



Gracious: Modern living in post-independence Singapore

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Abstract

In the 1960s, Singapore began a rapid period of urbanisation, altering city and domestic sphere. In 1969, the concept of 'gracious living' was introduced to capture the ideal qualities of modern Singapore, but it remained ill-defined. This paper explores the dissemination of gracious living in 1969–75 through Singapore's popular press. It shows how gracious living was adopted as a counterpart to modernity, transformed, embraced advertising, and came to be derided as empty materialism. Gracious living shows us an important ideological device in Singapore's programs of nation building and modernisation, and this study attempts to account for the core principles underpinning its uses.

Keywords

Singapore, policy, modernisation, governmentality, consumerism

Introduction

This essay is about rhetoric in Singapore in the 1970s. Specifically, it is about the concept of 'gracious living', which attempted to define the urban condition and national character of Singaporeans. Singapore became an independent republic in 1965, beginning a process of reform that included stabilising the economy and addressing urban squalor. Powell (1996, p.47) characterised the period as one of optimism and idealism. This period of remaking Singapore included efforts by the Housing and Development Board to reshape the city through low-cost public housing, and later, national campaigns to shape behaviours of language, family, and outlook. But gracious living was unlike these other policy developments in that it remained particularly undefined. It was not targeted towards any specific realisation, but still suggested the promise of complete reform. Rather than leading clearly to strategy and design, it took shape as rhetoric, being frequently discussed in newspapers. Gracious living was ultimately a lifestyle concept that made Singaporeans consider how they ought to live.

Art, nature...

Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, introduced gracious living to the national consciousness in 1969. In his words, it described "a pleasant city, with parks and gardens, music and painting, drama and light entertainment: a rugged and courteous people" (Koh, 1974). It was at once a description of the ideal urban environment, the culture industries, and the public mentality. However, there was a problem with the definition in that people didn't quite understand what it meant. Over the following years the term became a flexible catch-all for the desires of Singaporean society.

Lee's description of gardens and the arts led to interpretations of tangible qualities. What he described was most recognisable as things that are pleasing, prompting a materialist reading where to live graciously was to surround oneself with beauty. Difficulties in understanding gracious living beyond its materialism may stem from the fact that it was not a novel term, in the west it had been used in books on social etiquette (Pratt, 1932; Cuming, 1965). It was attached to ideas of how grace and elegance translated into home decoration and hospitality. In the 1940s, for instance, the Singaporean department store Robinsons promised gracious living through its advertisements of imported upholstery fabrics and tablecloths. At the time, gracious living was the calm elegance of the domestic environment, a product of the home beautiful. Throughout the 1960s advertising continued to promise gracious living through appliances and imported foodstuffs, making it an aspiration to domestic luxury. When Lee

adopted this language in 1969, he was expanding existing aspirations for home life to the scale of the state, constructing a framework for living that encompassed urban planning, architecture, the culture industries, and individual behaviour.

Gracious living can be seen as an early attempt at the governmentalist campaigns that were later released, an effort to shape Singaporean citizens, making them amenable to the economic and cultural plans of the new republic. However as Tunstall (2007) argues, for governmentality to operate it requires two levels of design, first the policy, then a clear communicative form so that the message may enter the national consciousness. Gracious living lacked this second step, remaining an unresolved proto-policy. It did, however, serve as testing ground for Singaporean values that would later appear in specific campaigns.

Not long after Lee introduced gracious living, it became a subject of public discussion. Two elements were clear in Lee's outline: gracious living involved *nature* and the *arts*, and for many this served as a reliable guide. A.G. Alphonso, Director of Singapore's Botanic Gardens, commented that conserving nature was essential to gracious living (Gardens and Parks, 1972). By 1972, it was described that simply sitting under the shade of a tree was gracious living (Not Just Grace of Place, 1972). This last appeal to gracious living promoted the annual Tree Planting Day, part of a general greening policy that intended to make the rapid urbanisation of the Housing and Development Board more pleasing. This is one example of how values established under gracious living became defined policies of their own.

Others focused on the arts, and many exhibitions launched in aid of gracious living. Parliamentary Secretary (Education) Mohammed Ghazali Ismail stated in opening one such exhibition that it was artists who would ensure gracious living by applying their skills to industry, thus beautifying the human environment (How Artists Can Ensure a Gracious Life, 1970). Interestingly, for Ghazali in particular, nature and art shared a logical connection. He saw nature as "the mainspring of inspiration for artists" (Call to Cultivate Interest in the Fine Arts, 1971). At this time, nature played an important role in the identity of Singaporean art, as represented in the romanticised landscapes of the leading Nanyang Painters.

Art and nature were explicitly mentioned in Lee's 1969 introduction to gracious living, but it wasn't long before others attached different values to the concept. In 1970, two months before Ghazali's speech on art and industry, Parliamentary Secretary (Culture) Sha'ari Tadin proposed his own method for gracious living: family planning (Family Planning, 1970). As with Tree Planting Day, this was another idea that was later adopted formally in the 1974 *Two is Enough* campaign. Projecting future policy, Sha'ari positioned small families as economically stronger and providing better education. Small families would lead to greater knowledge, which is what Sha'ari understood as 'gracious'.

... And consumption

Sha'ari's approach to family planning and Ghazali's idea of the arts gave value to knowledge and skill. However, both could also be interpreted materialistically: small families are financially stronger, and art will make better industrial commodities. Indeed, it was this materialistic interpretation, extending gracious living's earlier meaning of conspicuous consumption, which took hold of the public imagination. The commercial mobilisation of gracious living received its first grand showcase at the 1971 industrial trade exhibition at New World Amusement Park (Trade Fair, 1971). Here, advertisers drew on the newfound popularity of the term and asserted its former meaning, using it to display the latest household goods. For many people, gracious living was consumption of the latest appliances and home decorations.

'Art' and 'nature' showed gracious living as a response to urbanisation, and in some ways so did its materialist reading. Singapore's early public housing projects were based on utilitarian needs to provide shelter and support the economy; they were what Jacobs and Cairns (2008, 589) called "a modernism indifferent to display and ornament". By the early 1970s, there were growing efforts among people to invest in luxury decoration inside their public housing flats, softening the functionalist rooms and creating a higher sense of material wealth. As Jacobs and Cairns (2008) describe, from 1972 the HDB published the magazine *Our Home*, which gave professional advice and DIY solutions for renovating flats. As the nation stabilised, the lure of gracious living was its promise of something more than shelter. It implied the material luxury of modernisation, where harsh public housing estates could be made glamorous through consumption. In this way, through advertisers' prompting, gracious living became a popular concept of interior design. It was this impulse that the *New Nation* newspaper played into with their "Gracious Living" supplement in late 1971, a special section concentrating on modern interior decoration, which discussed high-rise living, designing bathrooms, using carpets and wallpapers, and incorporating antiques into the

home. Such efforts were framed around public housing, though some features show that desires lay elsewhere. For instance, a small logo, marking each article in the section, shows a modernist bungalow, a statement that the real image of gracious living was not the government flat, but the private house.

In the materialist interpretation, gracious living meant televisions and kitchen appliances. What was earlier attached to soft furnishings was now an expression of domestic technologies and modern conveniences, and this all cost money. One letter to the *Straits Times* described this gracious living: “a clean and beautiful garden city, an earth satellite station, a mosquito-free and pollution-free Singapore, easy-to-play Toto, hawkers’ centres, five-room housing board flats, colour TV (soon to come), wider roads, pan-expressways, fly-overs, over-head bridges, jumbo-jets, more hotels, more public telephones, and many other amenities” (Chew, 1971). The idea was projected as something everyone in Singapore should strive to attain, speaking of public flats and structural works to improve the whole city. While there is hope here for the broad population another reader was sceptical, saying, “only money makes gracious living possible” (An Observer, 1971). Associations were developing between ‘graciousness’ and affluence.

The consumerist view of gracious living grew so powerful that it easily absorbed the notion of art into its system. Gracious living meant the commodification of art, or, art as home decoration. Art was accepted, but as the poet Yeo Cheng Chuan (1971) commented, was not engaged with as substance: “...where an exhibition / of paintings is a social event first, where / many are sold on gracious living, but what / they really buy are houses, cassettes, cars...”

While this view painted gracious living as modern lifestyle, for some the fatigue of consumerism set in. To express this, gracious living was again employed, though this time it suggested a dignified removal from modernity. This quality is found earlier than Lee’s policy, in the language of advertising. In 1957, gracious living was taken out of the home, and used to market the Sea View Hotel. An older hotel from the 1900s, it is stated as having a gracious quality “not often found in the modern hotel” – this adds nuance, suggesting gracious living as a type of consumption involving a calm elegance, disconnected from the speed of the modern world. A later commentator, Amy Chua (1971), trying to make sense of gracious living, drew on this earlier notion to criticise the materialist interpretation. Chua maligned the fact that gracious living had come to mean “high-style living”. She questioned the fundamental connection between gracious living and art, writing that the fashion for batik painting in home furnishing reduced art to decor and commodity.

Chua suggested instead that gracious living should be “graceful”, the “relaxed living” of not being caught tirelessly in the business of modern life. It was modernisation that brought Singapore its materialistic focus on lifestyle, and gracious living needed to question this. The purpose of art in gracious living is not to surround oneself by beauty, but to cultivate aesthetics for refinement and “humane sensibility” – the capacity to observe art should translate to abilities to observe the suffering of others, rather than being blinded by wealth. Aesthetic sense, for Chua, was the core of gracious living, which was not really about design, but “inner truth”.

Despite such arguments, the materialist understanding persisted, as did associations with wealth. Even though it was promoted through efforts such as the Ideal Residential Block contest of 1978 (offering prizes for residents who made their government flats presentable and maintained a neighbourly community), gracious living became less associated with life in government housing. Some believed that the very environment of the private condominium was more conducive to gracious living ([Letter], 1972). Certain buildings were soon being advertised for their ability to provide gracious living, and in some cases, like the 1976 Ardmore Park apartments, gracious living directly informed the architects’ plans, providing tangible examples of built works that claimed gracious living as guiding philosophy (Every Facility for Gracious Living, 1976). For Ardmore Park, what this actually meant was very similar to a 1940s understanding of the term – it was about privacy, modern decor, and adjustable living spaces for entertaining guests, providing a social function of style and glamour. Gracious living ultimately meant modern conveniences like the central air-conditioning in the 1972 design of an exclusive estate at Victoria Park Close, expressly designed to give gracious living to “rich executives” (Bungalows Designed for Gracious Living, 1972).

But looking back to the comments of politicians, gracious living was not intended for the elites, nor did it set out to promote conspicuous consumption. The arguments against materialism continued. Sha’ari Tadin admitted that earlier attempts to construct gracious living had been misconstrued. In 1972, emphasising the value of art, he commented that the absence of aesthetic sensibility created a “spiritual vacuum in the Singaporean personality” (Getting the Wrong Idea About Living Graciously, 1972), which provoked concern that “this slogan [is] restricted to money, nightclubs and fancy car numbers” (Bassapa, 1971). Taking up this concern, Edgar Koh (1974) tried to

champion gracious living, arguing that the materialist standpoint had missed its essential quality. The materialist urge resulted in what Sha'ari called "ugly Singaporeans", and so Koh argued that it was actually "simple and frugal living" that better encapsulated the concept, because this would foster the spiritual and aesthetic components that he believed were intended. In this, Koh drew on the values of Amy Chua's writing from 1971. It was about "individually, learning to appreciate simple pleasures and derive joys from simple sights, sounds and actions" (Koh 1974).

In 1975, *New Nation* included this exchange: "Ah Fook: I say, what has happened to the national fitness exercises that used to be such a big thing? Mei Lin: I suppose people have opted for gracious living instead, whatever it means" (Ah & Mei, 1975). It was clear by this point that gracious living had become a recognised topic for discussion, but that nobody really knew what it meant. Indeed, over the previous six years it had been many things to different people. It was an individual's focus on the home interior and a communitarian concern with the city. It was luxury in private ownership and compassionate civic mindedness. It was fast-paced modern life and the reaction against it. It was interpreted both materialistically and aesthetically.

A proto-policy on modernity

Gracious living became a rhetorical vessel for the values of different people, allowing them to make of it what they would, installing and trialling their own ideas. Interestingly, many of these values were later officially turned into policy. 'Two is Enough', 'National Courtesy', and 'Singapore Garden City' all expressed values once contained in gracious living. Considering this, I would argue that gracious living was a proto-policy, and essential in shaping governmentality in the city-state. Lee's introduction of gracious living constructed desire for an ambiguous modern lifestyle and modern city. It introduced the concept to popular rhetoric, calling out diverse interpretations about how to make this possible. This made the government's later provision of answers, by extracting elements of gracious living, all the more welcome, as the desires had become internalised. Gracious living was, at its core, establishing beliefs as to what Singapore should be, how its people should behave, what they should value, and what their government ought to provide. By the 1980s, gracious living ceased to be a subject discussed in newspapers, though it continued occasionally in advertising. Today the phrase is sometimes still seen, as in the Gracious Living furnishing exposition. As a formless proto-policy, there was no clear ending to gracious living, but its significance gradually faded.

Gracious living responded to increasing modernisation and urbanisation in republican Singapore. It attempted to make sense of this new landscape, and more importantly, to move beyond utilitarian concerns, constructing a lifestyle that celebrated the luxuries of the modern world. While it remained unclear, and was never as prominent as Singapore's later campaigns, gracious living shows a process through which Singaporeans tried to make sense of modernisation, attempting to move past the physical changes that modernity brought and construct the pleasures of modern life. It's just that nobody quite agreed on what these pleasures were.

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Biographical note

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