URBAN SYSTEMS STUDIES

ENGAGING WELL, FORGING BONDS: THE COMMUNITY AS STAKEHOLDERS IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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CENTRE for LiveableCities
SINGAPORE

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CENTRE for
LiveableCities
SINGAPORE   CLC is a division of   **MND**
                                          SINGAPORE

Set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) has as its mission "to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities". The CLC's work spans four main areas—Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms, and Advisory. Through these activities, the CLC hopes to provide urban leaders and practitioners with the knowledge and support needed to make our cities better. For more information, please visit www.clc.gov.sg.

Research Advisors for the CLC's Urban Systems Studies are experts who have generously provided their guidance and advice. However, they are not responsible for any remaining errors or omissions, which remain the responsibility of the author(s) and the CLC.

Cover photo:
Rail corridor, Bukit Timah Road truss bridge. Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

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FOREWORD

At the risk of over-simplification, one of the things which I often reminded myself and my then colleagues at the Ministry of National Development of, was that while we build houses, it is really people and their families who build homes. We can build well-designed precincts which can be, as we often proudly tout, "world class" or "first class", but then it is people coming together, investing interest in a place, creating personal attachments and growing social relations in the process that makes the place a real neighbourhood, a living community.

Knowing what people want, what people need, what is important to people, is at the heart of why we do what we do in urban development. It must drive what we do if we are serious about our declared mission to make Singapore the best home for all Singaporeans. Whether it is because we have developed and matured as a society, and have thus become more diverse and more complex, or whether there are other additional factors, policy makers and planners cannot assume to know what people value, want or need without actually engaging them in one manner or another.

Engagement takes many forms. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and interest groups play a significant and usually visible role in this engagement process. They can bring expert knowledge and different perspectives, articulate a cogent counterfactual, and mobilise resources to raise wider attention, deepening the awareness of the issues they champion.

However, as much as there is need to engage this organised constituency, there is value in engaging beyond it as well. Ordinary people directly or generally impacted by policy or plans are not always able to come and attend focus group discussions, or write eloquent petitions.

In organising "Our Singapore Conversation" in 2012, we thought it prudent to not only engage people who came for the various peer-to-peer "conversation" sessions, we also asked researchers to conduct general ground surveys on the same issues so as to capture the "voice" of those who did not or could not attend our sessions for whatever reasons. This enabled us to hear from as broad and inclusive a population of Singaporeans as possible. I believe that this made the final composite outcome a more textured and informed picture of where our people stood or felt about the various issues or concerns.

Engagement, in and with all its different forms and actors, offers an opportunity to put our assumptions to the test and refine our policies or our planning ideas. It is also a process which can seed a real sense of co-ownership by participants. Even when there is no complete agreement or consensus, if engagement is conducted genuinely and honestly, it can generate a more informed view on all sides, of the competing perspectives, varying salience of interests, and especially of dynamic inter-dependencies. It is a valuable process which fosters, if reinforced by consistent positive experience over time, mutual trust. This is fundamental to growing social capital, which determines the well-being of any community.

Engaging Well, Forging Bonds: The Community as Stakeholders in Urban Development documents our community engagement journey towards a more collaborative partnership between the government and the people of Singapore. It tells the story of the various successes, challenges and mis-steps; highlighting episodes from which we can draw lessons as we continue to refine our engagement processes. Importantly, it shows how all actors can have a role to play in creating space for conversations on difficult or uncomfortable issues.

While the shape of a final decision taken, even with trade-offs accommodated, may not please everyone, with good engagement comes the opportunity to forge a sense of shared responsibility to build a better Singapore for all. We must believe that this makes us do a better job, not just in urban development but also in community building.

I hope that readers will find this publication as enjoyable as it is informative. I certainly did.

Benny Lim
Special Adviser
Centre for Liveable Cities
(former Permanent Secretary of the
Ministry of National Development)

PREFACE

The Centre for Liveable Cities' (CLC) research in urban systems tries to unpack the systematic components that make up the city of Singapore, capturing knowledge not only within each of these systems, but also the threads that link these systems and how they make sense as a whole. The studies are scoped to venture deep into the key domain areas the CLC has identified under the Singapore Liveability Framework, attempting to answer two key questions: how Singapore has transformed itself into a highly liveable city within the last five decades; and how Singapore can build on our urban development experience to create knowledge and urban solutions for current and future challenges relevant to Singapore and other cities through applied research. *Engaging Well, Forging Bonds: The Community as Stakeholders in Urban Development* is the latest publication of the Urban Systems Studies (USS) series.

The research process involves the close and rigorous engagement of the CLC with our stakeholder agencies, and oral history interviews with Singapore's urban pioneers and leaders to gain insights into development processes and to distil tacit knowledge which has been gleaned from the planning and implementation, as well as the governance of Singapore. As a body of knowledge, the USS series, which covers aspects such as water, transport, housing, industrial infrastructure, and a sustainable environment, reveal not only the visible outcomes of Singapore's development, but the complex support structures of our urban achievements.

The CLC would like to thank all those who have contributed their knowledge, expertise, and time to make this publication possible. I wish you an enjoyable read.

Khoo Teng Chye
Executive Director
Centre for Liveable Cities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE SINGAPORE LIVEABILITY FRAMEWORK

The Singapore Liveability Framework is derived from Singapore's urban development experience and is a useful guide for developing sustainable and liveable cities.

The general principles under **Integrated Master Planning and Development** and **Dynamic Urban Governance** are reflected in the themes found in *Engaging Well, Forging Bonds: The Community as Stakeholders in Urban Development.*

High
Quality
of Life

Competitive
Economy

Sustainable
Environment

Integrated Master Planning and Development
- Think Long Term
- Fight Productively
- Build in Flexibility
- Execute Effectively
- Innovate Systemically

Dynamic Urban Governance
- Lead with Vision and Pragmatism
- Build a Culture of Integrity
- Cultivate Sound Institutions
- Involve the Community as Stakeholders
- Work with Markets
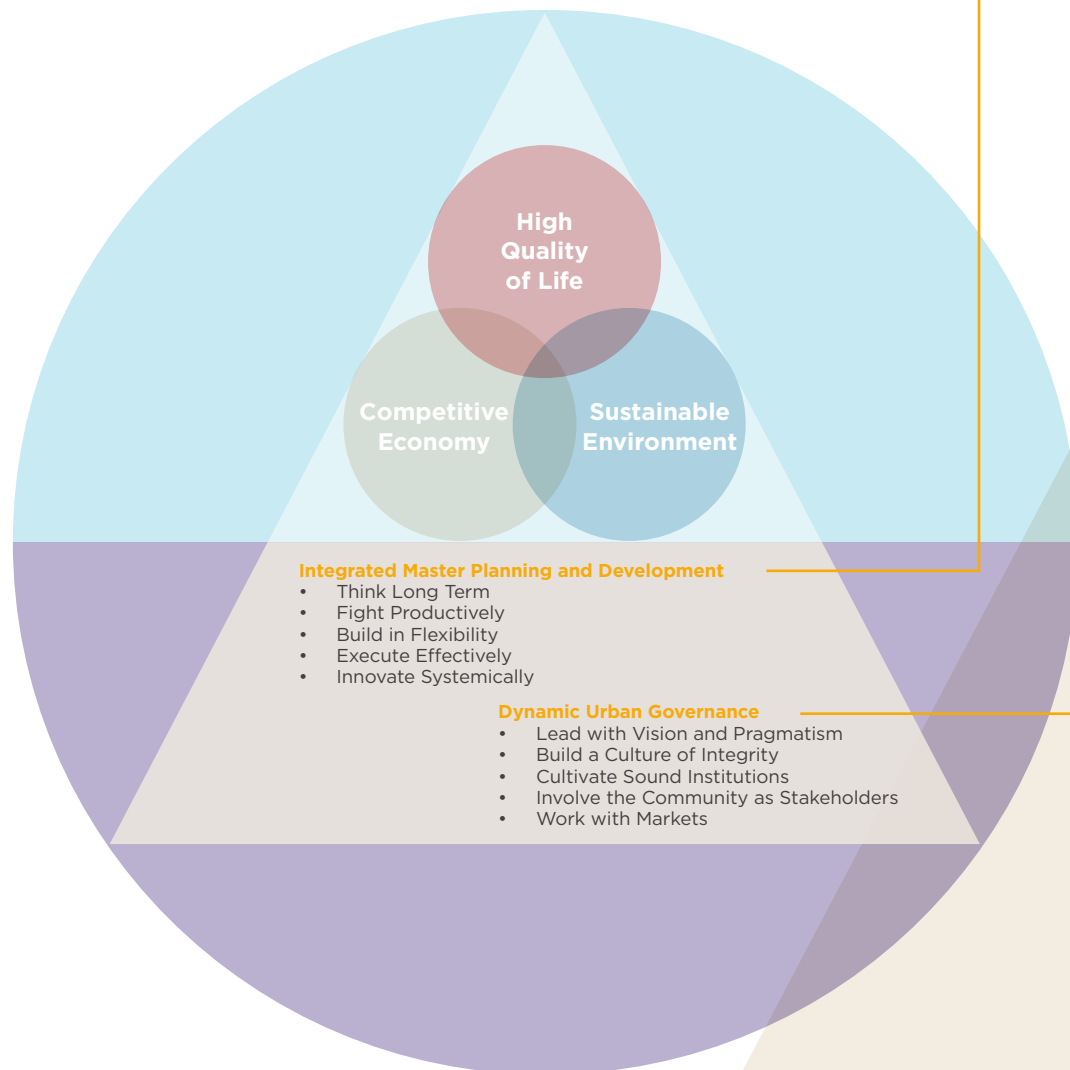
Integrated Master Planning and Development

Fight Productively

Differences between members of the public, interest groups and the government are bound to arise from time to time. However, it is important that despite contrasting opinions and interests, parties are able to "fight productively" and come to the table with an element of openness and trust to discuss issues constructively. It is with this spirit of sincere engagement that steps can be taken to address each other's concerns and, in cases where a compromise cannot be reached, that the relationship and conversation between parties can continue despite disagreements.

(See Working Alongside: Developing a State–Society Partnership, p. 52, and Working Through Differences, p. 86)

Build in Flexibility

A well-designed community engagement programme can potentially harness the knowledge and wisdom of a citizenry that is educated and skilled. However, engagement could be ineffective and contrived if flexibility is not built into the urban planning process, enabling the public to lend their expertise and make a positive contribution. The Development Guide Plan (DGP) initiative in the early 1990s and the 2001 Concept Plan public engagement exercise, are examples where members of the public have been given the opportunity to make meaningful contributions towards Singapore's urban development. Having sufficient flexibility to allow the community to devise and implement plans alongside the authorities further enhances collective ownership of these plans.

(see Early Efforts at Engagement Through Urban Planning, p. 29, and Moving with the Times, p. 54. Also, Engendering Communal Ownership at the Neighbourhood Level, p. 66, and Improving the Engagement Process, p. 78)

Dynamic Urban Governance

Lead with Vision and Pragmatism

There is no "one size fits all" model for community engagement. The extent of public involvement is dependent on the issue, the relevant constraints, and the decision-making space. In the early years of Singapore's development when issues of economic growth, lack of housing and environmental health were pressing, a pragmatic approach towards engagement was taken. With societal progress, there has been increased involvement of stakeholders in conversations on urban development. Yet political leaders and senior public officials have the duty

to uphold the long term interests of the nation, listen to views and balance competing interests to ultimately make the necessary tough decisions, even if they might be unpopular with certain segments of the public.

Cultivate Sound Institutions
Institutions and platforms for engagement play a critical role in disseminating information, rallying public support and providing avenues for collaboration on government policies. As Singapore has progressed, so have new institutions emerged and existing ones evolved in response to the changing social dynamic between people and the government. This is seen in the changing work of the People's Association (PA) and its constituents such as the Citizen Consultative Committees, Residents' Committees and Community Centres. The introduction of Town Councils in the 1980s, and formation of partnership networks by statutory boards such as the PUB, Singapore's National Water Agency, and the Land Transport Authority (LTA) since the early 2000s are also reflective of the shift towards collaboration and co-creation with the public on policy issues, from the earlier engagement efforts characterised by information dissemination.

Involve the Community as Stakeholders
The support and contribution of the public is essential for policies and plans to succeed. Involving the community as stakeholders is vital in achieving a liveable urban environment for all. This USS details how community engagement has been carried out through the years: from the formation of semi-government institutions (e.g. PA) to disseminate information and rally policy support from the public post-independence, to more progressive attempts, in recent years, at "co-creation" as seen in the case of the rail corridor.

OVERVIEW

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:[1]
FOR WHAT PURPOSE AND ON WHOSE TERMS?

Community engagement and citizen participation are important themes in urban governance. They can be seen as the invisible threads that bind people to the urban environment in which they live, and root people to the places they consider "home". Community engagement, in its broadest sense, builds bridges between the government and its people, and can be seen as a move from a more elitist, bureaucratic mode of governance, towards one that is more inclusive of the citizenry and disadvantaged groups. The importance placed on dialogue between government and citizens, especially in urban planning, has been linked to the growing awareness that "wicked issues" in the social and environmental realms are complex, wherein professional planners and technocrats cannot claim to know all the answers. There is an increasing appreciation of localised knowledge and the benefits of involving people to identify problems and contribute to their solutions. It is enabled by improvements in communication technologies and reflective of a more society-centred thinking. Increasingly, social capital built through "bonding" connections among people at the local level and "bridging" connections which enable people to draw on wider groups including governance systems, is considered essential to fostering cohesion and building a national polity.

Engagement can take many forms—informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering, with each moving up the scale of participatory forms from weak to strong. While recognised for its merits, "engagement" in its weaker forms can sometimes be regarded as political propaganda—a conditional engagement, one premised on the ability to secure votes. In its stronger form, community engagement processes have been criticized for being protracted, holding up policy making and the implementation of development projects when they are "hijacked" by specific interest groups. The responsibilities to ensure that the overall public good is upheld and that Singapore's long-term planning goals are achieved, lie with a successful state–society partnership.

Managing the community engagement process, however, is a delicate and dynamic relationship between reigning in the powers of the State, and encouraging the growth of civic society. As George Yeo, former Minister for Information and the Arts, pointedly notes, for civic institutions to grow, the State must withdraw a little and provide space for local initiative. This is crucial to create participation and a greater sense of ownership and

rootedness. It inculcates gratitude, affection and pride for the nation, and through civic participation, enables a greater sense of being Singaporean to be achieved.[2] Yet in every society, the historical, socio-economic and political contexts are important factors in shaping the processes and forms of community engagement. As a small nation just over 700 square kilometres in size, Singapore can be vulnerable to economic, social and political disruptions that threaten its growth, security and stability. While pluralism is necessary, too much will destroy Singapore. Singapore needs a strong centre to react quickly to a changing competitive environment. Like a banyan tree that provides shade and warmth to those who take shelter beneath it, state-society relations are "pruned judiciously".[3]

Drawing from interviews with politicians, policy makers and urban experts as well as archival and published material, this Urban Systems Study documents how Singapore, a former British colony and an independent city-state since 1965, has harnessed community engagement and navigated its challenges in its nation building efforts. Focusing on the urban development of Singapore, this study is a chronological account of the dynamics surrounding Singapore's urban governance and community engagement as it has evolved over the years. It highlights the challenges Singapore had to overcome in the tumultuous years immediately after independence, the tussles and trade-offs experienced amidst a more vocal populace, and the lessons learnt in the process, as the partnership between the Singapore Government, civil society organisations and its citizens continues to shape the development of Singapore.

CHAPTER 1

SEEDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

> " How to convert a society
> of transient immigrants
> into a community of
> permanent settlers?" [4]

S. Rajaratnam, former Foreign Minister

LEGACIES AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Inculcating in the population a sense of identification with the future of the Republic of Singapore was a preoccupation of Singapore leaders in the immediate founding years of Singapore's independence, and became the defining tenet of community engagement. For well over 100 years, right up to the end of the Second World War, people in Singapore did not regard themselves as a permanently settled community. Singapore was hailed as the "Gibraltar of the East", a British colonial bastion that provided immigrants from China, South India and around South East Asia with get rich quick dreams—a trading haven where money could be made as quickly as possible, so they could thereafter retire comfortably to their homelands. The thought of Singapore was not "our island", but a treasure island in which one stayed so long as there was treasure to extract. No one was particularly interested in the future of Singapore, only in their personal futures.[5] In the years after the Second World War, a British Housing Committee report noted that Singapore had become home to the world's worst slums—a chaotic and unwieldy megapolis that was haphazard and unplanned.[6] Over-population, unemployment and housing shortages fuelled dissatisfaction with the British colonial government, and the streets were rife with gang violence, racial riots and disruptive strikes.

Led by Lee Kuan Yew, the People's Action Party (PAP) Government came into power in 1959 after winning the first general elections in Singapore. However, as the PAP sought to consolidate its political footing and resolve these pressing issues, turmoil began to brew within party ranks. In 1961, 13 members from the PAP who were sympathisers to the communist cause defected to form the "Barisan Sosialis". The communists had a psychological grip on the Chinese-speaking population in Singapore and Malaya in the 1950s and '60s, and made people believe that what had happened in China would also come to pass in Malaya. Many believed that communism was the wave of the future and those who opposed them would be buried by history.[7]

Alongside these political uncertainties, civil society thrived. The government of the colonies was often minimalist and economical, leaving the various communities to develop their own civic life. People who came to Singapore from different parts of the archipelago had their various organisations (for example, the Bawaen people, their *pondok*;[8] and the Buginese, their own settlements). The Chinese had their clans, temples and schools, so too did the Indians who had their equivalents.[9] These communal and sectoral divisions would have been unsustainable for a budding nation. As George Yeo, former Minister for Information and the Arts, noted:

> The first thing that we had to do when we became a nation was to, as it were, weaken these civil organisations and re-orientate them towards the idea of a single Singapore country or nation.... So after having achieved a certain level of foundation laying, we can now gradually free up again and create not a colonial civil society but a Singaporean civil society.[10]

FOUNDING INSTITUTIONS

People's Association: The "Ministry of National Unity"

Community centre basketball tournament in the 1960s.
Photo from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

It was against this socio-political backdrop that the People's Association (PA) was set up in 1960 to serve as a bridge between the government and the people to:

> ...keep in constant touch with the people, not only to know what their grievances are, but also to inculcate in them social qualities which will be useful in the building up of our society. In the present phase of political development it will be easier to do this at a non-government level. For this reason we have decided to set up the "People's Association".[11]

Lee Kuan Yew, founding Prime Minister

Community centre sewing class in the 1960s.
Photo from People's Association Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, wanted the PA to serve as a conduit to cultivate leaders who could be part of the government but in a non-partisan way. These leaders would then bring the views and feelings of the people, the perceived shortcomings of the government, to the attention of the administration. It would be a way to understand the difficulties that people were encountering, be they farmers, fishermen or city dwellers. He was resolute that the government should not be a separate entity divorced from ground realities, relying on "middlemen" such as clans and associations to broker negotiations between the people and the government, as was the case during colonial rule, which allowed discontent to fester and problems to emerge. He felt that "part of the process of making the people participate in the government is for the administrative organs to "grow roots" in the hearts and minds by closer participation of the representatives of the government in the people's social activities".[12] To do so, the PA was tasked to be eyes and ears on the ground, with an explicit objective to foster community bonding. As Tan Boon Huat, former Chief Executive Director of the PA explained, the PA recognised Singapore's diversity. It was not about achieving a "melting pot" but celebrating that diversity.[13] Tan Boon Huat saw the purpose of the PA as offering opportunities for the community to interact, creating and expanding common space to foster national identity. Otherwise, people would simply remain in their separate social orbits and become increasingly disparate from one another:

> The better off are in their own circles in country clubs, and the less well-off in their own circles. You never meet, and that means no community…. And that's why, at the risk of oversimplification, I explain to overseas visitors that we function like a "Ministry of National Unity". We foster national unity from the ground level up. No other agencies or ministries do this![14]

Managing Communist Threats

Despite Lee's well-intended objectives to cultivate community leaders who could be part and parcel of governance, the initial years of the PA's work was very much politically motivated. The PA and the community centres (CCs) that were built became bastions against the rising tide of communist fervour in the 1950s and '60s. The communists, in order to spread their ideals, targeted the rural areas and used various activities to win support and trust. The PA then competed by providing similar services to contest the "soft" selling of left-wing ideology. Lee noted how the communists operated and sought to influence people, admitting that the PAP were often "frozen out" when they went into communist dominated areas. The communists would infiltrate key players in a constituency, including union leaders and officials of retailers' and hawkers' associations, clan and alumni organisations, bringing them into a network of communist cadres and making them feel part of a winning team. In similar fashion, the PAP sought to develop institutional and organisational networks to muster support. Clan associations, chambers of commerce, recreational clubs and arts, leisure and social activity groups were brought into the PA as corporate members. They provided advice and programmes (literacy classes in Chinese and English, and courses in sewing, cooking and repairing motorcars, electrical instruments, radios and television sets) in the CCs. These efforts gradually proved to be effective in winning back the political ground cultivated by the communists.[15]

COMMUNITY CENTRES

The CCs had their origins in the post-war food distribution centres and children's centres of the British Military Administration. Set up as a means to deal with the food shortages and lack of schools following the end of the Second World War, they were converted into recreational centres as the country recovered. Although they were intended to keep older children engaged in meaningful activities and off the streets, the management of the CCs was often poor, and the centres frequently became hangouts for gangsters.[16]

This changed when the PAP Government assumed power in 1960. Borne out of political ingénue, the CCs that the PA built and operated became the initial institutional seedbeds of state–society community engagement set up by the PAP government. The CCs became a vehicle for connecting with the people by providing neutral spaces through which social, cultural, educational and athletic activities could be enjoyed by everyone, enabling people to "realise that they belong to a multiracial community, the interests of which transcend sectional loyalties".[17]

More importantly, the CCs provided essential services to the mainly *kampong*-dwelling[18] population of the time. These included access to a telephone, inoculation of livestock, help in job applications and even in the reading of letters for the illiterate. The CCs provided people with someone to turn to who was sympathetic to their everyday problems, and who had access to the government.[19]

Changing face of the community centre—Kampong Kembangan Community Centre, 1963 (left) and Heartbeat @ Bedok Integrated Complex today (right).
Photos from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore, and courtesy of People's Association respectively.

While the essential function of the CCs has remained largely unchanged through the years, CCs or Community Clubs as they are known today, are almost unrecognisable from the simple utilitarian centres of the 1960s. With contemporary architectural designs, CCs presently boast sophisticated facilities such as indoor gymnasiums, and offer programmes like fencing and archery to appeal to the changing tastes and lifestyles of the Singapore population. In 1997, the PA pioneered the concept of the co-located CC with the opening of the Bishan CC. For the first time, public and commercial entities were situated within the premises of the CC. It is not uncommon for visitors to CCs today to find a café alongside a neighbourhood police centre; creating even more opportunities for interaction within the community. In recent years, this concept has been extended further with the introduction of integrated complexes or lifestyle hubs. The newly constructed integrated complex—Heartbeat @ Bedok—houses Kampong Chai Chee Community Club alongside a sports centre, library, polyclinic and more.[20] It is a reflection of the ongoing bid to make facilities as relevant as possible to the increasing diversity and lifestyle needs of the population, and to foster social cohesion.

PA STRIKE
OF 1961

By early July 1961, communist elements were well-positioned within the PA and disrupting regular operations of the CCs. After 17 employees—mostly centre leaders—were dismissed for their failure to stop disruptive political activities and declare their loyalty to the government and the PA, 177 PA workers walked out on their CC roles, sparking a strike that lasted 10 months.[21] The strike was one in a series of politically-motivated strikes and violent demonstrations that plagued the nation in the early 1960s as part of "the battle for merger".[22]

In the face of the attacks, the PA responded by finding temporary replacements such as the Federation of Boys' Clubs to keep the CCs open amidst the disruptions, if only for psychological reasons.[23] The strike eventually reached a stalemate, and by mid-1962, most agitators had withdrawn from the demonstrations and asked to be re-employed. Eventually, the strike petered out and came to a close, as the last remaining demonstrators surrendered peacefully and left the Havelock CC which they had been occupying.[24] The PA had survived, albeit in a much depleted state.
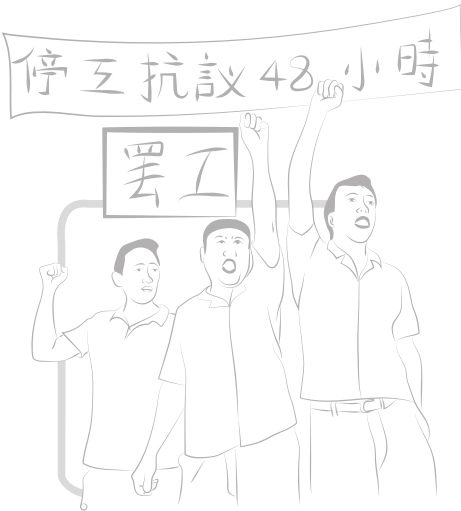
CULTIVATING THE GRASSROOTS

Unfortunately, along with the Barisan Sosialis split from the PAP, the CCs, as foundling grassroots organisations, also became infiltrated by the communists. In 1961, some 177 out of 230 PA employees went on strike after the PA dismissed 17 of its employees for engaging in political activity within the CCs. The strikers broke into the CCs, stole equipment, put up anti-government posters and defaced walls with graffiti. Tan Boon Huat noted that:

> The idea was for these CCs to outreach to the people, but it was captured by Communist ground organisations. So quite a few of the staff, organising secretaries, were actually subverted, particularly the Chinese, because many of the employees of the PA in the beginning were Nantah [南大 Nanyang University] graduates, and there is always this tension between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated. So it was very easy for the Communists to exploit this and therefore they went on strike.[25]

Setting up Semi-Government Institutions

With the operations of the CCs impaired, the government found alternative avenues to reach the masses through the leaders of community organisations, such as clan associations and benevolent societies, who were already active in various activities organised by the PA. The main task of these grassroots committees was to connect with the people. Local leaders of various associations and clubs would constitute themselves as "welcoming committees" for their area, and discuss with the PAP government municipal issues such as road improvements, street lights, standpipes and drains to alleviate flooding. The government would then assign work teams to follow up with the respective local committees, and provide the funds to execute the projects.[26] The eventual plan was to have a grassroots committee in each *kampong* which would be overseen by a central committee working closely with the government. This new process converted local leaders into grassroots leaders, allowing them to become stakeholders of future developmental policies (such as housing redevelopment projects and land acquisition).

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The work of these local leaders proved particularly beneficial in calming the citizenry and establishing peace during the race riots in 1964 and its aftermath. Community leaders from the grassroots' committees, renamed as Goodwill Committees, went out to *kampongs* to speak directly to residents, reiterating Singapore's multiracial foundations and to gain the trust of residents. As Tan Boon Huat recalled:

There was a need to involve the local leaders. If you get a local leader, a natural leader, it's so much easier... They can be village leaders, clan leaders, business leaders. In those days, PA got involved a lot with the clan associations and the martial arts kind of pugilistic associations. Some of these martial arts were linked to the underground, to the triads, the samseng kia [local slang for delinquent youths]. A lot of these organisations grew out of mutual help to become crime triads. But the government managed to work around this and bring them under the control of the PA.[27]

Then Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye presenting accreditation cards to CCC members of Stamford and Rochor constituencies in 1966.
Photo from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew speaking at the Geylang Serai Goodwill Committee meeting in the 1960s.
Photo from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Building on these initial "welcoming" Goodwill Committees, the PAP government co-opted their more active and promising members into Management Committees (MCs) of community centres and into Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs). MCs of the community centres organised recreational activities, and the CCCs, through funds provided by the government, did local improvement projects and raised money to provide grants and bursaries for the needy. Lee noted that many community leaders were initially reluctant and fearful to identify themselves openly with a political party, even though they were happy to be associated with the government.[28]

Through the relentless work of the CCCs on the ground in various areas and on different matters, the government gradually garnered the trust of the people. This paid off later when particularly thorny issues such as land acquisition and urban resettlement arose. During the 1960s and '70s, many villages had to be acquired and the residents resettled to make way for land consolidation and comprehensive redevelopment for residential and industrial purposes. Although compensation was given, residents resisted resettlement, fearing that without land, they would lose both

their homes and livelihoods. Lim Hoon Yong, former Head of Resettlement Department in the Housing & Development Board (HDB) which built public housing estates, recalled how his officers were chased, sometimes with cooking pots, machetes and even *parangs*[29] by angry villagers when they visited to explain resettlement policies. Lim divulged that he even had an emergency button hidden under his desk, directly connected to the police department, so that the police would be alerted should he be confronted by angry villagers and gangsters.[30] There was therefore a need to be sensitive to the social conditions of those who were being resettled.

Residents moving into their new HDB flats in the 1960s.
Photo from People's Association Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The CCCs' help was invaluable in this regard. As Lee noted, resettlement was a "hazardous political task".[31] Working as intermediaries, CCC leaders and members played a crucial role in assuaging antagonisms between government officials and the people affected by resettlement, limiting political fallout. While negotiations were often difficult, the CCCs managed to at least tamper emotions, and enable constructive dialogue. As these leaders were often affected by resettlement plans themselves, their message held weight with the residents. Besides communicating the policy, the CCCs also assisted those who had lost their livelihoods to find work in school tuckshops and markets, thereby facilitating the building of a new life for the resettlers in their new public housing estates.

Whilst community engagement was motivated primarily by political dictates in the founding years of Singapore's independence, the setting up of the PA and various other institutions such as the early Goodwill Committees, the MCs and the CCCs, enabled the PAP government to harness the support of the citizenry to push through hard-nosed policies pertaining to city development. These semi-government institutions were effective in mobilising the elders who were respected in their own communities. These initial community engagement institutions would morph over the decades in tandem with the urban progress and social awakening of the citizenry in Singapore.

CHAPTER 2

LEARNING THE ROPES: FROM "SHOW-AND-TELL" TO DIALOGUE

> I [wanted] to make Singapore into an oasis in Southeast Asia… the physical infrastructure was easier to improve than the rough and ready ways of the people." [32]

Lee Kuan Yew, founding Prime Minister

"CAMPAIGN-CITY"
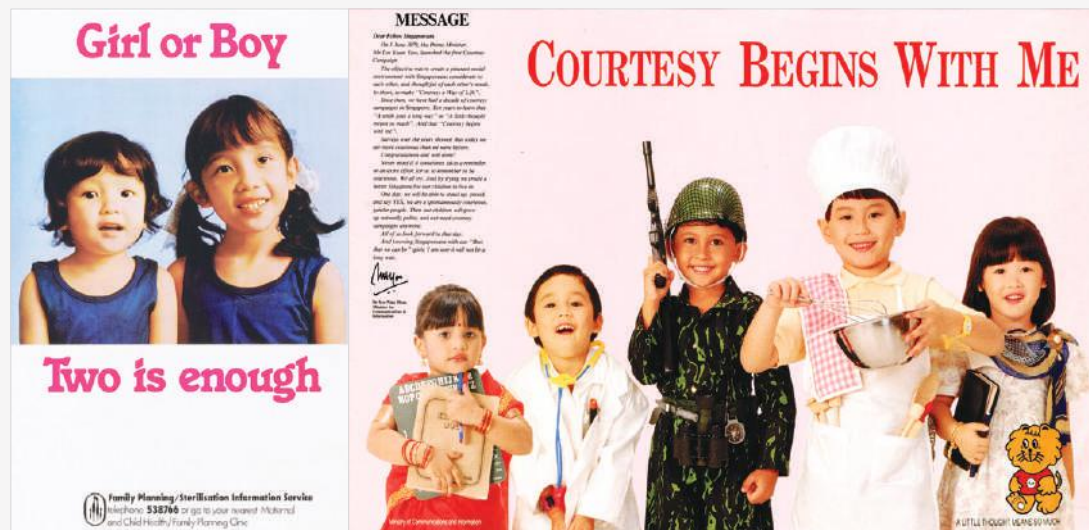
Campaign posters—Two is Enough (1978) and Courtesy Campaign (1989).
Images from Singapore Family Planning and Population Board Collection and Ministry of Communications and Information Collection respectively. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

From "Clean and Green" to "Two is Enough", from Singa Lion to Water Wally, public campaigns and their mascots have a special place in Singapore's heritage and the memories of its people. In the course of nation building and city development over the last five decades, Singapore has run many campaigns covering a wide range of topics, including encouraging the population to keep Singapore clean, adopting family-planning measures, being courteous, and speaking good English. There have also been others that remind people to be good neighbours and to live healthy lifestyles. Campaigns were used as a means of community engagement to influence the thoughts and behaviours of people. In the first few decades following Singapore's independence, campaigns played an integral role in shaping the urban living environment, and in instilling social attitudes that were considered important to laying the foundations of building a new nation.

Keeping Singapore Clean

The "Keep Singapore Clean" and "Tree Planting" campaigns, launched in 1968 and 1971 respectively, were run to transform Singapore into a country that is clean and full of greenery—an oasis of the region. They complemented a suite of improvement efforts by the government to institute public health laws, relocate and license itinerant hawkers, develop proper sewerage systems and put in place better disease control measures.

At that point of time, the community engagement approach was essentially one of public education. We tell you and teach you…keep Singapore clean, keep our waterways clean, use plastic bags to bag your wet refuse, no spitting. [33]

Loh Ah Tuan, former Director-General/Deputy Chief Executive Officer [DCEO], National Environment Agency

Enforcing good behaviour such as the proper disposal of waste to improve environmental conditions was seen as key to enhancing people's quality of life and as a way of cultivating national pride. It was a means through which people could learn to take responsibility and ownership of their urban environment. However, rampant unemployment in the 1960s made environmental clean-up efforts difficult. Many people, due to the lack of jobs, turned to selling cooked food on the pavements and streets in total disregard of traffic, health and other considerations. The resulting litter and stench of rotting food pervaded the city, and the clutter and obstructions caused by these itinerant hawkers turned many parts of the city into slums, making them safety hazards.

Residents participating in street cleaning, 1967.
Photo from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

In 1968, the Keep Singapore Clean Campaign Committee was formed. Headed by former Health Minister Chua Sian Chin, it included representatives from employer and employee organisations as well as other social organisations. The campaign commenced with much fanfare with over 1,500 community leaders attending the event. The inclusion of civil organisations into the Campaign Committee made it possible to hold community-level cleanliness competitions at schools, markets, community centres (CCs) and government offices. The cleanest premises were publicly praised and rewarded, while the dirtiest examples were named and shamed. Grassroots organisations were also actively involved in spreading campaign messages, garnering support for rallies and exhibitions, cleaning estates as well as making house visits. During these house visits and community events, members of parliament (MPs) and community leaders would call for volunteers

to join them in the cleaning effort. To cultivate good habits, students were specially targeted, with teachers and educators involved in the incorporation of campaign messages into the school curricula. Through these measures, the Keep Singapore Clean campaign targeted every resident, reminding them that environmental cleanliness was everyone's responsibility and not just the government's.

Turning Wastewater to NEWater

Many Singaporeans would drink NEWater, which has its source from treated waste water, thanks to the proven technology behind it and a massive public education campaign.

The need for public campaigns slowed after the initial decades of city building; people were becoming accustomed to an urban way of life, educational levels were increasing and Singapore was growing economically and gaining a foothold at the global level. Singapore's lack of natural water resources, however, was an ongoing problem that needed to be tackled.

Since Singapore began industrialising, conscious efforts have been made to ensure that wastewater was collected and treated before it was returned to the ocean. This minimised pollution and provided the opportunity to treat wastewater to drinkable standards once the technology became available. In the early 2000s, the coming-of-age of membrane technology made the treatment of wastewater into potable water possible at an affordable price.

Prior to its introduction in 2002, NEWater had undergone a rigorous review by a panel of local and international experts, who affirmed that NEWater is safe for potable use. Since then, NEWater has passed more than 150,000 scientific tests. The results consistently show that its quality is well within the international standards for drinking water quality. While it is safe to drink, NEWater is used mainly by the industrial sector for process purposes. The biggest users of NEWater are wafer fabrication plants which require water quality that is even more stringent than water for drinking. During dry periods, NEWater is added to Singapore's reservoirs to blend with raw water.

While all steps were taken to ensure the quality and viability of NEWater, there was also a need to convince the public that NEWater was safe for consumption. Tackling this psychological barrier became the key challenge of harnessing the NEWater resource.

NEWater makes its debut at National Day Parade 2002.
Photo from Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts Collection,
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

To do so, PUB, Singapore's National Water Agency, launched a public engagement exercise to educate the public about this technology. Besides sharing the technical know-how, a campaign was rolled out to educate the nation about reclaimed water and what closing of the water loop means.

It established the NEWater Visitor Centre (NVC) where educational tours were conducted for the public, companies and organisations. School children also visited NVC as part of their National Education. At the NVC, visitors learn about the stringent production process of NEWater. They get to understand how advanced membrane technologies, namely microfiltration and reverse osmosis; and ultraviolet disinfection, can produce ultra-clean reclaimed water. The interactive exhibits at the NVC help to bridge the gap between scientific understanding and public perception. In a greater attempt to reach out to the community, NEWater was and continues to be bottled for sampling.

In addition, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong gave his personal endorsement by drinking a bottle of NEWater following a tennis game on video. The footage, which reflected the strong support for NEWater at the highest levels, was aired on national television on 6 August 2002. It set the stage for the "mass toast" event at the National Day Parade three days later, where 60,000 people celebrated Singapore's national birthday with NEWater. The engagement exercise not only reinforced the scarcity of Singapore's water resources, but also showed how the government was doing all it could to harness the most advanced technology of the time to build Singapore's water resource capacity.

RESPONDING TO DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

As Singapore progressed, the manner through which grassroots energies could be harnessed had to evolve. Although the threat of communism had diminished and the problems associated with poor infrastructure and housing seen in the founding years had lessened, new issues emerged from the resettlement of the population into urban neighbourhoods. Maintaining the lines of communication between the government and the people within this new urban context required new institutions. There was also a need to establish a sense of community among residents in the Housing & Development Board (HDB) estates which had dissolved because of resettlement from the *kampongs*. Previously, it was the village elders, the school committees in charge of the teachers, the shopkeepers, and local clan leaders who could "rustle up the crowds". They were the backbone for mobilising and rebuilding widespread support for government policies.[34] With resettlement, new community engagement set-ups that could better relate to the citizenry amidst a changing urban landscape had to be built.

New Semi-Government Institutions: Formation of Residents' Committees and Town Councils

By the late 1970s, the majority of Singapore's population was living in HDB flats. As a result, the CCCs found themselves increasingly removed from the everyday lives of residents living in these new high density estates. Composed of merely a small group of community leaders, the CCCs were limited in their reach to the thousands living in the high-rise apartments that had sprung up across the island.

It was at this time that a proposal for "block working committees" was considered. Mooted as a means to prevent crime in the HDB neighbourhoods, each committee was to be comprised of resident volunteers, in particular, police officers who lived in the apartment blocks that formed the neighbourhood.[35] The underlying premise was that residents would be most familiar with the happenings within their neighbourhood and hence be best positioned to act—be it keeping an eye out for crime or providing feedback to authorities.

Residents' Committees (RCs)

While the idea for "block working committees" was an institution mooted with crime prevention in mind, it also held promise in filling the gap that had emerged when it came to community engagement. This led to the formation of Residents' Committees (RCs) that we know today. No longer simply focussed on crime prevention, the RCs are led by resident volunteers who look after the physical and social affairs of the people in their estate.[36] The number of RCs grew quickly and soon became the main channel of feedback to the authorities on a wide range of issues such as estate cleanliness, number of car parks lots and even feeder bus services.[37] By 1981, there were a total of 222 RCs, and to then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, RCs were the "most promising grassroots organisations we have created so far".[38] He felt that with the right people at the helm, the RCs could consolidate the HDB neighbourhoods and foster a sense of social cohesiveness in these new high-rise, owner-occupied estates.[39]

Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (then Senior Minister of State for Finance) speaking at the opening of the Marine Parade RC Seminar, Marine Parade was one of two constituencies to pilot the RC concept in 1978.
Photo from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

By the 1980s, there existed a plethora of grassroots organisations and there was a need to streamline their often duplicative roles in managing constituents' needs—the CCCs to have constituency-wide responsibilities and functions, while the RCs' primary responsibility was to generate neighbourliness and maintain a good atmosphere and environment in their own zones.[40] Another issue that had to be addressed was how the organisations were administratively governed as they were overseen by different agencies. By 1992, the three main grassroots organisations (CCMCs, RCs, CCCs) were placed under the purview of the People's Association (PA) with the Community Club Management Committees (CCMCs) focusing on the management of CCs, the RCs on the needs of its immediate residents, and the CCCs on the coordination of major activities and fundraising efforts in the constituencies.[41] However, even with this reorganisation, there was a lack of an institutional platform which could empower citizens and enable them to take greater ownership and accountability for the running of their neighbourhoods.

Town Councils: Giving Residents a Greater Say

The idea of Town Councils (TCs) was first mooted in 1984 with the intention of giving residents a greater say in the day-to-day running of their housing estates.[42] The HDB had, up until then, been solely responsible for looking after the estates, from cleaning to landscaping. While everything was centralised and efficient, there was little room for variations across estates. When former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, as Member of Parliament (MP) of the Marine Parade ward and his grassroots leaders wanted to accede to residents' requests to install grilles and railings in some blocks, the HDB said no. Similarly, when they wanted to give hawkers more leeway to change their trade, the HDB said no. The Board was duty bound to uphold rules fairly and consistently across the island.[43] To enable municipal decisions to be made at the local level and in line with the desire to help foster stronger communities within HDB estates, Goh saw that the system had to change so residents could have a say in the running of their estates, through which a greater sense of ownership and accountability could be instilled.

In 1988, the Town Council Act was passed which gave the green light to the devolvement of power from the HDB to the TCs, with the first three TCs formed the following year.[44] Composed of elected MPs and appointed members of whom two-thirds had to be residents of the

respective towns, the TCs were given the mandate to control, manage, maintain and improve the common property of their HDB housing estates.[45] As of 2018, there are a total of 16 TCs, with MPs put in charge of each of these TCs so that they can meet the needs of residents in their estates and be accountable to them at the polls. In addition, as the TCs are primarily funded by the service and conservancy charges (S&CC) collected from residents and commercial operators within the town,[46] residents have an indirect stake in their immediate living environment. With residents making up at least two-thirds of members in the council, residents have access to decision-making opportunities albeit through appointment. The TCs also organise various engagement activities such as public dialogue sessions and the publication of quarterly newsletters featuring the goings-on within the town. Through close collaboration with grassroots organisations, TCs play an active role in engaging residents on the estate improvements they wish to see, and in seeking feedback on the performance of estate management services.

Planning the City: The Pragmatics of Engagement

Singapore was in dire straits in the 1960s—the city was overcrowded and slum-filled, the streets were dirty, living conditions were poor, unemployment was high, and there was a severe lack of infrastructure. Whilst community engagement through public education was essential to the success of environmental efforts, the government recognised that the larger structural issue of unemployment had to first be resolved. It was only in the early 1970s, when sufficient jobs were created that the government could enforce against illegal hawking effectively and reclaim the streets. Hawkers were moved from the roads and pavements to properly constructed hawker centres with piped water, sewers and garbage disposal. Community engagement was merely one piece of the puzzle in the larger efforts of city building.[47]

Urban growth then was also messy and haphazard. To consolidate land and redevelop it comprehensively for public infrastructure, housing estates, reclamation purposes and to facilitate industrial and economic growth, the Land Acquisition Act (LAA) was passed by Parliament in 1966 amidst fierce debates, and enforced in 1967. The LAA gave the government broad powers to secure private land for public benefit.

The exigencies of national development were deemed of utmost importance for the government to carry out necessary infringements on the rights of private property owners for the greater public good. Coupled with Singapore's biggest problem—the lack of space—every square metre had to be put to optimal use. Pragmatically, the urgency of putting together a functioning city-state, alleviating squalor and providing people with homes, jobs and a more pleasant environment to live in, meant that efficacy was achieved at the expense of engagement.

Engagement was thus kept at a technocratic level with judicious planning undertaken internally by government planners, engineers and policy makers, with expertise from specific professional bodies drawn upon when needed. Urban Master Plans were passively communicated to the public at large. From the 1950s to the early 1980s, these plans were not so much blueprints of new ideas that were to be put in place, but documents that merely recorded and updated actions that had already been decided on.[48] They were exhibited for no less than two weeks—the statutory minimum requirement—before being implemented:

> *In the early-year versions of the Master Plan, there was not much publicity accompanying the gazette of the new Master Plan which was reviewed every five years as required by the Planning Act. The draft new Master Plan was exhibited in the government office for about a month or so and if you are unaware of the gazette notice in the papers, you may just miss the exhibition all together, including the period that allows for submission of objections to the new Master Plan.*[49]

Tan See Nin, Senior Director Physical Planning, Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)

Initiations: The Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR)

One would, however, be mistaken to assume that little community engagement meant no interaction between the government, private sector and individuals. Founded in 1965 by William S. W. Lim and Tay Kheng Soon, the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR) consisted of a mixture of local professionals—planners, architects and academics—drawn together by a common desire to contribute to the building of the nation, with the belief that the cause of physical planning

in Singapore could be enhanced if the interested public was also involved in the process. In 1965, Howe Yoon Chong, then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of National Development (MND), invited SPUR to help plan Woodlands New Town, a public housing estate situated at the northern edge of Singapore.

SPUR also championed other issues in urban planning including the conservation of old buildings, the rail network, traffic control and the management of pirate taxis, and the building of an airport at Changi instead of expanding the former Paya Lebar airport. They were drawn on for ideas and invited to give presentations on various development projects that the government was intending to implement.[50]

These engagements between the government and the private sector were often kept informal and took the form of coffee chitchats and small-group meal gatherings. Koh Seow Chuan, founder of DP Architects and a member of SPUR recalled:

> *Singapore being that small, we see each other so often anyway. In those days, you can have this engagement where you don't need to be seen as adversaries. We were all passionate in doing the best for Singapore and trying to offer the best views…, Lee Kuan Yew was very astute and forward-looking. Nobody was seen to have monopoly of all the best ideas. He was prepared to sit back and listen to what others are saying, who may disagree with what the government is doing or government authorities are doing, what views they could offer, whether they are better or not as good. Nevertheless, it's worth listening to because they could end up being better.*[51]

This openness to "listening" among government leaders led to a fluid exchange of ideas between politicians, the public service and professionals in the private sector. Together, they mulled over targeted issues, discussed problems and worked out the best way forward in urban development for Singapore.

Early Efforts at Engagement Through Urban Planning

By the 1980s, most of Singapore's basic physical development programmes had been put in place and were reaping results. The economy was growing and the housing problem had largely been addressed. For the planners, the quality of the urban landscape began to take on greater significance, and the distinctiveness of Singapore's identity assumed importance in its urban development. By then, the tourism sector had become a contributor to economic growth and keeping Singapore's built heritage became increasingly important. Singapore had also begun large-scale reclamation in the Marina area next to the existing central business district (CBD), which provided potential green-field land for intensive commercial developments to be built. This offered justification for the historic core areas to be left largely intact and the conservation of other selected areas. In addition, with the mass rapid transit (MRT) system given the go-ahead then, planners had to map out the MRT lines and stations that were to traverse through the city core, extending outwards to the city fringe and outlying areas. This provided the opportunity for planners to rethink the Central Area and its surroundings—what areas could be saved and what had to go, so that a mix of high-, medium- and low-density developments could be articulated, to bring to fruition a city of buzz and character. By this time, the stewardship of the country had also been passed on to the next generation of leaders, led by Goh Chok Tong. These new leaders brought with them a more open outlook towards a consultative style of governance:

> *People as stakeholders of a city should have a greater say over the development of the city they live in. City planners have to involve city dwellers in the process of creating their dream homes within a safe, secure and pleasant living environment. Then the city will not only be a place for work and business but buzz with residential life as well.*[52]

Goh Chok Tong, former Prime Minister

Taking the cue from the changing socio-political climate, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) led the way with concerted efforts at engaging the public on its urban plans. In 1986, the URA mounted an exhibition of its Central Area Structure Plan and announced the conservation of seven areas—Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill. Extensive public consultation was conducted and detailed conservation plans unveiled for three historic ethnic districts—Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam.[53] A three-week exhibition titled "Conserving Our Remarkable Past" was also put up in 1987 to familiarise the public with the various conservation schemes. These events were greeted with much media coverage and public excitement, and were followed-up with dedicated consultation events with local stakeholders, such as in Kampong Glam, before the Conservation Master Plan was finalised and adopted in 1989.

"Conserving Our Remarkable Past" Exhibition in 1987.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.
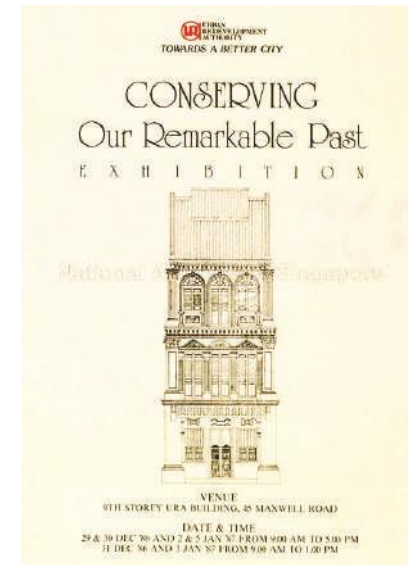
"Conserving Our Remarkable Past"
Exhibition Poster.
Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Following the Central Area Structure Plan and the Conservation Master Plan exhibitions, the URA set to work on the 1991 Concept Plan and published "Living the Next Lap", a 40-page booklet that painted the development trajectory of Singapore for the next 25 years and beyond "Year X". Within it, the URA articulated the vision of a city surrounded by regional centres that would bring jobs closer to homes, with maps showing where development directions would be in incremental 10-year development phases, the island-wide transportation network, and included a "Green and Blue Plan" that would form the framework for improved leisure opportunities and recreational use.[54] Building on the momentum of consultation, conservation efforts were also further consolidated in the 1990s with the gazetting of the Secondary Settlement conservation areas, and the publishing of several publications covering conservation principles, planning parameters, and best practices and techniques, to guide owners and professionals on aspects of conservation and restoration techniques.

The long-term proposals laid out in the Concept Plan were thereafter translated into local plans for implementation. These were called Development Guide Plans (DGPs), with each DGP expressing in a clear and precise way how an area would be developed. Singapore was divided into 55 DGPs and within each DGP, the public could gain an insight into the planning constraints, objectives and parameters of local areas, enabling an awareness of the URA's plan-making process and giving an opportunity for people to voice alternative ideas based on their localised knowledges. One of the first DGPs produced was for Singapore River, which outlined how the banks of the river could be enlivened

URBAN
SYSTEMS
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with sensitive developments that were not too jarring, while maximising development potential. Selective sites which embodied the spirit and way of life of past immigrants were also set aside for conservation. These DGPs were first exhibited with draft plans produced to solicit feedback from the public. This initiative to exhibit the draft plans were precursors to the mandatory exhibition phase required by the Planning Act. Some of these draft plan exhibitions were held in high-traffic commercial centres such as Raffles City, Marina Square and Orchard Plaza to maximise outreach to the public at large. Feedback forms were given out and people were encouraged to comment. Several public dialogues were also held, chaired by cabinet ministers of the time, to provide legitimacy to the process and show sincerity in inviting people from all walks of life to give feedback.
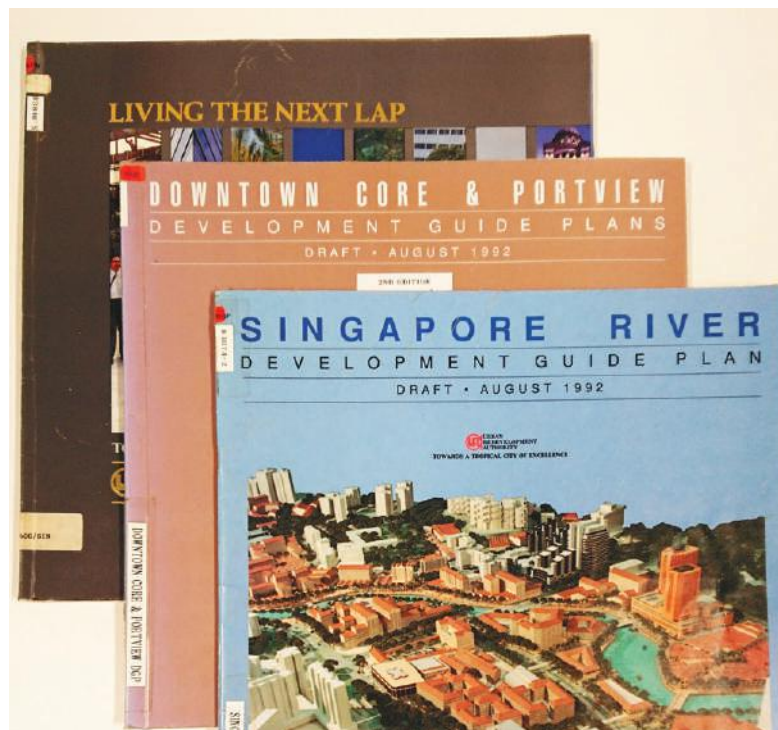
"Living the Next Lap", and early draft Development Guide Plan publications of the Singapore River and Downtown Core.

Prior to the preparation of plans for exhibition, planners held "ground-sensing" meetings with stakeholders, and dialogue sessions with residents, often with the involvement of the MP and grassroots leaders of the area. Besides land-use plans, urban-design plans were prepared for selected areas so that people could visualise how an area would look when it was developed in the future. Models were also built to help people see, in three-dimensional form, how proposed plans could pan out and add to the existing physical landscape. The Central Area structure model used in 1986 still stands proudly in Singapore's City Gallery,[55] albeit having undergone multiple revisions and improvements, as a reminder of the beginnings of the purposive outreach in urban planning in the 1980s.

Besides outreach to the general public, steps were taken to put in place platforms and organisational set-ups to foster closer collaboration between government agencies and the private sector. One example was the Waterbodies Design Panel (WDP). Set up in 1989 to re-naturalise Singapore's waterways, the WDP consisted of representatives from public agencies as well as the private sector who lent their technical expertise in landscaping and beautifying the waterways. To draw on fresh and creative ideas, some of the DGPs were also farmed out to the private sector and professional bodies. The Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA) was assigned the DGPs for Simpang, Kampong Bugis, Jurong East, and Changi Point, while the Real Estate Developers' Association of Singapore (REDAS) was assigned Geylang East. In 2002, the Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP), an independent panel, was set up to advise the government on Singapore's conservation efforts. Its role was to give input on the URA's built heritage proposals, propose buildings for further study and promote greater public education and understanding of conservation. Through these various efforts, the planners hoped to fire the imagination of people—professionals as well as laypersons—and excite them about the future proposals for Singapore and around their neighbourhood, and bring planning closer to the hearts of everyone.

Kampong Bugis Development Guide Plan consultation session in 1991.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

DEVELOPING NEW WAYS OF COMMUNICATION

Whilst the "show-and-tell" approach towards community engagement was predominant in the early stages of city building, engagement between the public and private sector thrived and operated in social settings, based on individual rapport and relationships. This approach towards engagement took a marked turn in the 1980s and 1990s, in a bid to address concerns on corruption and corrupt officials. Engagement became more structured and bureaucratic. Civil servants and political office holders distanced themselves in private engagements to avoid being misunderstood or wrongly accused of granting favours. Engagement had to be done through official channels, and over time, as the responsibilities of governance passed on from one generation of public service leaders to the next, the personal rapport and trust that had been built up in the founding generation of Singapore leaders became less of a factor in stimulating engagement in urban governance. Instead, new channels for feedback and engagement were implemented as the grassroots organisations were re-organised and the setting up of RCs and TCs enabled people to exercise communal ownership for their towns.

In urban development, the URA spearheaded urban conservation efforts in the public sector and enabled plan-making to be more transparent. Reaching out to the public through exhibitions, public dialogues and publications, the URA sought to root Singaporeans by giving them a means to shape their environment and build a collective ownership towards the vision of "Living the Next Lap". As Liu Thai Ker, then Chief

Planner, said in the epilogue to Concept Plan 1991, "[The] URA can earmark land for housing or other development, but the impetus for bringing it to life rests with everyone." [56] While the desire for engagement was strong across the public, private and people sectors, concurrently, new means of engagement also needed to be worked out and practised. What had been effective in a fledgling nation was no longer sufficient for an increasingly educated populace who wanted a larger say in shaping the Singapore they now considered "home". While visionary plans were often enthusiastically welcomed, testifying to the success of the many exhibitions and outreach programmes the URA carried out during this period, crystallising these plans into concrete development projects brought difficult decisions on trade-offs to the fore. The realisation of the impacts that the materialisation of planning visions would have on existing land uses and landowners, sharpened planning dilemmas. Coupled with an awakening of civil society and a growing acknowledgement by government agencies of the need to bring policy making and development decisions closer to people, the 1980s and 1990s marked a dynamic era of urban governance in Singapore's development. Like newlyweds still ill-equipped with the tools to translate that shared vision of creating a meaningful home into reality, the next decade of community engagement would witness tussles amongst the stakeholders in urban development that would prove crucial to the learning and honing of skillsets necessary to move the community engagement process forward.

CHAPTER 3

TUSSLES AND TRADE-OFFS: TOWARDS A CONSULTATIVE APPROACH

Policy making is a process not just of coming up with a proposed solution or a proposed policy to resolve a certain issue, but also to implement that policy.

How do you implement it without the people understanding what the policy is?

The engagement process is part of this effort to explain policies—getting feedback, getting reaction about the policy. What is doable, what is not doable.

Community engagement is, therefore, an intrinsic part of policy making.

It cannot be an afterthought. It has to be part and parcel of the whole process.'' [57]

Mah Bow Tan, former Minister for National Development

RUMBLINGS FROM THE GROUND

Chinatown Revitalisation Plan

Adversarial, dramatic, intense. These words capture the mood in the room on 1 February 1999 at the Kreta Ayer Community Centre (CC) where the public forum on the Chinatown Enhancement Plan was held. On stage, a panel of government officers sat. In the audience gathered some 200 people—architects, planners, academics, university students and those with business interests in Chinatown. A man stood up from the audience and flung a dossier on the ground, "What is this? Stop this nonsense!" he said. It was the Chinatown Master Plan, replete with a Chinese brocade cover and elaborate designs. Someone with a pukka English accent on the stage tried to respond, but was interjected by another voice from the audience, "Oi! Shut up! You prissy fellow!".

Public Forum – The Chinatown Enhancement Plans
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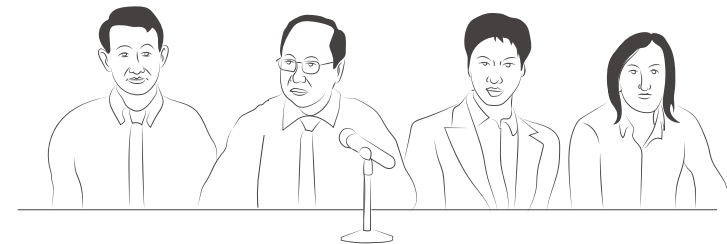
This was not a dialogue. It was a showdown. In September 1998, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) had announced a $97.5 million plan to "revitalise" Chinatown. The lead consultant engaged to spearhead the enhancement efforts felt that a focal point was lacking in Chinatown, and proposed a village theatre to be built to better integrate the four sub-zone areas, (Kreta Ayer, Telok Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar). This village theatre would have a landscaped open square with an external stage that played to an outdoor audience. The theming of streets according to certain trades and activities was also proposed, so as to give these streets their own unique character. In addition, gardens would be built in each sub-zone, themed according to the five Chinese elements (fire, water, earth, metal and wood). An interpretative centre, to recollect the spirit of Chinatown through stories of rituals and people, was also another suggestion included in the Chinatown enhancement plan.

The proposed village theatre: an integrated complex housing a traditional theatre, a Chinese temple, a teahouse, retail outlets and restaurants.
Image courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

Proposed theming of streets according to certain trades and activities, to give certain streets their own unique character.
Image courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

One of the proposed elemental gardens inspired by the five Chinese elements—fire, earth, water, metal and wood.
Image courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.
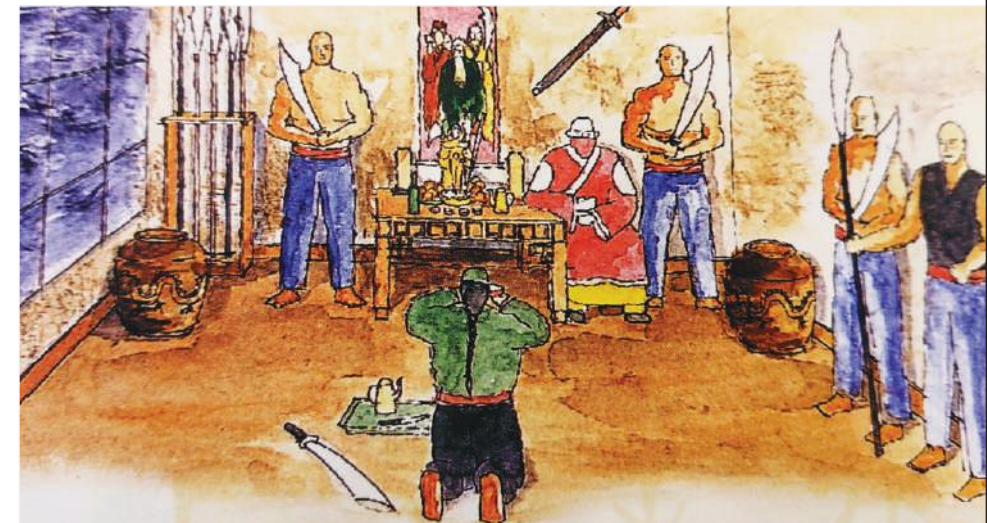
Proposed Chinatown interpretative centre: A cultural resource centre to help Singaporeans and others to recall the Chinatown spirit.
Image courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board.

Within months, a public debate erupted over these plans, mostly offered through the Chinese-language newspaper *Lianhe Zaobao*. Readers criticised the plans for being insensitive to the authenticity of the area with its superficial theming. Many felt that the "enhanced" Chinatown would simply be a contrived tourism product, robbing locals of memories they hold dear:

> *Chinatown has its own unique historical features and it will not work to use the conventional approach to thematic tours. We have to reconsider the concept of tourism and start from a fresh perspective....*[58]

> *What Chinatown needs is funding and support, and not superficial decoration, packaging or artifice. What we want is the real Chinatown...*[59]

Many Singaporeans had either lived in, or had relatives who lived in Chinatown prior to urban renewal. The significance of Chinatown in personal memories and in family histories led many to identify strongly with Chinatown, stirring the heated public debate on the subject. While many agreed with the need for Chinatown to be revitalised, they disagreed with the approach taken and the flagrant disregard of existing social patterns of residents who continue to live in the area. For instance, the "old man's square" near Sago Lane remained popular with elderly residents who would gather there to relax, exercise and interact with one another. Such spaces, which have developed over time and have acquired social value and meaning, would vanish if the proposed Theatre Village and Fire Garden were implemented on this site.[60] In an opinion piece written to The Sunday Times, the Singapore Heritage Society, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) set up in 1987 as an advocacy of heritage issues, argued that "the tourist experience, local or foreign, never has been, and should not be, the basis of a renewal of Chinatown."[61] Fundamentally, Chinatown should not be a re-engineered product that privileges the tourist experience, but rather, revitalisation efforts should be made meaningful to the personal and collective memories of people who once lived and worked there, and for those who would continue to do so into the future.

George Yeo, when addressing Parliament in March 1999, suggested that the Chinatown debate showed that Singaporeans have "strong emotional bonds to the land".[62] What took centre-stage, too, in this episode was how inadequate and poorly managed the engagement process had been. Instead of a community-driven approach, government authorities

were criticised for being high-handed and not involving stakeholders sufficiently in the planning process. In the initial stages of the Chinatown redevelopment plan, a Revitalisation of Chinatown Committee (RVCC) was established, consisting of grassroots and retail organisations in Chinatown and major retail companies in Kreta Ayer, with then Member of Parliament for Kreta Ayer and Minister for Finance, Dr Richard Hu, as the adviser to the RVCC. The STB also formed and engaged another group, the Chinatown Retailers Pro-Tem Committee, involving Chinatown businessmen and stakeholders who were not part of the RVCC. However, residents, shophouse owners and the public at large were not included in the engagement process, leading to the public furore. The authorities had underestimated the importance of affective ties that Singaporeans had developed to places.[63]

National Library

Old National Library at Stamford Road.
Photo from Peter Lamb Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Around the same time, another debate was brewing. The old National Library, a reinforced concrete frame low-rise structure with red brick walls, stood at Stamford Road. It was designed by British architect Lionel Bintley of the Public Works Department (PWD) to be reminiscent of the red-brick era of British architecture in the 1950s. In 1988, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) publicised plans for the Civic and Cultural District, for which the relocation of the National Library was a key component. A dialogue, chaired by then Minister for National

Development, Mr S. Dhanabalan was held on 28 May 1988, wherein invited professionals (planners, architects, real estate developers and property consultants) could share their views of the draft Civic and Cultural District Master Plan. Although discussed, the proposed demolition of the National Library did not come across as particularly contentious. In fact, there was general support for removing the library at the time.[64]
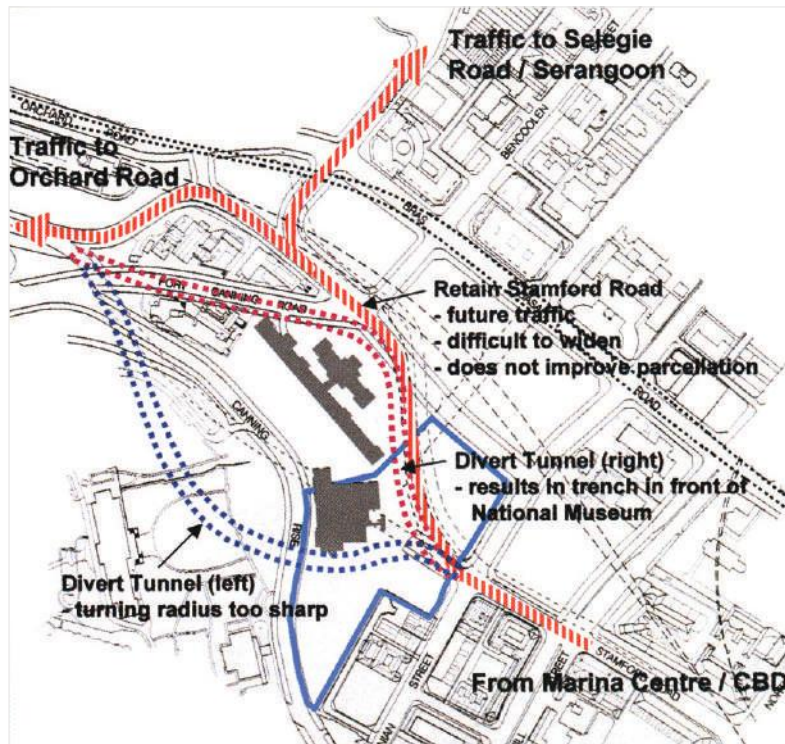
Alternative public proposals for the Fort Canning Tunnel, 2000.
Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

In 1992, in the public exhibition of the Revised Civic and Cultural Master Plan, plans showed the one-way Fort Canning Tunnel for the first time, which would enter the Fort Canning Hill at the existing National Library site and emerge at Penang Road. In 1997, the URA launched the Museum Area Master Plan which left the planned Fort Canning Tunnel from 1992 unchanged. Following which, in late 1998, the Singapore Management University (SMU) began to publicise its plans for a new city campus,

occupying six parcels in the Bras Basah area, one of which was the National Library site. It was at a public symposium to discuss the campus master plan that passionate debate ensued as attendees finally learnt that the National Library would be demolished and relocated. The Straits Times the next day carried the headline "National Library building to go" on its front page.[65]

Remnants of the old National Library building.
Photo courtesy of Jason Boh, CC BY-ND 4.0

Over the next few months, members of the public wrote in to urge the government to reconsider its plans to demolish the building.[66] Although there was much emotional attachment to it, the National Library was not accorded heritage status. Architect Tay Kheng Soon, one of the founding members of the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), put together his version of a master plan for the SMU in an effort to save the National Library building. After assessing Tay's plans and exploring various options such as diving the tunnel more steeply to avoid the foundation of the Library site. The authorities concluded that the removal of the National Library Building was still the best option. As former National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan recounted:

We did explore options, and if we were to go through the process again, I think we did the right thing. At that time, the traffic engineers were really quite worried about the traffic in that area. It would have been very bad, worse than the Orchard Road–Bideford Road area, which is a real mess every day now. But people probably do not appreciate that, now that they're actually driving through the tunnel and everything is smooth.[67]

Even while demolishing the National Library was found to be the best option to alleviate traffic congestion in the vicinity, Mah notes, in hindsight, that the engagement process could have been better managed:

I think this is one of the dilemmas that we faced. Whether there was a solution that would have satisfied both the conservation ideal as well as the traffic requirement. I mean the heart and the head, you know? I don't think there was, but maybe we could have articulated that a bit better. We actually did look at the engineering solutions—how we can underpin the Library, which options were found not feasible and so forth. But you know, everything is feasible if given the right amount of money, so maybe that's something we should have looked at, and said, "Okay, it's going to cost us X million dollars, are we going to do it?" So, I think the issue is not only engagement but also of getting people on board, and part of that problem was that we did not start the engagement process early. We did not realise how sensitive or emotional the Library was to so many people.[68]

A strategy of "getting people on board", at that time, was to make development plans as transparent as possible. Ironically, the public furore generated in both the cases of the Chinatown Revitalisation Plan and the demolition of the National Library, had been triggered by the exhibition of plans that were meant to involve the public more in future urban development plans. For the critics in these episodes, however, engagement felt insincere and appeared as tokenism. There was still much to be learnt about the mechanics of community engagement by the authorities as well as civil society actors.

MAKING HEADWAY WITH NATURE

In the early 1990s, the Malayan Nature Society (Singapore Branch)[69] sought an audience with the Ministry of National Development (MND) to present their plan—The Master Plan for the Conservation of Nature in Singapore. The meeting, chaired by S Dhanabalan, discussed the Society's proposals in the Master Plan which highlighted sites of biodiversity importance in Singapore, many of which had been relatively unknown to the conservation community. This meeting paved the way for the drawing up of the Singapore Green Plan (SGP) in 1993. What was significant was that 14 of the 19 sites listed in the SGP coincided with the Society's Master Plan, demonstrating the role that the NGO played in early efforts towards biodiversity and nature conservation. More importantly, nine of these sites were outside protected nature reserves.[70] Termed "Nature Areas", these sites were to be kept untouched as long as possible though they could still be subject to development should it be deemed necessary, given Singapore's land scarcity.

Sungei Buloh Nature Reserve

Sungei Buloh became the first area to be conserved as a nature reserve since Singapore's Independence. This was a historic milestone in itself, but it also signalled how state–society actors could work together, through tussles and alternative viewpoints, to arrive at a decision that benefitted the public at large.

Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the opening of Sungei Buloh Nature Park, 1993.
Photo from Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

An area of tidal ponds and mudflats covered with luxuriant mangroves, the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve is home to almost half of all bird species recorded in Singapore. Sungei Buloh's rich birdlife was first spotted by Richard Hale, an avid birdwatcher and Nature Society (Singapore) member, in 1986. Hale noticed that flocks of waders were flying from the Straits of Johor towards Sungei Buloh. When plans were announced to develop the area into an agro-technology park, a group of birdlife enthusiasts took action. Formulated by the Nature Society's Bird Group after about a year of meetings and collection of information and data, a proposal was made for the creation of a 318 hectare (3.18 km²) nature reserve.[71]

Sungei Buloh Nature Park boardwalk.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

After two years of deliberation, Dhanabalan announced that 85 hectares (0.85 km^2) in Sungei Buloh would be set aside for a bird sanctuary in 1988. It was said that then President Wee Kim Wee, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Dhanabalan had visited the site and were impressed with what they saw. Although less than 90 hectares (0.90 km^2) was eventually gazetted for conservation, far short of the originally proposed 318 hectares, it showed that advocacy groups and the state could work together to arrive at a somewhat compromised "win-win" position. The Park was officially opened in 1993 and attracted 17,000 visitors in its first month. Under the efficient and ecologically oriented management of the Nature Park since 1993, the Sungei Buloh ecosystem has remained viable and is a popular destination for tourists and Singaporeans.

Pulau Ubin's Chek Jawa

The air was stuffy and still. The air-conditioning and general lighting had been switched off. It was almost 10 pm. Huddled in front of their computers and table lamps, a team of young staff officers sat in front of their computers, fingers busily clacking on their keyboards. Sheets of paper and plans lay strewn about them. They were busily putting together a feasibility assessment to facilitate discussion among MND officials the next day. The topic—the possibility of keeping Chek Jawa. The assessment contained various scenarios, each replete with cost-benefit analyses and alternative land–take and planning options. The struggle to save Chek Jawa, was to go down in history as a significant milestone in civil society–state partnership, and a testimony of national identity.

Chek Jawa is a coastal wetland located at the eastern tip of the island Pulau Ubin, and which holds rich marine and coastal biodiversity. In 1992, Chek Jawa was earmarked for reclamation, a decision which was reflected in the 1998 Master Plan, as "reserve land". The plan aimed to extend the south-eastern and eastern coasts of the island via reclamation, and the proposed reclaimed land was to serve the Ministry of Defence's (MINDEF) military training purposes. In April 2001, Mah unveiled the Draft Concept Plan 2001 to the public. The reclamation intentions for Pulau Ubin were left unchanged. With the reclamation of Chek Jawa slated to begin in Dec 2001, the intertidal coastal area of Chek Jawa would be destroyed and would have an impact on almost all existing natural ecosystems at the eastern segment of Pulau Ubin. Nature enthusiasts voiced their concerns to the MND at the public feedback forum for the Draft Concept Plan. While the Nature Society (Singapore) took the lead in lobbying for the keeping of Chek Jawa, the groundswell that the issue generated amongst the public at large was unprecedented. Dr Geh Min, former President of the Nature Society (Singapore), related how groups had formed spontaneously and individual members of the public took it upon themselves to advocate for Chek Jawa:

Visitors on an educational tour of Chek Jawa.
Photo courtesy of Ria Tan, https://www.flickr.com/photos/wildsingapore/16341500804/ CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

One day I was near the vicinity and I saw this poster "Save Chek Jawa!" Well, it wasn't put up by our Society. And then I looked, a new group that I'd never heard of! So this was great! Groups had formed spontaneously, and people sent pictures to the PM [Prime Minister] to lobby the government. It showed that it was not just Nature Society, one advocacy group that were the noisemakers that kept on pulling out the stops. It actually was a much broader feeling for the place. This was not calculated on our part as we certainly didn't have the PR [public relations] machinery to do this. But you know, I'd never seen Singaporeans react so spontaneously.[72]

As media attention increased, a growing number of people became interested in visiting Chek Jawa. Volunteer guides conducted tours and an estimated 900 people went on low tide walks over those few months before reclamation works were due to begin. On 18 October 2001, Mah together with officials from the MND, URA, Housing & Development Board (HDB) and the National Parks Board (NParks) visited the site:[73]

Chek Jawa, I took a personal interest in it. I went down to see it for myself, together with ministry staff. After that visit, I thought there was something there, so I asked them to restudy it. Nature Society also put up cogent, scientific and well-thought through arguments to support their proposal. They had managed to drum up a lot of public support through their advocacy and educational tours they conducted. The public really took an interest in Chek Jawa. I must say that the public support did surprise me.... After careful consideration, we took a decision to do a U-turn [on that] which was very unusual, but there's something there, and if we lose that natural environment, that habitat, it would be irreplaceable.[74]

Announcing the decision, a press release from the MND stated:

The Ministry of National Development has decided to put off land reclamation works at Pulau Ubin for as long as the island is not required for development.... The decision not to reclaim Pulau Ubin at the moment has been made after we weighed the trade-offs and carefully considered the land use implications. This episode is a positive example of consultation and collaboration between the Ministry and the stakeholders which has resulted in a win-win situation. The government will continue to take a balanced and pragmatic approach to land use planning.[75]

The discovery of Chek Jawa's rich biodiversity and natural beauty led the government to reconsider reclamation. The URA and the HDB looked into alternative reclamation profiles and consulted NParks and MINDEF on whether modifications could be made while retaining sufficient land for military training.[76] To the advocacy groups, the outcome came as a wonderful surprise. Geh related the day the Nature Society (Singapore) was told of the government's decision:

We were called into this meeting in January and all of us, representatives of different groups, I think there were about 10 of us, were sure it was going to be a meeting for the Minister to tell us "Sorry, no go". So actually everyone went in feeling quite depressed. And then he said, without wasting a lot of time, "We have looked into all the proposals and we have decided that we are not going to reclaim the land for now." And there was this stunned silence in the room. Really, it was one of the most dramatic, memorable moments I have experienced. Everyone was just too amazed to speak. Then Minister Mah said, "Well, aren't you going to say anything?" We were all so moved and overjoyed, that what we had worked and hoped for so hard had, against all expectations, come true![77]

Chek Jawa intertidal flats.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

WORKING ALONGSIDE: DEVELOPING A STATE–SOCIETY PARTNERSHIP

Chek Jawa, now an icon of Singapore's national identity, highlighted how the NGO's role could be complementary rather than confrontational, as opposed to previous episodes of engagement. It illuminated lessons on effective positive engagement that could be principles to be built upon to strengthen the processes of community engagement.

The Roles of Advocacy Groups and Governance

Advocacy groups see their value as remaining autonomous for the larger good of Singapore—being able to present alternative viewpoints and ideas, rather than be seen as offshoots of the government apparatus:

I don't think civil society should collaborate with the government but we should certainly communicate and work very closely together to look for commonalities if possible. But civil society must retain a certain autonomy. When we voice an opinion, the government often tells us, "You are a narrow focus group but we see the Big Picture." They may see a helicopter view with an eagle eye but the ant on the ground can sense a lot too, and that helps. So there is value in both perspectives; working for what they think is good for Singapore.[78]

Dr Geh Min, former president of the Nature Society (Singapore)

However, the establishment of progressive communication channels can be challenging as it is often undergirded by trust and rapport that is crucial to the making of a progressive state–society partnership. These take time to build, sometimes with hard knocks experienced along the way. Sharing her experience, Geh related the incident where anxious members of the Nature Society (Singapore) had written to the press when they learnt that fishing and boating activities could be carried out in the Sungei Buloh wetland reserve. Concerned that these activities would cause the reserve to become akin to a theme-park, angry letters were sent and published in the Forum Page of the national newspapers. Presented as a "fight" between the Nature Society (Singapore) and NParks, the tussle was played out in the public arena and the issue blown out of proportion. This was hardly constructive in moving forward a state–society partnership, yet Geh noted that during that time, advocacy groups had little choice:

The government, in the past, was very reluctant to share any information. So if a place is going to be developed that affects a nature area for instance, government agencies are not going to tell you, "We are going to do this and this, and let's have a discussion on it." Instead, you usually only know when you see the trees are chopped down, or there are bulldozers there. And then some irate member would write in to the papers, which is our main communication with the public and government agencies, because when you write in letters and petitions to the government agencies they don't reply, but you write in to the Forum Page, it will get you their attention. So unfortunately, the newspapers used to be the main interface of effective communication before the advent of social media.[79]

Trust between civil society and the government has to be mutual, with each party respectful of the others' positionalities and viewpoints. As former president of the Singapore Heritage Society, Kevin Tan, put it:

You've got to learn to trust civil society actors; and civil society actors have to trust the government. What we really abhor is being made use of, to appear to have been consulted. We are happy to share with you, but it cannot be that you think you always know better and summarily rubbish our ideas. In many instances, we know so much more! For the civil servant, it is just another job, but for us, it's a passion, so we study it, we think about it. There needs to be a major change in the way civil servants view civil society. Civil society is a major resource, not a stumbling block.[80]

However, while acknowledging the value of civil society groups, the government still has the responsibility to consider and provide for the larger needs of the people. As Mah emphasizes:

Yes, interest groups have a role to play, but they have a very focused agenda. They say, "Okay, I'm going to preserve nature," so they lobby. It's up to government to take that lobby into consideration, within the wider perspective. Theirs is not the only view. The government is not the Nature Society. The government has to look at nature but also the needs of the people for efficient transport, the needs of the people for good jobs, the needs of the people for a healthy environment. But without the Nature Society, for instance, that particular issue would not be so keenly presented. So, I think they do a good job and we need it, in the same way that we need other groups, such as the heritage groups. Lobby groups do serve a purpose.[81]

MOVING WITH THE TIMES

In seeking to build trust and open up more channels of communication, the government initiated several movements at the turn of the 21st century that were to be pivotal in setting the stage for the way ahead in communication engagement. By the 2000s, Singapore was poised as a global city. Jobs took many Singaporeans away from home, and more and more foreigners were coming to Singapore to study, work and live. There was an increasing need to root Singaporeans so that Singapore was a "home" and not a "hotel".[82] Part of this drive involved ensuring that Singaporeans felt part of the building of Singapore as a nation and society. Active citizenry became the buzzword in strengthening the "heartware" of Singapore—the intangibles of society, such as social cohesion, political stability and the collective will, values and attitudes of a people. Unveiled in 1999, the Singapore 21 committee released a report that aimed to, according to Goh, "move beyond material progress, to a society which places people at its very centre"[83]:

> We must become active citizens who are participants, not mere observers, in building the Singapore we want for the future. Active citizens form a people sector that can complement the public sector and the private sector in a tripartite partnership. Effective consultation and the national interest must form the basis of this partnership.[84]

Focus Groups: Concept Plan 2001

It was during this time that the government was reviewing the long-term plan for Singapore's future land use needs. In what was to culminate in Concept Plan 2001, the review presented a useful opportunity for testing the ideas to build "heartware".

Two focus groups (FG) were set up, each focusing on a particular planning dilemma. One FG examined the planning dilemma "Identity vs. Intensive use of Land" while the other FG looked into the trade-offs required in "Land Allocation". These FGs, each led by two co-chairs, comprised professionals from the private sector, academics, media, and respected individuals from the people sector. They organised site visits, engaged with government agencies, and held public forums to draw on a broader spectrum of people in the populace. Officers from the URA helped with the logistics, organisation and sourced for information and data the FGs required to facilitate their work. It was hoped that in the process, the private, public and people sector could establish better trust

and understanding of each other's concerns and positionalities. It was also seen as a reflection of the attempt to begin the engagement earlier in the plan-making process. Geh, who was invited to be part of the Land Allocation FG, noted that it was "very educational" and a "good learning process" realising the different competing needs that planners had to deal with. However, despite the good intentions and the desire to engage, there were those who were sceptical of the government's motivation. As Mah recalled:

> One of the participants, very vocal, said, "Look, you've already got your plans, it's at the bottom drawer. You take it out and then you tell us, 'Okay, what's your view?'" So I said, "Yeah, we have plans. We have a proposal. That's the reason why we are consulting you with a proposal. But if you have an alternative proposal, or if you think something in the proposal is not quite right, tell us. Tell me. This is the reason why I'm engaging you."[85]

First meeting of the Focus Groups, 2000.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Focus Group members' site visit to housing estates.
Photos courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Some have criticised the structured way in which the consultation process had been undertaken, as being insufficient engagement. But from the point of view of agencies, this was what would make engagement constructive:

> You can't go to them [the community] with a clean sheet of paper and say, "What do you want?" because you will not go very far. People will give their wish list, and this can be a very long list and you can't fulfil everybody's desire. It is better to have some kind of a skeleton of a plan and then these different groups can tell us what they are looking for and we can design to make it happen.[86]

Yap Kheng Guan, former Senior Director, PUB, Singapore's National Water Agency

While scepticism would always be part and parcel of the process, there often was no major disjuncture between the government and the public. In fact, through the extensive discussions the FGs held, Mah noted that "eminently reasonable proposals" were put up, and the FGs were supportive of many of the things the government was doing or trying to do. It showed that the government was moving "on the right track" and substantiated what was already being done. The test of engagement is thus not so much whether proposals are changed because of the engagement process. Rather, as Mah says, "it is that people have had a chance to look at our proposals, given their comments and then we

have listened to them."[87] The review of the mid-term Master Plan process provided yet another opportunity for broader channels of communication between the people and the government to be created, and for the government to show that they do listen.

Refining the Consultation Process: Master Plan 2003

Ideas in Concept Plan 2001 were thereafter translated into details in terms of site allocation, densities and specific development proposals and incorporated to be finalised in Master Plan 2003. Arising from the calls in Concept Plan 2001 to focus greater attention on identity and heritage, as well as to enhance Singapore's "blue" and "green" resources for the benefit of the population, the Master Plan 2003 proposed two island-wide plans—the Parks and Waterbodies Plan, and the Identity Plan. These two plans presented ideas and possibilities on improving the living environment through the harnessing of Singapore's natural assets, as well as retaining places with local identity and history. 35,000 people visited the exhibition, the highest number seen at that time, with 4,200 people submitting feedback through survey forms, emails and letters. Three subject groups—the Parks and Waterbodies and the Rustic Coast; Urban Villages, Southern Ridges and Hillside Villages; and Old World Charm; were formed and their recommendations reviewed by planners. Those feasible were incorporated into the final Master Plan 2003.

Parks and Waterbodies and Identity Plan public exhibition, 2002.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

As the trust seeded in these beginning stages of engagement starts to take root, the next chapter looks at how common ground between different stakeholders, including the State, has been better harnessed; and how the forms of engagement have evolved to include moves towards empowering the citizenry. In the changing landscape of Singapore over the last decade, particularly with the promises and pitfalls of social media, what should community engagement entail so that people can be involved not just as mere participants, but also as initiators of programmes who take ownership and accountability for development proposals? What then is the role of the State in all of this?

Subject Group members' site visit to Casuarina Road in 2003.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

CHAPTER 4

CHARTING THE COURSE: HARNESSING THE COMMON GROUND

> " The key is to go beyond idea generation and start getting people involved in the solutions as well. Ideas are helpful and they contribute towards policymaking, but it's even better to have citizens co-creating the very solutions that will be implemented." [88]

Lawrence Wong, Minister for National Development

THE CHANGING CONTEXT

While people generally do not want a weak State incapable of making decisions, people do expect their opinions to be respected and reflected more tangibly in the decision-making process. Against a backdrop of increased crowdedness, congestion, loss of green space and built heritage due to pressures to accommodate a growing population sustainable for Singapore's economic goals, community engagement has become a crucial factor in the business of public service. More significantly, unlike the past where advocacy tended to be agitated by specific interest groups, the public at large has become increasingly vocal in wanting their voices heard. The government is no longer seen to be the purveyor of full knowledge and expertise. People are challenging the premises upon which decisions are made. It is no longer sufficient for the government to build legitimacy from outcomes and deliverables of goods. Legitimacy of process has become salient in defining state–society dynamics.

Exacerbated by the accessibility and prevalence of social media, which has become a ready and immediate channel for people to voice their angst and unify supporters, the tenor of public sentiment can easily be drummed up to spiral out of control, thus damaging the good intent of engagement efforts if they were ill managed. Alongside these trends, the government is compelled to engage the community in more effective ways. As Loh Ah Tuan, former Director-General/Deputy Chief Executive Officer (DCEO) of the National Environment Agency (NEA) put it:

> *I see it as three tiers. The first level is communication. You communicate down, you teach and tell people what to do. Then the second level is engagement. You create activities related to the programme or campaign. People participate so that they can have a deeper understanding and better appreciation of what you are trying to say. The third level is ownership, empowerment. When you own something, it is yours. The important thing to recognise is that the government does not have all the answers. Singapore does not belong to the NEA or any government agency. Singapore belongs to everybody. I don't think we have arrived and we need to continue with our journey.*[89]

FORGING PARTNERSHIPS AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

One way that government agencies have sought to build legitimacy for their programmes and what their organisation stands for, is to cultivate long-term relationships with stakeholders. These stakeholders encompass a spectrum of individuals, organisations and companies—influencers such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media, academics and grassroots advisors, but also the general public. Such long-term relationships seek to build awareness of programmes, and through fun activities, enable feedback from the ground that could nip budding issues and better manage crises should they erupt.

WATERWAYS WATCH SOCIETY

In the early 1990s, the government Parliamentary Committee (GPC)[90] for the Environment invited private sector individuals to participate as members, and in the process better understand the government's long-term plans for the environment. In 1997 the GPC took it one step further and decided to empower the public to play a part in protecting the environment, in particular, keeping the Singapore River and Kallang Basin free from pollution. This led to the founding of a community group, the Waterways Watch Society (WWS), by Mr Eugene Heng, one of the private sector individuals invited to the environment GPC in 1995.

With an initial seed fund from the Ministry of the Environment (ENV), the society has grown from strength to strength with membership numbers approaching the 500-mark as of 2017.[91] The range of activities championed by the independent volunteer group has also expanded over the years. Aside from patrol and clean-up activities in water bodies, the WWS now regularly conducts educational and outreach events. These include guided learning trails at reservoirs around Singapore, school assembly talks, and environmental camps for students. Each programme strives to provide opportunities for hands-on learning, impart lessons on the importance of environmental conservation, and inspire participants to become stewards of the environment.[92]

Despite being an NGO, the WWS works closely in partnership with government agencies such as the PUB and the NEA to raise awareness and encourage participation in environmental and water conservation.[93] The WWS case is reflective of the gradual shift in the practice of community engagement by the government. Where in the early years, community engagement largely meant educating the public and the consultation of professional bodies for feedback on government policies, it has since taken on a collaborative dimension where members of the public are encouraged to work with the government in achieving common goals.

Waterways Watch Society members cleaning litter out of the Singapore River.
Photo courtesy of Waterways Watch Society.

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The PUB, Singapore's National Water Agency, for instance, has a tiered engagement strategy—Awareness, Adoption and Advocacy. At the basic Awareness level, the PUB works towards raising awareness on water topics or issues by getting the community to participate in programmes or events. At Adoption level, the community is encouraged to take ownership of water resources such as adopting ABC Water sites to use as outdoor classrooms or driving water conservation activities within their organisation. At Advocacy level, the community takes the lead to spread water conservation messages or spearhead water conservation initiatives beyond their stakeholder group. The PUB has also formed the Water Network group, which serves as an avenue to involve partners from various domains (academics, private companies, schools and other government agencies) to be advocates for the PUB. Some successful outcomes from the Water Network include the Ministry of Education (MOE) agreeing to incorporate water topics in their curriculum and the Nature Society (Singapore) collaborating with the PUB to run community water programmes. The PUB also engages partners to develop community programmes from the outset with these partners running the programmes in the long term. The ABC Waters Learning Trails for instance, are developed with schools and takes the "train the trainer" approach where teachers or student leader learn to run the activity for their students or peers.

Institute of Technical Education (ITE) Central and Raffles Institution students at the learning trail they created for preschool children at Kallang River @ Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park.
Photo courtesy of PUB, Singapore's National Water Agency.

Re-orientating the Organisational Ethos: The Land Transport Authority

The vision to engender greater collaboration with the public and community partners, however, required capacity building at the organisational level. Used to a modus operandi of professional expertise and competence, public servants needed to re-orientate their mind-sets towards a belief in the value of community engagement. Doing so, required a shift towards a participative culture internally, harnessing ideas throughout the tiers of decision making and not simply via an instructive top-down process. Sharing his experience, former Chief Executive of the Land Transport Authority (LTA), Yam Ah Mee noted that with a more innovative and participative culture within the organisation, the desire for outreach and community engagement improved.[94] This was essential to the success of the LTA's Transport Master Plan 2008. Feedback was solicited from various channels—the online portal Talk2LTA, hotlines, emails, physical letters and focus group discussions (FGDs). Separately, a "Great Transport Challenge 2020 e-Game" was introduced to bring younger members of the populace, such as students, into the engagement process. Viable feedback was then incorporated into the Transport Master Plan.

Following its implementation, the LTA sought to maintain the on-going relationship with members of the focus groups. In 2008, the Land Transport Community Partnership (CP) division was created. The LTA's Community Partnership programme engages advisors, grassroots organisations (GROs) and residents with the aim of fostering sustainable relationships and resolving ground issues. Taking into account the feedback raised, LTA officers are assigned as case managers to oversee the resolution of local issues, and implement the ideas generated. Regular reports by the CP team provides the LTA and the Ministry of Transport with a better sense of ground issues. Separately, the Friends of LTA (FOLTA) network was also created. A network of some 500 members, FOLTA encompasses different profile of users including taxi-drivers, students and working adults who work with the transport authority as champions for the LTA.

This re-orientation of public service employees towards an ethos that is receptive of feedback and collaboration paved the way for a more all-embracing approach to community engagement. As Kevin Tan, former president of the Singapore Heritage Society pointed out, it was to be a tough learning process, but which would pay dividends over time:

Ground energy cannot be created. They are there waiting to be harnessed. When the community feels they want to do something, the state should go in there and say, "All right now, how can we work together on this?" rather than, "Ah! Here, I'll give you a building. Now, make sure it works." Then I'll say, "I never asked you for a building!" If civil society really wants to get something going, it will be grateful even for a ramshackle shed…So you need dialogue. If you don't have dialogue, you don't learn to trust people. That's it! You mustn't be afraid of the citizenry. There will be people who are rough at the edges, people who'll be rude but that's all part of the process. If you want to be a good government servant, you got to have thick skin! The trouble is that our civil service has been so mollycoddled because of the tremendous power that it has had, but you need to develop calluses, bunions and corns. Otherwise, when it pricks it will be really painful! [95]

ENGENDERING COMMUNAL OWNERSHIP AT THE NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

Over the last decade, several programmes developed by government agencies have been successful at empowering the citizenry and in co-creating ideas at the neighbourhood level for implementation. These have built confidence among civil servants on the value and meaningfulness of engagement. However, an increasingly disgruntled segment of the populace, frustrated with disruptions to their lives, contributed to a series of NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) events that were to prove instructive for public officers in honing the mechanics of managing the community engagement process.

Community in Bloom

In July 2004, as part of the move to encourage active citizenry, the Garden City Action Committee (GCAC) explored the option of communal gardening. It was a significant shift away from the centralised greening efforts by the government at that time. Launched in 2005, the programme strived to "foster a community spirit and bring together

residents, both young and old, to make Singapore our garden".[96] The Community in Bloom (CIB) programme began at Mayfair Park Estate as an experimental pilot and took off with the efforts of residents who became informal leaders, championing the programme. Working with local businesses such as nurseries to do direct selling of plants and gardening materials to residents, around 60% of the residents took part in the programme, taking responsibility of the grass verges in front of their homes. There was an element of fun as the close-knit neighbourhood developed a friendly rivalry through the gardening movement. The success of the pilot made it possible to easily replicate the program in other private estates. Extending into public housing estates, the CIB has taken off and galvanised a gardening movement in Singapore. Presently, the programme boasts close to 1,000 communal gardens across Singapore, engaging over 20,000 residents, fostering close community relations among different social, ethnic and cultural groups through its activities. The CIB programme has also enlarged its network of partners to include CIB ambassadors, mentoring students to seed new gardens in schools and neighbourhood communal areas. Private companies have also got in on the movement, helping to seed-fund CIB gardens in orphanages, reformative houses and special-needs institutions.

Residents tending to their community garden in
Bukit Gombak-Hong Kah North.
Photo courtesy of National Parks Board.

Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Programme

Akin to the CIB, drawn by a common interest, another group of individuals has been attentive to water recreation and the developments taking place along the water's edge. Through the Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters (ABC Waters) Programme, the PUB has sought to involve the local community to create meaningful spaces around water bodies. Then Chief Executive (CE) of the PUB, Khoo Teng Chye, noted the integral element of community engagement in the conceptualisation of the ABC Waters Programme:

Whenever we do a project for ABC Waters, they are very local projects. So we try and get the community involved. Once we draw up initial ideas, the initial concept, we will go to the local Member of Parliament and the grassroots, the community leaders. We will show them what we intend to do, and ask for their opinions and suggestions. Often, we get very useful feedback and input as they live there and they know the ground. When we begin implementation, we also organise groups to visit the projects, keep the residents posted and informed of what's happening so that there's always an ongoing exchange of ideas. We have benefitted greatly from the community's input.[97]

Bringing in the local stakeholders at a very early stage in the engagement process facilitated communal ownership of the schemes. According to Yap Kheng Guan, former Senior Director, PUB:

You can have very nice things, you can spend a lot of money, but people may not have that kind of sense of belonging, the sense that "I am part of this". They see it as another government thing that has been provided for the people. Whether I use it or not, it doesn't matter. Then after a while, nobody uses it, there is vandalism, and the place deteriorates. We knew that if we didn't engage the community, that can happen.[98]

In Kolam Ayer, the first ABC Waters project, a workshop was conducted to encourage participants to find ways to interact with the community space and enliven the area. At the ABC Waters project at Kallang River @ Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, workshop discussions centred around safety. As it was to be the first ABC waters project without hard barricades to keep people away from the waterway, some of the solutions that emerged after consultation with the community and experts were the use of design features such as steep slopes and natural vegetation to block off certain areas with deeper waters, as well as the need for more public education on safety. These ideas have been instrumental in the ongoing success of the schemes, but also in fostering a sense of partnership in projects meaningful to the community.

Kallang River @ Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park before improvement works.
Photo courtesy of Jhecking, https://www.flickr.com/photos/jhecking/9241481644/in/album-72157634544341741/ CC BY-SA 2.0

Kallang River @ Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park after improvement works.
Photo courtesy of Jhecking, https://www.flickr.com/photos/jhecking/9241481644/in/album-72157634544341741/ CC BY-SA 2.0

Remaking Our Heartlands

Unveiled by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the National Day Rally in 2007, the Remaking Our Heartland (ROH) initiative was launched as a new comprehensive blueprint to renew and further develop existing Housing & Development Board (HDB) towns and estates to meet the changing needs of the community. In its renewal plans, the distinct characteristics of each area were capitalised. Punggol, Yishun and Dawson were the first heartland towns and estates selected in 2007 to undergo ROH. Subsequently in 2011, East Coast, Hougang and Jurong Lake areas were selected for the ROH 2 programme.[99]

In March 2015, it was announced that Toa Payoh, Woodlands and Pasir Ris would be the next HDB towns to undergo the ROH 3 programme. In drawing up the rejuvenation plans, the HDB took the engagement exercise further. For the first time, residents from the three towns were invited in the early stages of the planning, to participate in FGDs. A total of 11 discussion sessions were conducted, involving some 400 residents and community stakeholders from the three towns. Residents from as young as 17 and as old as 81 participated. With the views gathered the HDB refined the plans, taking into account the local context and specific requirements of each town, to ensure the improvements would benefit residents of all ages. The plans focused on strengthening the character of the town, providing community spaces and facilities, and enhancing the connectivity networks to improve the walking and cycling experience of residents. The plans were thereafter showcased in fortnight-long exhibitions in April 2017, during which further feedback from residents were invited.[100] As Dr Cheong Koon Hean, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the HDB, points out:

> [The] HDB doesn't just look at the "hardware", we also look at the "heartware"—where people could activate areas, so that they feel it's theirs, it belongs to them, they take care of it. So we do a lot of facilitation on the ground...When we did the ROH Programme—we used to just do the plan and then we go out and ask people, "So do you like the plan?". But in the recent batch, ROH 3, we took a very different approach. We actually started from bottom up. We had a lot of focus group discussions, talking to residents in the town, getting people together, asking them what memories they have of the town, places they like, what they like to do, what they like to see if we were to come in and rejuvenate parts of the town.[101]

Woodlands residents participating in a Remaking Our Heartland focus group discussion.
Photo courtesy of Housing & Development Board.

The HDB even provides funding for people to draw on, to make places the way they want it. Called the "Friendly Faces, Lively Places" fund, it encourages active citizenry, enabling people to take ownership of their neighbourhoods. Thus, unlike a decade ago where efficacies of development took centre-stage, the willingness to adopt a ground-up approach, taking time to understand people's desires and issues, reflect a morphing state–society dynamic.

HDB'S
BUILD-A-PLAYGROUND
INITIATIVE

The Build-A-Playground (BAP) initiative was conceived during the HDB's annual Community Week in 2014. Piloted in Canberra estate, Sembawang, it arose from the broader HDB strategy to build communities and strengthen social ties by affording residents opportunities to actively shape their neighbourhood environment.[102]

The BAP does this by bringing together residents to conceptualise, design and build playgrounds in partnership with the HDB. For example, Adventure Playground @ Canberra—the first of these community-built playgrounds—was borne from a series of engagement activities spanning over a year. These included design workshops, roadshows, and surveys where residents could not only share their thoughts but also participate in the process of building a playground.

> *The most important aspect of a playground is not just the design but the process—how residents come together to design it and take ownership of it. When you take ownership of something, you will take pride in it, and make good use of it. You will come to appreciate the facility even more.*[103]

Lawrence Wong, Minister for National Development

Adventure Playground @ Canberra (left) and Canberra residents sharing their ideas at the Build-A-Playground engagement session (right).
Photos courtesy of Housing & Development Board.

From the choice of the design to the assemblage and installation of the playground structure, the participation of residents in the BAP strengthens social ties in two broad ways. Firstly, residents build ties with each other over the course of their interaction in planning for the playgrounds. Secondly, as the playgrounds have been designed according to the needs of residents, they are used more frequently thus increasing opportunities for incidental encounters amongst themselves. Involving residents, as opposed to taking a purely administrative approach towards development projects, has the potential for creating communal spaces that are more meaningful and hence more effective in building ties among residents.

DEALING WITH THE NIMBY PHENOMENA: "NOT IN MY BACKYARD, PLEASE!"

A weak economic outlook and unmet expectations can lead to an erosion of public trust if left unaddressed. Particularly since the 2011 General Elections,[104] where citizens vented their frustrations at the voting booth due to rising costs, crowded spaces and a stressful pace of life, citizens increasingly expect consultation, demand reasons for decisions and are less tolerant to disruptions in their lives. Two incidents which garnered widespread public attention, arose at this time, suggesting that it was no longer business as usual for the public service.

Maplewoods

Residents of the Maplewoods condominium voiced concerns about safety and inconveniences arising from the construction of the new Downtown Line mass rapid transit (MRT) in front of their estate. Work was stopped on 6 June 2011 when Maplewoods residents protested that a launch shaft, to be built at the King Albert Park worksite during the construction of the MRT line, might be dangerous for drivers and pedestrians. 458 units signed the Maplewood's petition to the Prime Minister. A remaining 239 units did not.

The LTA's engagement at the Maplewoods began as an initiative to update residents on impending changes in rail development that would impact them via regular meetings with the Management Committee of Maplewoods. When the issues turned contentious, the agencies sought resolution with the residents through dialogue. During the dialogue which lasted for over two hours, the 100 or so residents who had gathered at the condominium's function room had an alternative tunnelling proposal for the LTA. The atmosphere was tense, adversarial and emotions ran high. It was said that the door of the function room was locked while the dialogue took place, with LTA officials including its Chief Executive, within. Residents wanted the launch shaft to be situated at another site—the worksite of Sixth Avenue station instead. This launch shaft, to be removed once construction was over, was needed to lower and launch tunnelling machines to build the tunnels between King Albert Park station and the next station at Sixth Avenue. The residents' alternative proposal was rejected as it would prolong the project. It would have meant acquiring 10 shophouses at Sixth Avenue, adding another $500 million in costs and delaying the Downtown Line 2 completion. Locating the launch shaft at the King Albert Park worksite, on the other hand, did not involve

acquisition. To address residents' concerns on pedestrian and vehicular safety, the LTA revised its plans so that trucks carting tunnelling debris from the site did not cut across the estate, and a new pedestrian footpath was built to enable children to reach their school at Blackmore Drive. Work resumed after the month-long stalemate.

Toh Yi Studio Apartments

In the case of Toh Yi, when plans for Golden Kismis, a block of studio apartments for the elderly were announced in January 2012, residents submitted a petition with some 230 signatures a month later to Ms Sim Ann, the Member of Parliament for the area, opposing the development sited at the junction of Toh Yi Drive and Toh Yi Road. Their main concern was that the location of the block of flats, which is on a slope, was not suitable for the elderly. Some also grumbled that the estate's main recreational site comprising a basketball court, jogging track and community garden, would be lost. Of the 1,600 residents affected by the construction, only 80–100 turned up at the Meet the People's session by MP Sim Ann. Subsequent feedback also showed that majority of the residents did not oppose the proposal. For those who opposed the project, many felt they had been misrepresented as "selfish" and representative of the "not in my backyard" syndrome, when their aim was to persuade the government to give the elderly better housing choices.[105]

PAYING HEED TO THE SILENT VOICES

In both instances, the government went ahead with their plans, with improvements taken on board to address residents' concerns on inconveniences, safety and the loss of amenities. These examples showed the need for public agencies to be more upfront with residents of their development plans. Whilst they were for the larger public's benefit, the development works had inconvenienced immediate residents living there. Greater sensitivity and earlier engagement with residents could have tempered emotions leading to a more effective engagement process. More importantly, the incidents showed that there was a need for the public service to build greater capacity in undertaking engagement efforts. In particular, alternative voices and silent views need to be better incorporated to present a more comprehensive picture of overall sentiment. How can conversations be framed and steered such that they are more reflective of broader perspectives, rather than the immediate concerns of vocal minorities?

The design of the engagement process is thus essential in working towards a more progressive state–society relationship. Managing public views, often conflicting in nature, is an inevitable aspect of community engagement. The nature of the communication process if badly handled, can impact the downstream acceptance and viability of development initiatives. In both the Maplewoods and the Toh Yi case examples, the communication process improved when the Advisors for the area and grassroots leaders were briefed and more intimately involved in the engagement. Better information flow, more extensive engagement, earlier engagement with the possibilities of co-creating development products, working alongside varied stakeholders, are all factors which help build societal capacity for more difficult conversations when they arise. Public officers who are used to officious and efficiency-driven modes of communication and its lack thereof, would need to learn how to create positive relationships, to improve the legitimacy of the process and its eventual outcomes, with citizens.

CHAPTER 5

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: BUILDING CAPACITY FOR A SOCIALLY RESILIENT SOCIETY

> Partner Singaporeans and harness their energies and ideas for the good of Singapore.
> No one has the monopoly on ideas…" [106]

Peter Ong, former Head of Civil Service

IMPROVING THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Efforts to improve engagement practices by the public service have steadily gained pace over the last few years. They showed an extension of the breadth of engagement in terms of the communication channels that were opened for the public at large and civil groups to get in on conversations, as well as continued attempts to deepen the engagement process by involving people in the preparation of plans, soliciting of suggestions, upstream at the preparatory stages of planning. The Rail Corridor Project that began in 2011 presented itself as an opportunity to harness the ideas of the public, and more importantly, to involve the citizenry in the making of development plans. It also fostered the co-creation of a sense of community among people.

The Rail Corridor: Creating a Common Vision for the Future

What is now known in Singapore as the "Rail Corridor" was previously railway land occupied by the Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) Berhad or the Malayan Railways Limited. The KTM railway ran from Tanjong Pagar Railway Station (TPRS) at the southern end of Singapore, close to the Central Business District, cutting through Singapore as it headed northwards to Woodlands before entering Malaysia.

The railway was previously a central mode of transportation for the transfer of goods and personal travel between Singapore, Malaya (now Malaysia), and Siam (now Thailand), but had become less popular over time. On 1 July 2011, as part of a bilateral agreement between Singapore and Malaysia, the KTM station was relocated from TPRS to the Woodlands Train checkpoint.
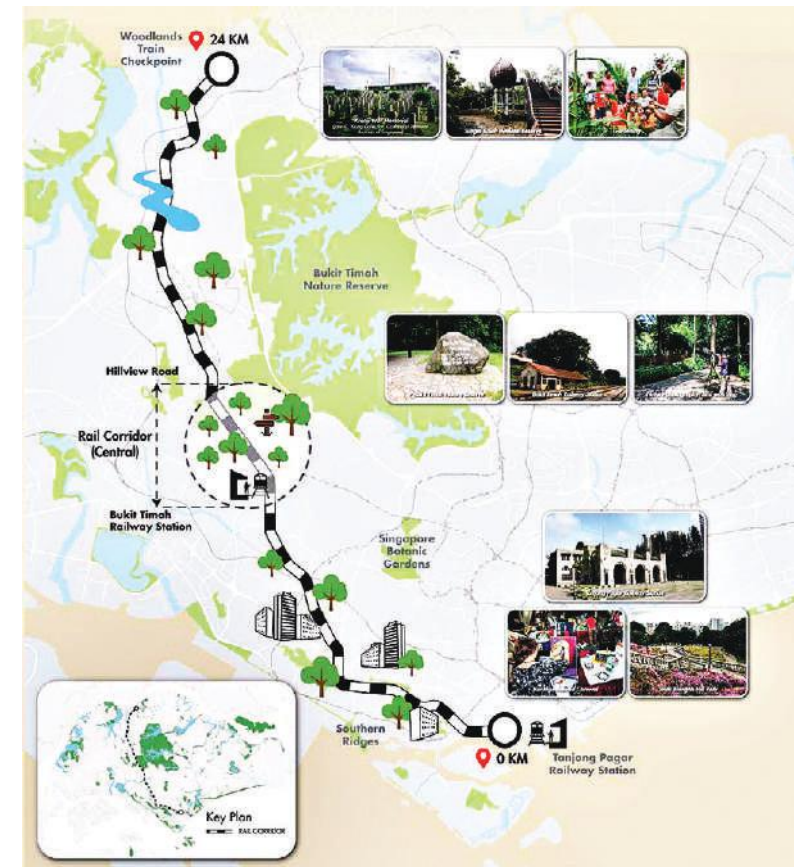
The Rail Corridor.
Image courtesy of National Parks Board.

Following this shift, railway lands south of the Woodlands Train Checkpoint were vested in the Singapore government. The announcement stirred much public interest, and numerous suggestions were sent to the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) on how to better make use of this unique "corridor" cutting across the island, spanning a distance of 25 km and covering an area of 170 hectares (1.7 km^2). The URA subsequently embarked on a public engagement exercise—its most extensive undertaken to date—to gather feedback and ideas, with the aim of working closely with the community to shape the disused railway and its surrounding land.

URBAN
SYSTEMS
STUDIES

Engaging Well, Forging Bonds:
The Community as Stakeholders in Urban Development

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Broadening the Base, Engaging Upstream

To ensure the engagement exercise reached as many people as possible, the URA made purposive effort to include the residents who lived in, and around, the railway lands. The URA estimated there could be approximately one million residents within easy reach of the corridor, from seven constituencies (Bukit Panjang, Bukit Timah-Holland, Choa Chu Kang, Jurong, Radin Mas, Sembawang, and Tanjong Pagar) and 58 schools.

At least five categories of community stakeholders were identified for public engagement. They encompassed specific interest groups, residents, students, the general public, and professionals. A dedicated website on the Rail Corridor was set up by the URA as a communication channel to solicit feedback and suggestions directly from the public, as well as to disseminate information. The website provided links to other advocacy groups (such as We Support the Green Corridor in Singapore) and an online forum was included to enable people to comment and vote on the ideas they liked from other contributors.

A consultation group (Rail Corridor Consultation Group) led by the Minister of State for the Ministry of National Development (MND) and staffed by officers from the URA, was also created. The consultation group included representatives from interest groups such as the Nature Society of Singapore, the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), the Friends of the Green Corridor, academia, as well as a cycling enthusiast and a butterfly expert. Together, they provided input to government agencies, and helped the URA in its various public engagement efforts to chart the direction and future plans for the Corridor. This Group was later renamed the Rail Corridor Partnership to reflect a stronger emphasis on closer collaboration between public sector agencies, interest groups, and individuals. The Partnership was tasked to look into the programming and promotion of suitable community activities and events along the Rail Corridor.

Over the course of the next few years, community meetings with residents, grassroots leaders and advisors were convened, and schools were involved in "Meet-a-Planner" sessions. Design workshops and an ideas competition were also launched to generate interest among the general public, the student community and design professionals.

People visiting the rail corridor after it was made open to the public, 2011.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

One of these suggestions was to re-develop the railway lands into a continuous Green Corridor, which could serve as a major natural open space through the centre of the island. In the months that followed, various interest groups sprouted in support of the Green Corridor proposal, attesting to the growth of civil activism in Singapore. Described as "an incredibly beautiful place, a green oasis in the heart of a very dense city",[107] it was understandable those keen to preserve the integrity of the greenery wanted to keep it untouched and in its existing state. However, engaging the community should not be simply hearing the voices of those who are most vocal. As Senior Director of Physical Planning in the URA, Tan See Nin noted:

> When we engage, we should not just listen to those who are fully familiar with the place, such as the advocacy groups, as we cannot assume that their views are always representative of the vast majority of the population. That vast majority may even include the communities who live near the rail corridor, but have never stepped into the corridor. We needed to reach out to these people as well.[108]

To develop a Concept Master Plan and concept proposals for the Rail Corridor, a request for proposal (RFP) was called. The programmatic brief for the RFP included nine sets of planning and design goals that were distilled from the hopes, aspirations, feedback and suggestions from all the public engagement that the URA had done involving various segments of the community.

Even after the Concept Master Plan was completed, the URA continued to put on roving exhibitions and community workshops to test out specific ideas with residents living adjacent to the Corridor so that they had a chance to participate. Local residents, including senior citizens, young children and the physically challenged who may not have visited the Rail Corridor, got to experience and envision how parts of the Corridor could become a community space. They became "planners" for a day and drew up master plans for stretches of the Rail Corridor where they lived, to illustrate how the Corridor could be inclusive and relevant to their needs. They were also asked for their views on what type of materials they preferred for the trails, the kind of landscapes they would like to see along the Corridor as well as the kind of activities that they would like to participate in. Through these various mechanisms and platforms, the URA broadened its base of engagement to guide the next phase of development.

Roving exhibition (left) and community workshop (right) of the Rail Corridor held at Yew Tee Community Centre, 2016.
Photos courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Calibrating the Tone of Engagement

The tone of engagement in the Rail Corridor project reflected a marked shift from previous public engagements. Rather than an engagement stance that sought to obtain "buy-in" for proposals to a preconceived plan, the process reflected an earnest desire to involve the community to co-create the proposals from a "clean slate". More significantly, the oft-used dogmatic tone of needing to "optimise land-use" was set-aside to make way for more purposive community-driven objectives that undergirded the crafting of development proposals. The extensiveness of the engagement process, bringing on-board a diverse spectrum of participants, also allowed advocacy groups to explore beyond their perspectives, to work with the community.

To Tan See Nin, who oversaw the engagement process, and who has been involved in the Rail Corridor project since 2011, bringing together collective desires meant understanding the values people had for the place, and determining if these values were common:

> For instance, some civil groups never think about safety as it is not a big issue for them. However, when we brought the elderly there, they see all the tall grass, they were worried that something or someone could jump out from the grass! So we need to strike a balance and address all legitimate concerns in a holistic manner.[109]

In this way, proposals were calibrated to be more attuned to the needs of the local communities living along the Rail Corridor. Often, the success of community projects is dependent not so much on the aesthetics and design specifics, but the community's emotional attachment to the place and the ways in which they envisage that space to be meaningful for them.

Where the former KTM line had physically divided communities, the Rail Corridor has been transformed into an inclusive and extraordinary community space to connect neighbourhoods and link communities. More importantly, the process of engagement has resulted in a collective product that serves not only as a catalyst for development, but which also embodies sensitive interventions for nature, culture and heritage, earning

the URA and its stakeholders international recognition and accolades for their sterling dedication to the project.[110] The Rail Corridor project has thus shown itself to be a hopeful example of how government–community engagement can potentially evolve into a constructive partnership.

Workshop participants and their planning suggestions for the Rail Corridor, Bukit Timah Community Centre, 2016.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE STATE–SOCIETY DYNAMIC

Community engagement activities have become essential to almost all sectors and areas of work. For the State however, public accountability, acting with the public good in mind, issues of democracy and citizenship, and the forging of a societal compact, are unique objectives embedded in the engagement process that the public sector has to contend with.

Whilst greater openness and transparency of information facilitates dialogue and constructive engagement between the people and the government, confidentiality of government data has to be observed in certain cases. These impact on the kinds of issues that can be addressed through public engagement, its mode of engagement, and the outcomes of the process. Nonetheless, quality outcomes from meaningful public engagement are often best achieved when people have all the information required to provide well-informed input. The public sector should avoid the use of confidentiality as an excuse to control the public discourse around an issue and to shape its predetermined results.[111]

In a digital age where communication technology is an enabler, affording the possibilities of synthesising data into suitable and relevant information products, opportunities for state–society interaction is enhanced. What are the key ingredients of a community engagement that is progressive and which fosters the building of a more resilient social compact for Singapore?

Understanding the Mechanics of Engagement

When carried out in meaningful and appropriate ways, a well-designed community engagement programme harnesses the knowledge and wisdom of a more sophisticated citizenry, illuminates complex issues, and involves committed citizens constructively in developing and implementing relevant solutions. More importantly, it nurtures common spaces in which citizens get to hear and appreciate the diversity of perspectives, and in the process, strengthens relationships and trust, both between the government and the public, and among citizens.[112] As Dr Chua Ai Lin, vice-president of the SHS notes, "Civil society organisations can play an expert role, to plug knowledge gaps between different administrative frameworks, and make recommendations that facilitate different levels of stakeholders."[113]

However, not all policy formulation and development proposals lend themselves to an extensive engagement exercise. The mode in which public engagement is carried out has to be suitably tailored in times of emergencies, or when a quick decision is necessary to take advantage of an opportunity, or when a decision has been made and there is little room for the public to influence the outcome.[114] There is thus, no "one size fits all" model for engagement. The extent of public involvement is dependent on the issue, the relevant constraints, and the decision-making space. This in turn determines the kind of engagement approach to take (outreach, consultation or co-creation). Discerning and setting parameters on what is on the table for engagement is important. In cases where the policy options are limited and manoeuvrability is constrained, a co-creation approach may lead to mismatched expectations and the perception that the engagement exercise is disingenuous. A more appropriate approach might then be to provide more information on the considerations behind policy decisions, explanation on its trade-offs and the mitigating measures taken for segments of the public who may be adversely affected by the policy.[115]

Working Through Differences

On 12 June 2011, the LTA, the URA and NParks released a joint statement announcing the construction of a 4-lane road in Bukit Brown, a sleepy neighbourhood that encompasses a cemetery and forested areas. The new road was aimed at alleviating peak-hour congestion along Lornie Road and the Pan-Island Expressway, and to cater for expected future demand. Civil society groups had then raised their concerns about the impact of the works to the area's environmental and biodiversity, as well as the heritage significance of the Bukit Brown cemetery.

Groups such as the Nature Society (Singapore) and the SHS questioned whether alternative options had been thoroughly explored and made their own proposals for preserving the site. In addition, there were criticisms that consultations should have been conducted before the decision was announced. The situation that unfolded over Bukit Brown was in contrast with what was observed for the rail corridor where engagement efforts were greeted positively. Some felt that the government was demonstrating the old practice of presenting decisions as fait accompli instead of genuine engagement and discussion.[116]

Despite the disagreements marking the interactions between civil society groups and the government in the events following the announcement, parties did not shy from further efforts to engage. As Ms Faizah Jamal, former Nominated Member of Parliament and Nature Society (Singapore) member argues, a crucial ingredient in engagement is to find a way to keep relationships going even amidst tensions.[117] Part of this involves engendering close but professional working ties with each other over time. While parties might not see eye to eye each time, by coming to the table with an element of openness and trust, a common understanding can be achieved despite differences and allow relationships to persist.

Therefore, while the Lornie Highway will be built as planned, it has not stopped the authorities and civil society groups from working together to document the history and heritage of the graves that would be removed due to the construction. In November 2017, the SHS also launched the Bukit Brown Wayfinder trail with the support of government agencies, to allow the public to access the history and heritage of Bukit Brown.
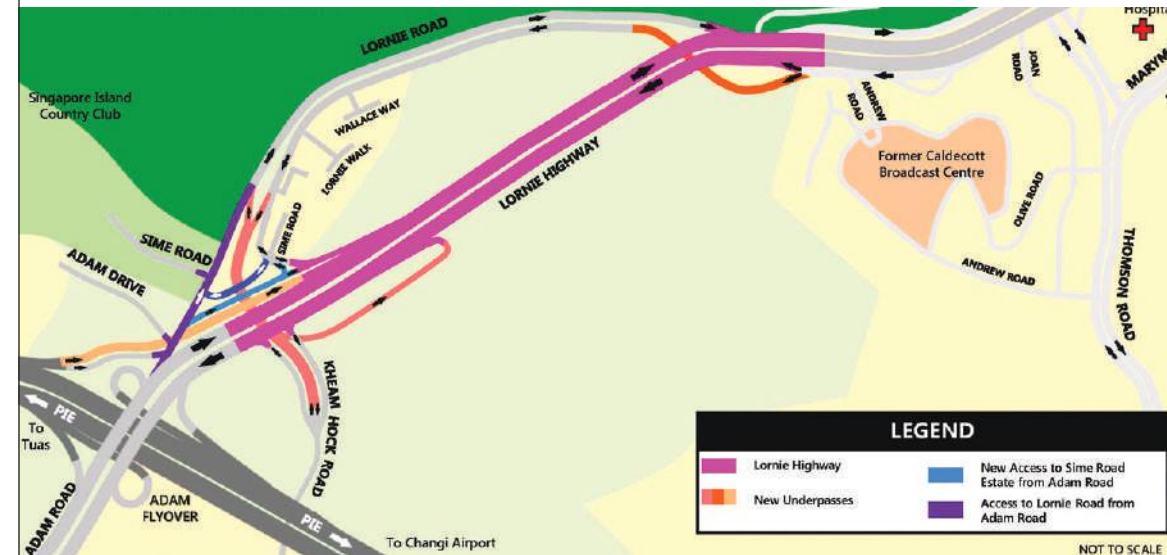
Planned Lornie Highway through Bukit Brown Cemetery.
Image courtesy of Land Transport Authority.
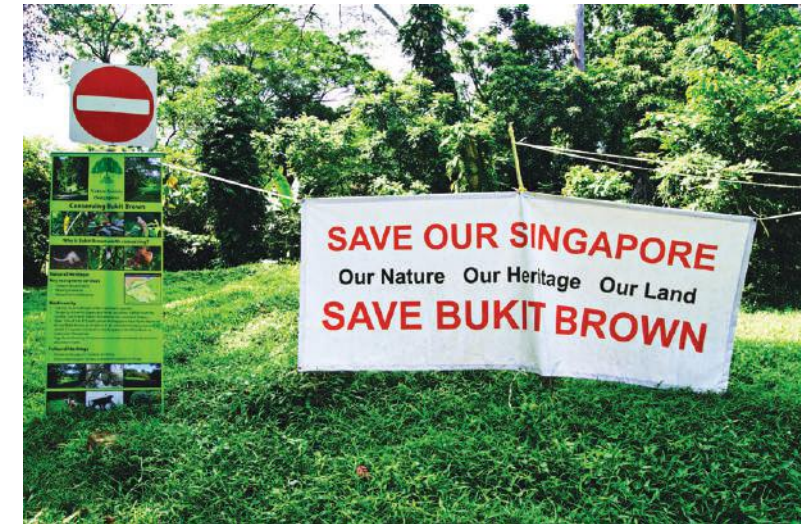
Save Bukit Brown banner at Bukit Brown Cemetery, 2013.
Photo by Jacklee, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Save_Bukit_Brown_banner,_Bukit_Brown_Cemetery,_Singapore_-_20130728.JPG#file, CC BY-SA 3.0

Singapore's scorecard on effective community engagement through the years has seen its share of hits and misses. In situations where policy decisions are unpopular but deemed necessary, engagement is all the more important despite obvious difficulties. As Mah Bow Tan noted:

Take transport policies which I was involved in, say the implementation of ERP [Electronic Road Pricing]. That's never been a popular policy. People don't like it, but after a while, they grudgingly accept it. That's the best I could hope for. I cannot expect people to say, "Wow, what a great idea! What a great policy," you know? But somebody has to make that decision. So, the government has to decide. Engagement in that kind of situation won't make people happy, but it allows you to explain why you are doing this, and I think in transport, engagement has been going on for many years.[118]

Taking time to articulate policy options and their trade-offs has to be integral to policy making, particularly when hard decisions need to be made. The on-going debate on the Cross-Island Line (CRL)—a proposed 50-km mass rapid transit (MRT) line that would take commuters across Singapore from Jurong to Tampines and slated to be ready by 2030—is a recent example.
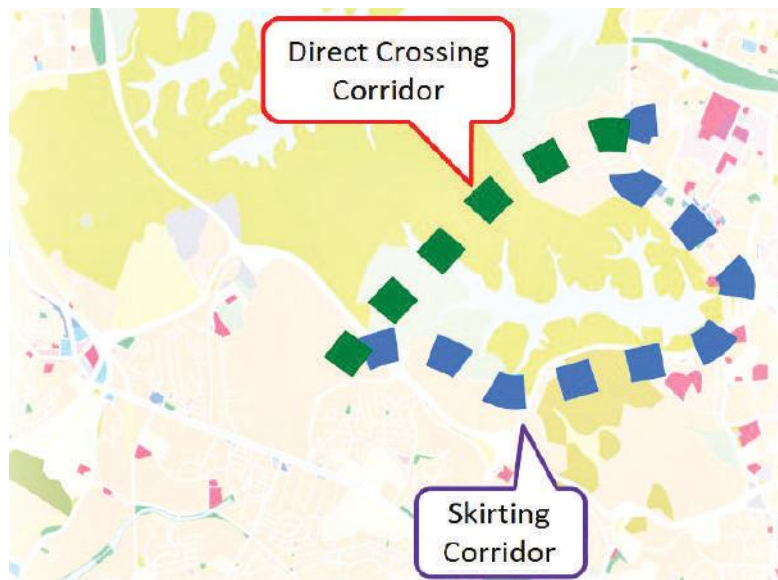
2 possible routes for the cross-island line under consideration.
Image courtesy of Land Transport Authority.

When the line was announced in the Land Transport Master Plan in 2013, its path went through a section of Singapore's Central Catchment Nature Reserve. Although there would not be any surface works, nature groups were worried that its construction would disrupt the primary and secondary forests in the Reserve. To avoid this, an alternative alignment which skirts the Reserve has been proposed. However, this second option will increase commuters' travel time, and run underneath homes and businesses, which may entail land acquisition. On top of that, the alternative alignment is estimated to cost an additional $2 billion.[119]

To date, no decision has been made on which of the two alignments to pursue. An Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) is being carried out to assess the impact of the construction and operations for both alignments. By seriously studying both options in the planning process, and undertaking a comparative analysis of the costs, benefits and implications of both alignments; government agencies, civil society groups and the larger public will be able to better appreciate the trade-offs and considerations involved. Thereafter, the government will consider the views from all stakeholders, including the nature groups, before deciding on the final Cross Island MRT line alignment. Apart from its environmental impact, the decision on the final CRL alignment will also take into account the length of commute, engineering feasibility of both alignments, the impact on businesses and families, and the cost to taxpayers.[120] From the perspective of civil society groups and the larger public, even if the final decision made was not one to their liking, the engagement process would have come across as genuine and authentic. As Kevin Tan says:

Civil society actors fight a number of battles. We don't expect to win every time. In fact, we seldom ever really win. But I think people will feel much more assuaged if they feel their voices have been heard; that they actually deliberated it. Then they say, "Okay, I understand why the policy-maker has to make certain compromises. I may not like it, but I will not hate you for it."[121]

Upholding the Responsibility of Governance

There is, therefore, value in community engagement, when effectively carried out through appropriate modes and mechanisms, in both good and bad situations. Although the duration of decision making could be lengthened and the implementation of development proposals delayed, the collective process fosters a shared ownership towards the building of the city and society. Yet, in many cities, engagement processes can lead to stalemate and become mired in gridlock when difficult decisions are left in limbo.

Sometimes, civic participation, while possessing the possibilities of making policy formulation more responsive to citizen's needs, can also undermine inclusivity. Susan Fainstein, political theorist and urban planning professor at Harvard University, argues that citizen participants are typically well educated and middle-class, not necessarily different from the experts they are challenging, and may not be very representative of poor and minority groups. For example, citizen activists can be very parochial in their interests, as manifested in the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) syndrome, and those passionate about historic conservation may concern themselves little with the housing problems of the poor. For these reasons, Professor Fainstein challenges the assumption that the results of participation will always be fairer than if policy remains in the realm of bureaucrats and politicians.[122]

The government has the duty to uphold the interests of the nation, safeguard the needs of varying sectors of the community, particularly minorities and the marginalised, and balance the competing demands of scarce resources. Eventually, a decision has to be made, and this responsibility lies with the public sector and the political office holders who had been elected into office. To Mah, leaving decision-making in the hands of a populist vote, or the reluctance to make difficult decisions is worse than "carrying the can" of an unpopular decision:

Do you put all the solutions on the table, and say, "Here are three options, and let people vote?" That's not the way we govern. That's not the way we should govern. Or do you say, "Okay, this is my job, I have been entrusted with this, I decide. The can, the buck stops here!" But the responsibility for making that decision involves taking in all views and hearing people's views.[123]

Reflecting on his decision in the case of the former National Library in Singapore, Mah continues:

The National Library, yes, I made the decision, I made that call. I did not stop the demolition because I felt that the longer term recurrent benefits would outweigh this loss. But of course, you know, that issue is still lingering. So, I just carry that can. But if the decision had gone the other way, if we had said, "Okay, keep the Library, but don't build the tunnel," then today everybody who is stuck in that jam for the next many, many years will be cursing and swearing, and maybe it would have been better off for me, because they won't blame it on me![124]

Transforming the Public Sector

Even though policy makers have to take the step to make decisions at the end of the day, the case for community engagement is clear. The decision-making process can be a constructive shared partnership. As former Head of the Civil Service, Peter Ong says, the public service may not always have the answer, or be the answer. As such, they are constantly on the lookout for opportunities to crowdsource, consult and co-create—both within the service and with Singaporeans.[125] To this end, the public sector in 2012, formed a learning community termed the "Public Engagement Network" (PEN) to help agencies level up their capabilities.

The PEN has since developed a "Public Engagement Field Guide" to provide agencies with an over-arching framework for public engagement and information on best practices in public engagement. Singapore's Civil Service College has also developed a "Public Engagement Competency Model" to guide practitioners' capability development, and has implemented several training courses for public officers. In addition, a Committee on Citizen Engagement (CCE) has been set up under the umbrella of the Public Service 21 (PS21) Executive Committee to provide strategic guidance and coordination on whole-of-government engagement issues. It works with agencies across government to build the spectrum of capabilities needed to involve citizens meaningfully in dialogue, co-creation and co-delivery.

The CCE will help agencies embed public engagement in their priorities, work-plans and processes, to enable meaningful and sustainable opportunities for citizen participation in the public sector. Chairperson of the CCE, Yeoh Chee Yan, emphasizes that public engagement is core to the work of Singapore's public sector, and that leaders in government and at all levels must have a deep understanding of the interplay between public engagement, public communications, policy development and delivery, and intentionally weave these elements together. More importantly, public engagement will only succeed if public officers are sincere, have a good understanding of the citizens' concerns and are able to connect with empathy.[126]

A positive environment where ideas and suggestions are welcomed should be fostered in the public sector. Ground-up feedback by those closest to the issues need to be encouraged as these officers are usually the most well-informed, but often feel powerless to change things. In this way, practicing and promoting a greater sense of empathy internally within the organisation will enable officers to similarly empathize with the causes of members of the public. Over time, and as recent instances of community engagement such as the Rail Corridor Project, have shown, mutual trust and dialogue between the public sector and larger civil society will improve. As Tan See Nin says:

> We have become more confident in articulating to the public our planning goals and explaining our proposals as well the difficult trade-offs that are sometimes involved before the plans are finalized. The trust built over time with advocacy groups has enabled a non-adversarial or less defensive posture in dealing with specific comments or criticism. In this spirit, moving forward, there would be further opportunities to provide platforms to co-vision and co-create plans for specific areas of interest with the community.[127]

More can be done even as the public sector continues to level up competencies across its agencies so that the insights derived from public engagement contribute to more robust policy making. Public agencies, for instance, can collaborate better, adopting a whole-of-government approach so that engagement efforts can be wider and deeper than they are. Agencies regularly engage stakeholders around specific policies, but

often issues that citizens grapple with cut across agency domains and mandates. A better way forward may be to approach engagement from and through the citizens' point of view, rather than via an institutional lens.[128] This will foster a more comprehensive, but also more nuanced understanding of the needs of varying segments of the populace.

BUILDING A SOCIALLY RESILIENT SOCIETY

For the public service in Singapore, certain realities remain. Singapore is a small and open economy that is subject to the vagaries of external economic forces and geopolitical uncertainties. Decisiveness and strong leadership are paramount for good governance. Singapore's limited land resources mean that new development plans often encroach onto familiar places, green sanctuaries and sites that hold meaning for nature and heritage lovers, necessitating trade-offs. These trade-offs are not new, but people are no longer content to be passive consumers of the outcomes of development decisions. Hitherto, the government had taken decisions in the best interest of the population, transforming Singapore effectively and quickly from a squatter-lined colony to a modern global city.

Increasingly, Singaporeans are seen to want a bigger say in policy formulation. They seek to understand how these policies impact their lives, be it in the realm of transportation, housing, education or healthcare. Undertaking community engagement is not just about taking on-board these voices, but how the process itself engenders rewards in state–society relations, rooting people to a country, giving them a greater role in shaping the environment around them.

The advent of social media has complicated the engagement process. People have an immediate channel to express their opinions openly, sometimes based on unreliable data sources, which can amplify sentiments quickly. Managing this and meeting people's aspirations have become increasingly challenging amid a context where a large proportion of Singapore's population is aging, and the societal demographic is educated, diverse and affluent.

While community engagement in itself is not a panacea, the benefits of effective engagement are quite real and of value to the citizenry as well as the governing polity. Public agencies do need to invest more resources in strengthening internal capabilities to engage effectively, so that a shared responsibility and state–society partnership may be realised. Regardless of the engagement approach adopted, it is important for the process to be undergirded by trust, mutual respect, and an established understanding among government and civil society actors.

Meaningful engagement involves all parties being genuinely interested to take into account the ideas, opinions, beliefs, aspirations and values illuminated. The tone and tenor of emotions reflected in engagement processes are often the foundation through which a deeper understanding of the values a society holds dear can be grasped. While potential conflict is inherent in engagement situations, acknowledging the ethos and spirit of constructive dialogue by all parties involved remains vital. With skilled facilitation and an earnest desire to foster a deliberative partnership, even a conflict situation can be a creative rather than a destructive force in the collective shaping of a more socially resilient society.

Residents visiting a segment of the Rail Corridor during an engagement session, 2016.
Photo courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.

ENDNOTES

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ENGAGING WELL, FORGING BONDS: THE COMMUNITY AS STAKEHOLDERS IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

"Knowing what people want, what people need, what is important to people, is at the heart of why we do what we do in urban development. It must drive what we do if we are serious about our declared mission to make Singapore the best home for all Singaporeans.... While the shape of a final decision taken, even with trade-offs accommodated, may not please everyone, with good engagement comes the opportunity to forge a sense of shared responsibility to build a better Singapore for all. We must believe that this makes us do a better job, not just in urban development but also in community building."

Benny Lim, former Permanent Secretary, Ministry of National Development

Given the complexity of today's social and environmental issues, dialogue between government and citizens is essential in building a liveable city and a meaningful home for all. Managing the community engagement process requires a delicate, yet dynamic approach. While the collective process fosters a shared ownership towards the building of the city and society, it can also lead to protracted disagreements and potentially hinder effective decision making. The challenge then is in how public energies can be directed in a constructive manner.

Drawing from interviews with politicians, policy makers, urban experts, as well as archival and published material, *Engaging Well, Forging Bonds: The Community as Stakeholders in Urban Development* documents how Singapore has harnessed community engagement and navigated challenges in its nation building efforts through the years.