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A Garden City in Southeast Asia

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About a month prior to my giving this presentation, Singaporean newspapers were noting plans to build a new “founders’ memorial,” dedicated to the early politicians of the Singaporean republic in an effort to foster local nationalism.¹ A review based on public consultation is currently recommending Bay East Park as the ideal location – a large tract of reclaimed land that has created a new mouth to the Singapore River. The reason for this popular choice is that the site is close to the water, emphasising Singapore as an island nation, and more importantly, because this large man-made parkland would represent Singapore as a “garden city”. In Singapore, the park and the state have become deeply entwined. The media push descriptions of the country as a ‘garden city’ or ‘city in a garden’, phrases that are used to indicate qualities of progress and wellbeing, benevolent state management, and the ‘success’ of the Singapore project. Over the past 50 years, policies environmental control have become central to Singaporean identity construction.

From my perspective this has led to a parochial use of the term ‘garden city’ in popular rhetoric, and so the project that I’m sharing here incorporates what I think is a much needed international perspective on this aspect of regional planning. It shows that Garden City fascinations appeared long before the national period, through colonial systems of management and infrastructural development.² As the idea of the Garden City became popular in Britain, it also circulated throughout the British Empire, including the Malayan Peninsula.

Before going any further, though, a brief note on the history of the Garden City should be made. While the idea was first introduced with some clarity by Ebenezer Howard in England in 1898, it very quickly spread internationally. And as it spread, the idea shifted from a specific idea of social reform for the industrial age, to a generic balancing of the city and the countryside. For instance, Raymond Unwin’s *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding* of 1912 emphasised the formal elements of planning, thus setting up the Garden City as the aesthetic techniques of suburbia, taking the idea away from Howard’s more political interventions. As its reach grew, applications of the Garden City became vague and susceptible to re-interpretation, where the term was mostly used to mean a ‘leafy’ city. Therefore, in its popular use around the world, we really shouldn’t expect much more from the idea than this.

¹ “Committee recommends Founders’ Memorial be sited at Bay East Garden, open to public by 2025”, *Straits Times*, 7 August 2017. Accessed 05.09.2017, < <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/committee-recommends-founders-memorial-to-be-sited-at-bay-east-garden-open-to-public-by> >

² For Singapore, the period of national independence is post 1965. Prior to this, Singapore was part of an independent Malaysia (1963–1965), and a subject of the British Empire, organised under the administrations of the Straits Settlements (from 1868) and the British East India Company (from 1819).

The pre-war colonial Garden City

While the principles of the Garden City were trialled in British towns like Letchworth and Port Sunlight, the idea circulated throughout the Empire thanks to sympathetic colonial planners like Charles Reade and Langdon Williams, both of whom worked in Malaya and other British territories. Reade in particular had made a name for himself through planning projects in Australia that promoted Garden City ideals, and in 1921 he moved to Kuala Lumpur to establish the first regional Town Planning Department. In 1927, he composed a planning exhibition in the town of Ipoh, setting out the principles of the Garden City for a public audience and announcing his plans for transforming the town. As it was said at the opening of the exhibition, Reade “traced the developments in town planning from the garden city of Adam and Eve to the garden city of Letchworth.”³ This gives us an impression that Malaya’s interest in the Garden City was therefore contemporary with the rest of the world, being developed by planners locally, and being promoted through exhibitions and newspapers to the public. At this time, all popular sources spoke enthusiastically about the idea, as getting “far away from a very nasty, very dangerous tradition of Eastern building” (by which they were referred to the old town centres and shophouse configurations that were seen as unclean and overcrowded).

Prior to Reade’s relocation to Malaya, in 1920 there had already been one uneventful proposal calling for Kuala Lumpur to be turned into a Garden City. This was repeated in 1923, and then again in 1936 (this unrealised desire for a Kuala Lumpur Garden City is a recurring theme, even up to the twenty-first century). At the time of the 1923 announcement, the *Malaya Tribune* gave a public explanation of Ebenezer Howard’s ideas and what they might mean for the Malay city. It also provided a caveat: “Let it be hoped that the models which have succeeded in England be not too faithfully copied. They are perhaps unsuitable for our tropical surroundings”; no further clarification of why was given.⁴ But while Kuala Lumpur didn’t achieve this ambition in 1923, it was in that same year that Singapore gained its first Garden City suburb. It was a 12 acre site, privately developed by a Chinese sponsor, Wah Khoo Kok, and architect, Hong L. Choon. The Wah Garden City, as it was named, comprised a terrace row and two dozen “European style” bungalows set in a tropical jungle landscape.

The Malay popular press of the twenties and thirties tells us several things about the Garden City’s earliest reception in Southeast Asia. First, there is the contrast between state and private schemes. State boards and official town planners tended to propose turning full towns into Garden Cities, looking at wholesale reform, and generally being unsuccessful. Private developers created Garden Cities as new suburbs within existing cities, and in this they were more successful. From the twenties to the fifties, it was private capital advanced the execution of Garden City layouts (making them more about lifestyle choices than any reformist strategy). Second, we see Garden Cities being associated with ‘western’ or ‘European’ planning, and thus in opposition to ‘eastern’ planning. The western focus sometimes brought with it contemporary concerns for the hygiene of a city, but was more often used as an exotic image of wealth and success for the Malay and Chinese middle class. And third, we learn that Garden Cities were becoming desirable across the Malayan peninsula in

³ “Town Planning in Malaya: Ipoh Exhibition is Opened”, *Malaya Tribune*, 27 September 1927, p.7.

⁴ “Garden Cities: Experiment to be Made in Kuala Lumpur”, *Malaya Tribune*, 16 May 1923, p.5.

the early 20th century, with many small developments executed in wealthier west coast cities like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and others, even if the more ambitious wholesale city reforms went unrealised.

The post-war colonial Garden City

Internationally, by the 1940s, the Garden City was in a lapse, taught to planners only as a historical phenomenon of the early century. But the idea resurfaced in the post Second World War period of urban reconstruction. However as Robert Freestone has observed, this “neo” Garden City expressed very different values. He writes: “post-war reconstruction was a liberal consensual doctrine – evolutionary not revolutionary”.⁵ A sense of social reform was therefore certainly absent, as the driving force became an individual relaxed life in a pleasant new city environment. In 1946, an exhibition of Welwyn Garden City was launched, and news of the exhibition was published around the world. Other new Garden Cities started to be planned in places like Baghdad and Addis Ababa, also making the news. And so, the term began to resume a position in the Malayan popular mindset, again becoming an ambition for local cities, and a piece of popular rhetoric for discussing the urban environment.

In 1953, a new garden city was announced for Singapore, on Orchard Road. Proposed by the Ngee Ann Kongsi, it was meant to include 84 shophouses, 423 flats, 20 bungalows, a high school, a hotel, a cinema, an amusement park, and a petrol kiosk. It would, in most respects, be able to operate as a fairly self-contained city area. The project was slow in development because it required exhumation of about 25,000 bodies from a Chinese cemetery on the site, and also because an old temple required demolition and a squatter community needed to be relocated. However the project did eventually manage to be built in some form, which showed the incredible flexibility of the Garden City concept – in this case, what was built was a ten storey tower, which it seemed reasonable to still call a ‘garden city.’ This, of course, wasn’t so uncommon in the fifties, where Garden City principles were being attached to New Town planning concepts, favouring high-rise buildings surrounded by large open green spaces. The Ngee Ann Kongsi Garden City lasted almost 30 years, being demolished in 1985 to make way for a luxury shopping mall, as Orchard Road transformed into Singapore’s premier shopping street.

A little while after this scheme was built, in 1962, A.D. York, the Commissioner of the Federal Capital in Kuala Lumpur, was retiring after 11 years in post. He retired under the Malayization project, which essentially sought to provide home rule under the new Malaysia Agreement, and thus involved transferring leading positions to local officials. As he exited, York expressed his wishes for the capital of this new Malaysia. He hoped Kuala Lumpur would soon become “the most up-to-date city in southeast Asia”, suggesting that it would become a *Garden City* with *modern facilities*.

In the early 1960s, the same distinctions of state and private development obviously still existed. States and officials aspired to full urban renewals that they couldn’t deliver. Private developers absorbed the Garden City as a lifestyle promise, selling expensive housing in European fashions to

⁵ Freestone, Robert, *Model Communities: The Garden City Movement in Australia* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1989). p.217.

the Malay middle class. But York's comments and the Ngee Ann Kongsi project also show a new development occurring in the 1950s, where the Garden City also offered a promise of *modernisation*, incorporating high-rise and up-to-date urban amenities. Individually, the term "Garden City" was mostly used to imply beauty, but built into the concept was a notion that this demanded a constructed environment, and therefore it also spoke of care, planning, and investment. The Garden City was again becoming rhetorical ammunition for development. This is why economically under-developed Malay cities like Kuching (in East Malaysia, on Borneo) started giving their aspirations for economic modernisation the name "Garden City" in 1968, because it could be taken as synonymous to *progress*.

From the state's view, the city that seemed destined to become a Garden City, because it was politically the most important centre in the region, was Kuala Lumpur (promised without success since 1920). Though after 1965, it was the recalcitrant economic centre of Singapore, now breakaway nation, that stole this right for themselves.

Singapore's national period

In 1965, Singapore began to extract itself from the interests of Malayan development, and thought in terms of the island state. The Minister for Law and National Development, E.W. Barker, wrote about the social and cultural needs of a new country in its early planning development, which prominently included general improvements to public parks and gardens. Visible, manicured foliage was taken as demonstrating economic control and general progress, showing improved living standards, attracting tourists and, it was hoped, cultivating foreign investment. The plan to turn the central business district of Raffles Place into a "pleasure garden", with flowers, fountains and benches, became a centrepiece in this new scheme. But as if to confirm the connection between gardens and infrastructural modernity, the park was partly conceived as the dressing for the country's first underground car park.

Less than two years later, on 11 May 1967, public gardening became a central state policy in Singapore, when the Prime Minister announced his *Singapore Garden City* plans. As a state initiative, this was intended to be a complete transformation of city and country, following in the earlier state plans laid out for Kuala Lumpur. By year's end, planting initiatives had begun, resulting in 9,000 state trees being planted, the so-called "Floral Mile" was laid along Dunearn Road, and government nursery provisions had expanded. Even the new Singaporean currency, introduced that year, was adorned with plant life.

Considering the large expense of this venture, some responsibility for the programme was soon given over to the public in several ways. A kind of neighbourhood watch for ecological vandalism was established – with the public being tasked with a responsibility to report any instances of damage to city plants. 'Beautiful block' competitions were also introduced, starting with the Commonwealth Close public estate in 1967, offering accolades to people who maintained the cleanliness of their estate and built beautiful local gardens. By 1971, the Ministry for Law was publishing handbooks on gardening, cultivating this as a national hobby, and that year the first Tree

Planting Day was announced, taking pressure away from state nurseries. Before too long, public housing corridors were filled with potted plants, which still remains common today.

In 1968, official responsibility for the Garden City policy fell to the new Health Minister, Chua Sian Chin, who understood it principally as combining beauty and cleanliness. Thus the plan for greening the urban environment quickly came to incorporate anti-litter and anti-public urination campaigns as well. It was about creating an attractive and ordered city, free of general mess and decorated with flowers.

But there were also other conceptions of 'cleanliness' in operation in Singaporean politics at the time, some of which are elaborated by Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh.⁶ As in Mary Douglas's use of the term, 'dirt' comprised any object, behaviour or belief that was *out of place* in the new political system. So the ideas of *cleanliness*, now embedded in Garden City rhetoric, extended to include absence of social 'mess': undesirable customs and beliefs, which could mean anything from a lack of courtesy to political radicalism or dissent. By this point, the Garden City cannot be limited to a simple balancing of city and country, because it became a broad mechanism for control – state sponsored removal of physical, social and moral pollutants. The dangerous idea is that an environmental concept of nature extends to politics and society, where dissent or fringe youth groups can be modelled as 'unnatural', and thus as needing to be removed. The physical presence of public gardens and flower beds acted as outward demonstrations of the hand of the state, showing the absence of contrarians and anti-social activities.

So, while on the surface Singapore's 1960s Garden City policy was about flowers and gardens, it was also an outward expression of a much deeper project of social engineering. The Garden City wasn't just something that the state, or developers, provided, it was something to be cultivated in citizens, changing their values and activities, and demanding a level of civic vigilance. In some ways, this might be viewed as a move back to Howard's Garden City of social reform, and indeed was one of the most politicised uses of the idea since Howard's original work at the end of the nineteenth century, albeit of a much more authoritarian nature. Gardens were a veneer of social modernity in Singapore, more flowers meant more evidence of progress in cleaning the physical and social landscape. Greenery becomes code for social order and wellbeing. The belief was that urban order implied safety and stability, encouraging tourists and commercial investment, and indeed, in the 1970s public gardens became a central feature of state tourism management.

Conclusion

Today, the 'city in a garden' is key within Singapore's nationalist rhetoric, and is popularly imagined as an invention showcasing the foresight and strength of 1960s local politicians. While those politicians did use the idea to great transformative effect, they were really harnessing established regional discourses of the Garden City, playing on the meanings it had accumulated across the Malayan peninsula since the 1920s.

⁶ As they have written, "the state engaged almost vehemently in a 'cleaning up' of people and places" during the late 1960s and 1970s. Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of 'Nation'* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2003), p.32.

Southeast Asian Garden Cities stemmed from British colonial origins, providing a language for private developers to promote new properties, and for politicians to talk about their aspirations for reform. And prior to 1967, it always referred back to Britain – marking an idea of European status, lifestyle, cleanliness and peaceable order. Moreover, throughout Malaya (and probably throughout the British Empire) the idea of making a Garden City was an expression of the search for modernisation. That Singapore could then claim to be a Garden City by 1970, was clearly a victorious statement against its regional rival Kuala Lumpur and a demonstration of the city's unexpected success, validating its political separation from Malaysia. Overall, therefore, the Garden City was ultimately a tool of political capital.