

*The Desire for Design in 1960s Singapore*

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Abstract: In the 1950s, the island of Singapore was a British Crown Colony. As colonial administrators began their plans to unify and decolonize their territories in Southeast Asia, they recognised a potential problem with Singapore's economy. Although it was the richest city in the region, Singapore's wealth was almost entirely built on trade; should this trade have receded or shifted elsewhere it would spell disaster. Therefore, beginning in the 1950s and continuing throughout the 1960s, a policy was implemented to diversify the Singaporean economy by establishing local manufacturing industries. These eventually led to new industrial settlements on the island and introduction of new types of urbanised work.

This paper charts the Singaporean government's efforts to remake their economic future during the same period in which they traversed the processes of decolonisation. Drawing from political speeches, newspapers, government reports and promotional grey literature, the paper looks at the ways in which the state expressed its ambitions regarding industry, technical training, design and product development. This focuses attention on the period after the Industrial Promotion Board's founding in 1957, and follows the subsequent development of polytechnic education in architecture and engineering, the Industrial Research Unit, the Jurong Town Corporation and the Product and Design Centre. The material demonstrates the country's first efforts to organise and promote ideas about design as a means of strengthening the economy, as well as its internal strategies to create a manufacturing workforce that could engage with globalised industrial product design. Through this, the paper addresses a significant example of mid-twentieth century industrialisation in the postcolonial world.

In Singapore, the first university-level industrial design programme began in the 1990s, around the same time that design diplomas were expanded in the polytechnic system. A strategy was approved to encourage careers in the creative industries in 2000, the Design Singapore council was established in 2003, and from 2005 art and design programmes were established in public universities. In 2014 the National Design Centre was opened, encouraging business-oriented 'design thinking'. In many respects, the recent scope of these efforts to support a design industry in Singapore resembles a typical trajectory for many postcolonial states, where the cultivation of design is often an end point that comes after achieving a condition of economic maturity and stability, following decades where design is largely confined to the work of foreigners and overseas studios.

These recent promotions of design are intended here only as context, because what I intend to discuss today comes well before these events. What I am going to consider here is really more of a false start – a point in the 1960s when Singapore's government thought that it was valuable to promote modern design and set up the institutions for its state

management. It all did make sense, until one day it suddenly didn't, and at that point a certain type of design profession was no longer needed.

First, to clarify the economic setting for these events, Singapore is an island at the end of the Malay peninsula, located at a point where the Indian Ocean connects to the South China Sea. The British East India Company set up a trading town there in 1819, and because its location connected Chinese trade to Indian sea routes it became one of the key British free trade ports in Asia. For most of its history, well into the 1960s, Singapore's economy was defined by this trade. But we should also see this in relation to Britain's interests in Malaya. In their colonial history, Singapore was for shipping, and Malaya was for primary production, for things like palm oil, tin, rubber, pineapples and coconuts. Singapore became the key access point for both primary products leaving Malaya, and secondary products entering. In 1953, when Malaya exhibited at the British Industries Fair in Birmingham, the tonnage of trade passing through Singapore was the highest it had ever been. And at this point, 74% of Malaya's imports passed through Singapore, and 67% of its exports left through Singapore. In many respects, Singapore was essential for Malaya's material connection to the outside world. And on the back of transferring these goods, some manufacturing had developed in Singapore, pre-processing Malay products for foreign markets – a plywood factory, a soap factory, breweries and canneries. But politics was changing, leading to new policies on manufacture.

In 1955, Singapore's first government was elected, and they received a report from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which stressed the urgent need for both Singapore and Malaya to expand their manufacturing sectors. There was an inherent danger in the economy being so dependent on a single area like commerce, but also since the Second World War there had also been a change in demographics. Singapore's population was now less transient, as well as being very young and rapidly growing. Unemployment was high, and would become much higher if more jobs couldn't be created. These jobs, it was hoped, should be in manufacturing and construction.

The official response was to strengthen technical education, which involved establishing the Singapore Polytechnic in 1958. The school offered a range of professional courses and evening classes. Its Department of Architecture, for example, the first in the city, offered both a professional five-year diploma in architecture, as well as a range of craft courses, bringing design and construction of buildings together within the same faculty. This, along with the Engineering Department, established the first foundations to design education, and were intended to equip the population to move into technical work that would support industrial manufacturing. In the same year the Polytechnic opened, Singapore was granted home rule by the British Parliament, to take effect after an election in the next year. The People's Action Party, a rising political body that at the time promoted workers' rights, owing to its connections to unions, campaigned on the need to increase manufacturing. They ran on two key messages: industrialising Singapore, and incorporating Singapore into Malaya to create a broader sense of regional nationalism. The PAP overwhelmingly won that election.

With its aspirations for industrialisation, in 1960 the new government invited a United Nations Technical Assistance team to visit Singapore and advise. The delegation was led by Albert Winsemius, who had also been involved in the reconstruction of the Dutch economy after the Second World War. In general, it wasn't looking good, but the group did develop a four-year plan for growth. Winsemius's recommendations differed from previous reports on one key matter. Earlier advice suggested that industrial development was a private, entrepreneurial project, which could be supported by government in limited ways. But Winsemius recommended direct government action in forcing economic growth. This allowed the State to step in and organise industrial output, producing a heavy-handed style of social management that became a hallmark of the PAP government. A month later, the government reformed the Industrial Promotions Board to create its new Economic Development Board, which it intended to become the main agency for industrialisation.

They established a new city, called Jurong, which was to be the centre of all the factories that came from this policy of state management. The initial focus was on industries that required little upfront cost and required little skill in labour. Simple textile products were ideal. By 1963, the plan was progressing (even ahead of schedule), and aspirations for industrial expertise increased. The Economic Board founded an Industrial Research Unit in the Engineering department of the Singapore Polytechnic, in order to research and implement new industrial processes.

Around this time, Singapore declared independence from Britain and joined Malaya and North Borneo to form the new state of Malaysia. This helped confirm the reality of the government's plans for a Malayan common market, which was becoming increasingly necessary for Singapore's industrialisation. The common market would give Singaporean factories access to consumers throughout Malaysia, and just as the city had been the access point for regional trade, it was hoping to become the access point for industrial production. It is at this point that interests in modern design emerge, moving industry beyond manual labour and specialised technical knowledge.

In 1964, the Economic Development Board launched what it called the Product and Design Centre, which would lead connections between buyers and suppliers both locally and internationally, and would teach the public the importance of design. They assigned one of their own officers to head the organisation, this was Hwang Peng Yuan. But the key figure early on seems to have been an industrial designer appointed by the United Nations Technical Assistance programme to support this area of economic growth. This was Donald Jordan, an Australian industrial designer, who had the task of employing the centre's staff of young Singaporean designers. He found Willy Lim, a recent graduate from an industrial arts programme in Australia, Grace Tan, a textile designer trained at the Chelsea School of Art who had been working freelance in France, and Vincent Khoo, an architect formerly of the Public Works Department. Since there was no real design education in Singapore at this time, local designers had to study abroad, and it was the intention that each of these three would themselves be sent away again for retraining to fit their current position (which in this context meant a degree in industrial design). For the time-being, however, their job was to

help Singaporean manufacturers understand design. And after about a year of preparation, the Product and Design Centre opened to the public in May 1965.

The Design Centre had several key tasks. Practically, it kept an index of local manufacturers and their products, and liaised between manufacturers, builders, and buyers. But it was also supposed to eventually become an arbiter of good design. The centre had exhibition rooms in the John Little's department store building in the commercial centre of Raffles Place, with monthly exhibitions displaying design from a range of production fields. In its time, the centre exhibited mass produced consumer objects and fashion, handicrafts, and building materials, sometimes with themes, like their plastics exhibition in 1966, and sometimes showing foreign examples, like their exhibition on British ceramics.

The centre was also charged with promoting the need for design within established businesses. As the centre was being developed, the UN technical advisor Donald Jordan delivered ten public lectures in a series entitled *Product Development and Design*, with the intention of broadening public understanding. After the centre opened, it was Hwang, Lim, Tan and Khoo who took on the task of educating businesses, particularly focusing on product design, packaging and marketing development. In some cases, they offered design services to these businesses, therefore starting to work as a state-managed design studio. But, in this area they were less successful. The design centre's director P.Y. Hwang later said, most local companies still saw the implementation of modern design – particularly packaging – as unnecessary expense. But after all, changing these opinions was the reason the design centre had been established.

In some respects, the push for design at this early stage of industrialisation was a part of Singaporean nationalism and the PAP's initial anti-western stance. Design was meant to distinguish local products from international ones by stopping the practice of copying overseas goods, therefore creating something distinct that could be isolated as the visual identity of Singaporean manufacture. As was also being proposed in architectural practice at the time, locally-trained designers were needed to create something that was suited both physically and culturally to the location of Singapore, rather than being a displaced index of western modernism. This was also a mission to which Donald Jordan subscribed, and he put forward Japan as an ideal example of a country making advancements in creating modern design, while also retaining the temperament of its own identity.

But beyond the more abstract aspirations of national identity, another more concrete reason for wanting design to distinguish the 'made-in-Singapore' brand was that the Economic Development Board hoped to expand the amounts of local products being exported for sale – they weren't merely interested in the economics of industrialisation for import substitution. The aim of a Malayan common market was very important here, because it was hoped that all of these Singaporean designed products would be transported to Malaysia for sale, turning it into Singapore's economic hinterland.

The design centre was well received when it opened, and already assumed that it would soon expand. But about two months later, something else happened that significantly altered the trajectory of Singaporean design within a unified Malaysia.

In August 1965, Singapore found itself in the situation of having to leave the Malaysian union, and had to establish itself as an independent city state. This resolutely put an end to any hopes of realising a Malaysian common market, casting doubt over the idea that Malaysians would in any way be a market for Singapore-designed and made products. It seemed increasingly like 'designed in Singapore' would only mean 'designed for Singaporeans', and there was no way that the million-and-a-half residents of the city, who continued to face problems of unemployment and housing, could support industrial manufacture at the scale that the government wanted.

Having lost a key export market, and believing there weren't enough citizens to pursue large-scale import substitution, the government still saw a need to provide more manufacturing and construction jobs. So, from this point, while design wasn't immediately taken out of the picture, a new strategy for industrialisation started to develop, where manufacturing was key and design became something of an excess.

Foreign companies became essential, with an intention to organise Singaporean labour to focus on the production and assembly of foreign goods for export. The aim was therefore to compete with other parts of Asia to become a site for offshore manufacture. The only problem was that living standards were generally higher in Singapore than those other places competing for this kind of work, and the costs of living and thus established wages were already higher. But in decisions of offshore manufacturing, cost is the main factor. The PAP, which had begun in the 1950s as a pseudo-communist party (or at least as a pragmatist and diverse party with a number of individual members attached to communist causes) attached to the labour unions, now faced the task of gradually suppressing wages in the short term in a bid to encourage international investment.

The work gradually came, only now, unlike the early 1960s push for low-skill labouring jobs, the work could be increasingly technically demanding. The infrastructure of technical education was already in place through the Polytechnic, the Vocational Institute, and the technical colleges. But in this scheme, the need for design was greatly diminished, since foreign designers created the products, and it was foreign consumers that needed to recognise the values of design. All Singaporeans needed to do was show the technical expertise and working practices needed to assemble them.

The institutions that had started to develop local design five years earlier were now being reorganised to suppress it. A review of the Singapore Polytechnic in 1968 broke up design and technical education when architecture and engineering was moved to the University of Singapore; the Polytechnic would now only focus on trade education. Their Industrial Research Unit was also removed and turned into a state standards agency. Labour training was then supplemented by the Prototype Production and Training Centre in 1969, which was a body jointly managed by the Singaporean and Japanese governments. Essentially, it provided technical training by Japanese experts, so that Singaporeans could learn to better make Japanese technological products.

A little over two years after opening, in August 1967, the Economic Development Board passed the management of the Product and Design Centre to the Singapore

Manufacturer's Association. Under new management, it was renamed the Product Display Centre. They continued to exhibit local products, though the former director of the design centre, P.Y. Hwang, has said that at this time he thought they lost sight of the initial project of modern design to focus on local manufactures for export business. Industrialisation now focused on the labour needs of other places (outsourcing), and really it was this that solved Singapore's unemployment problems; by the early 1970s, there was actually a national shortage of labour.

To conclude, this example of Singapore's efforts to implement and manage design in the 1960s does show us some of the usual associations between mid-century modernism and post-war industrial development, even if it is framed through a different national context, as Singapore moved from a colony to being part of a larger Malaysian nation to an independent city state. But it also shows us something about design, industrial capacity, nationalism and global connectivity. Prior to the 1960s, Singapore's economy relied on international connections, which were threatened by decolonisation politics. But its capacity for design within a programme of industrialisation was dependent on the capacity of its national trade, and when this seemed to fail in the mid-1960s, the pursuit of higher local manufacture through design no longer made sense. In this case, design was seen to give value only when it was targeted outside of Singapore. At that point, design gave way to the pragmatic concerns of manufacture in national policy.

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