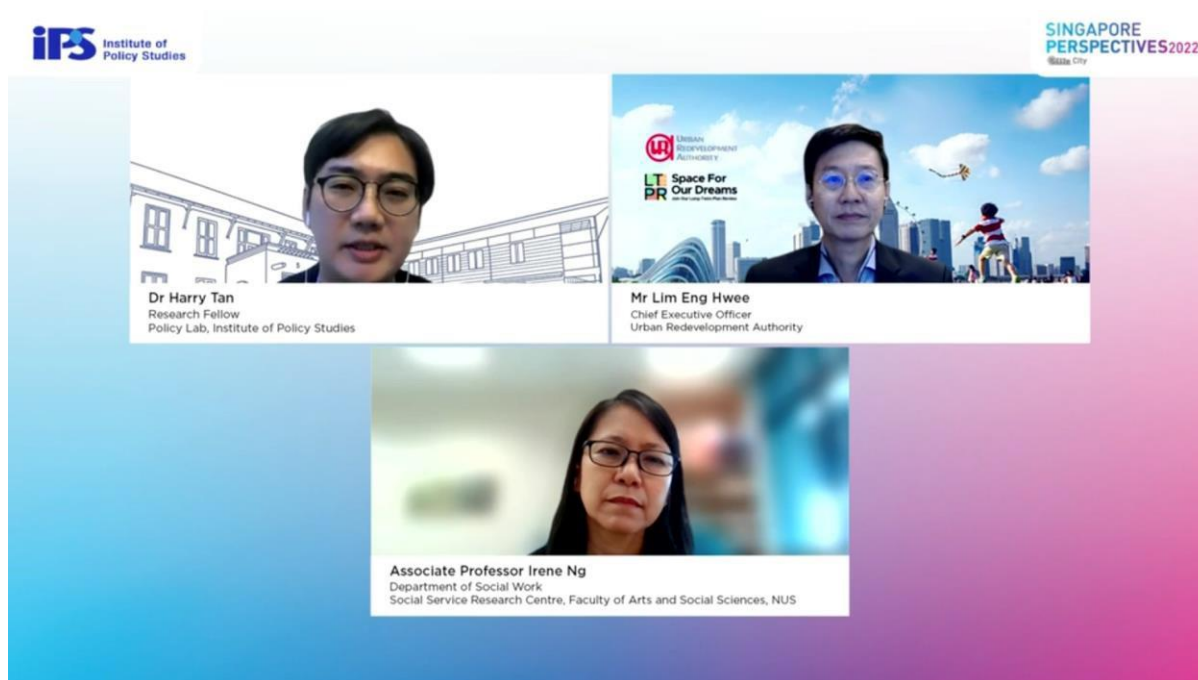


Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City Forum 2: City as an Inclusive Space

By Beverly Tan



Caption for photo: Dr Harry Tan introduces the panellists for the session on “City as an Inclusive Space”

The second forum, on “City as an Inclusive Space”, was moderated by Dr Harry Tan, Research Fellow at Policy Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies. The speakers of this session were Professor Saskia Sassen of Columbia University’s Department of Sociology and Mr Lim Eng Hwee, Chief Executive Officer of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). Associate Professor Irene Ng from the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences was the discussant. Dr Tan opened the forum by introducing the concept of global cities as strategic sites of managing the world economy and production of services, highlighting the inequality between professionals and builders, although both are equally essential. He posed the question of how cities can become more inclusive and liveable, and how Singapore can become such a city.

Opening Remarks by Professor Saskia Sassen

Professor Saskia Sassen spoke about transnationalism and the increase of specialised actors in her pre-recorded remarks. She first established that it was cities, instead of governments,

that were transnational, and explained the importance of protecting the urban condition. Prof Sassen also spoke of the rise of specialised actors, capabilities and constructing innovation, although when exactly these changes occur is difficult to determine. She highlighted the surfacing of a new modernity that has led to physical and digital innovations, which has empowered the transformation of less developed cities from a decade ago into “brilliant” and “exceptional” ones.

During her remarks, Prof Sassen emphasised how pandemics are a significant enemy of cities. She drew a distinction between dealing with pandemics on a broad, national level, and dealing with it in a more localised manner in cities. Some cities have access to all the resources they require to fight the pandemic, while others do not, drawing on the examples of Kolkata in India and parts of the US where people were “simply dying on the street” if they have been hit by the virus. Prof Sassen stressed the importance of developing analytics that enable citizens to understand the problems that the city faces. The obligation of protecting the city is no longer solely on the government, but also should be shared by citizens, despite the difficulty of this becoming a reality.

Prof Sassen emphasised the importance of cities remaining inclusive, despite the inadvertent rising of smaller, more affluent cities, who want to separate from their larger counterparts. Larger cities, despite housing a working class that is essential to the survival and maintenance of the more affluent cities, are less desirable. Prof Sassen drew on the example of global cities, including Singapore, where she noted that all kinds of knowledge were at play. She said that unlike Singapore, most cities are “small and poor”. As such, there is a need to pay attention to cities that lack resources and are struggling to retain their talent. She underscored the importance of looking at the bigger world, which includes modest cities struggling to retain their resources.

She concluded by saying that cities vary enormously and are marked by specific differences in resources or value and emerge because of opportunity.

Opening Remarks by Mr Lim Eng Hwee

Mr Lim Eng He’s presentation focused on land use planning in Singapore. He discussed affordable housing, social and community facilities and leveraging digital technology to promote inclusivity and liveability.

Mr Lim shared some of the considerations of the URA in making Singapore a more inclusive and liveable city, despite the unique social and physical context of the island state, which makes land use planning complex. There is a need to facilitate mingling and interaction among various ethnic groups, yet there is limited land. The country has a high population density and needs housing, amenities and protection, solidifying the need to optimise the available land. Mr Lim defined liveability as having a good quality of living within a highly dense environment, where inclusivity simply means liveability for all. Mr Lim outlined the structured process of city planning undertaken by the URA, which strives to ensure a highly liveable environment. This includes regularly reviewing, synthesising and addressing land use requirements in the long term and the short term. He shared that the URA is committed to secure housing that is adequately provided for, equitably distributed to and inclusively designed for citizens.

In the second half of his speech, Mr Lim described how the URA and other social community agencies contribute to inclusivity. He listed four ways this is being and elaborated on them.

First, the URA provides an increased variety of affordable housing island-wide to cater to evolving needs and socio-demographic trends, such as Community Care Apartments and 2-room flexi flats. He highlighted policy changes that make housing more accessible and inclusive, such as the Prime Location Housing model at Rochor and new estates that mix rental and sold flats. Second, the URA also strives to provide sufficient, well-distributed social and community facilities that integrate vulnerable groups with the wider community, such as Enabling Village and Kampung Admiralty. Additionally, the Singapore Green Plan is slated to bring parks within 10 minutes of walking distance to all Singaporean households by 2030. Third, in terms of improving economic spaces, the URA has been planning for a range of economic spaces to increase access to economic nodes and job opportunities for citizens, making Singapore more convenient for workers and facilitating innovative business models. Lastly, by leveraging digital technology, the URA is able to make more informed decisions regarding land use by tracking population mobility and amenities usage, among other things.

Mr Lim concluded his speech with a brief overview of the URA's Long-Term Plan Review (LTPR) 2022, which considers inclusivity and liveability amid an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world by seeking feedback from different segments of society.

Opening Remarks by Associate Professor Irene Ng

The session's discussant, Associate Professor Irene Ng started by describing Singapore as a role model for city planning, especially when it came to diversity in terms of ethnicity and religion, highlighting the success of the ethnic integration policy. She also lauded Singapore for its ability to make social and community facilities widely accessible.

However, Assoc Prof Ng stressed that despite Singapore's intention to be inclusive, more needs to be done to include the most excluded groups that tend to be overlooked. She gave the example of at-risk youths to illustrate why it is important to build into policies the groups who tend to be most overlooked or excluded.

Assoc Prof Ng explained that while Singapore has become wealthy, it has also become stratified, and that to prioritise inclusivity, more can be done to reorientate the principles of the country's operation. She used the example of her involvement in a digital inclusion campaign during the Circuit Breaker period in the pandemic, aimed at helping those who did not have enough resources for their children to engage in Home-Based Learning (HBL). Assoc Prof Ng made the recommendation for agencies to consider policies and test them on the most vulnerable groups first before rolling them out. This recommendation is in spite of Singapore doing a commendable job collecting data and feedback from the ground through focus group discussions or surveys on various policy ideas, as these channels for feedback may not be easily accessible to the most vulnerable or excluded groups. Assoc Prof Ng suggested seeking out proxy voices for these groups of people in the form of social service professionals, or intentionally identifying the vulnerable or excluded to ask for their opinions as these groups might not even be cognisant of their deficiencies.

She concluded by emphasising that data is normative and excludes the most vulnerable who are usually outliers or missing in the data. Thus, this reiterates the need to test out new plans on the most vulnerable first, similar to Taiwan, which rolled out their 5G initiative in the most rural and disadvantaged communities first. She also highlighted the relational lens of policymaking, where citizens or users are sometimes not consulted. Using the rapid development and changes in technology as an example, Assoc Prof Ng recounted her own challenges with the influx of applications placing a heavy load on her devices, much less those who are less digitally savvy or are less able to afford powerful devices. As such, it is imperative to get on the ground and understand whether initiatives made sense for those they are meant to serve, instead of relying on technical expertise alone.

Question & Answer

Mr Lim, Assoc Prof Ng and the moderator Dr Tan discussed Singapore's increasing population and its effects on liveability, heritage preservation as well as tangible and intangible aspects of inclusivity.

A participant asked how the country could make foreign workers — which Singapore depends so much on, feel more at home on the island. For Mr Lim, Singapore will continue to see a foreign workforce. The measures taken to make this foreign workforce feel more at home depend on the profiles and roles of these workers. He reiterated that facilities in Singapore needed to cater to all segments, regardless of nationality, and the importance of engaging different segments. Assoc Prof Ng added two contexts for considering the issue, the first being the inequality and the second being the marginal costs and benefits. She highlighted the interconnectedness of various issues pertaining to the migrant workforce, ending off with how employers should be the ones to provide for these workers.

The next question was directed to Mr Lim on defensive and hostile architecture, as well as how Singapore plans to resolve the issue of overcrowding. Mr Lim drew on the examples of parks and green spaces, which are accessible for all and free of charge, as well as the requirements of building public plazas into development plans. Regarding overcrowding Mr Lim highlighted URA's efforts to build higher as well as building underground, to free up ground space. He also mentioned creative design solutions to create the illusion of more space. Dr Tan expanded on the question by asking about accessibility features that might be hostile or defensive to certain groups. To that, Mr Lim restated the importance of considering the majority users of the space, as it will not be possible to cater fully to every single person.

A question about balancing the land use for heritage conservation and future needs was asked. Assoc Prof Ng summarised that in a city there will always be tension and contradictions in determining the pace of development that Singapore needs, and balancing such needs when Singapore is now a mature society. Mr Lim added that heritage and greenery are part of the URA's main considerations in city planning, and that the preservation of key heritage sites will depend on the relevance of these sites in the future. As Singapore matures as a city, the challenge is the selection of newer buildings to be retained when the time comes.

When it came to the impact and benefit of inclusive and liveable city plans on the underbellies of global cities, Assoc Prof Irene spoke about how oftentimes policies are made to be implemented fast and to be relevant to the population at large, potentially missing the most

vulnerable groups. She suggested that there could be a slowing down of the rest of the society in order to help those who are excluded — to lessen the growing gap. Mr Lim added that, from a city planner's perspective, it boiled down to job security, quality of life and access to opportunities. He agreed with Assoc Prof Ng that it is important to target vulnerable groups specifically to help them catch up with the rest of society.

When asked about inclusivity specific to disabilities, Mr Lim illustrated the URA's efforts in making universal access a priority by being mindful of the various needs of citizens, as well as doing on-the-ground testing and crowdsourcing to bridge gaps in creating more wheelchair-accessible pathways.

This was followed by a question on the intangible aspects of inclusivity and how to turn lip service into reality. Assoc Prof Ng shared that even though the physical aspects of a city are easy to change, the social aspect such as acceptance towards certain groups may not be the same. She encouraged more open discussions between diverse profiles and reiterated her earlier suggestion to first test policies on the most vulnerable groups to ensure their needs are also being met. Mr Lim added that it takes everyone to achieve a city that makes sense, and that after discussion and engagement with different groups, action and ownership need to be taken.

The final question posed to the panel was on transnational mobility and the increasing transitory nature of people. Assoc Prof Ng started by speaking about how digitalisation has enabled transnationalism and that the divide between different groups in the city now are far too distinct, for example, between citizens and permanent residents. She expected a further blurring of boundaries that policies will have to account for in the future. Mr Lim concluded by stating the importance of how Singapore could best use this translational mobility to its advantage, and how Singapore needs to find ways to endear Singaporeans to the country as it develops.

Dr Tan wrapped up the session by highlighting the tangible and intangible aspects of inclusion, the importance of inclusion not being simply normative, and the transnational nature of a global city, which means there is a need to engage people from all over the world.

Beverly Tan is a Research Assistant at the IPS Society and Culture Department.

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