

Singapore's urban success was in part enabled by good laws and an efficient administration, but Elgin Toh and Mercy Wong of CLC argue that even more vital was a pragmatic, action-oriented approach, which identifies the problem, formulates the policy solution and sees it through with political will.



Night view of the Singapore city centre. Singapore's urban governance has been successful largely due to a pragmatic, problem-solving, action-oriented approach. Source: Erwin Soo [flickr.com/photos/erwin\\_soo/14468751842](https://www.flickr.com/photos/erwin_soo/14468751842)

## First Things First: *The Question of Prioritisation in Singapore's Urban Governance Experience*

Singapore is admired today among urban development experts and practitioners around the world for the rapid and balanced growth it has achieved as a city over the last 50 to 60 years. A sea change in the living standards and the socioeconomic prospects of millions of Singaporeans has come about in a very short space of time. As part of the telling of this overall story, Singapore is often also feted in particular for having built two highly efficient and effective systems — one of administration, and another of laws — that, together, ensure the city runs seamlessly.

On occasion, this has given rise to the conclusion that the secret to Singapore's success as a city lies squarely in those two elements, the administration and the laws. They are seen as important starting points

and causal factors in explaining the progress that Singapore has made. By extension, a developing city that wants to walk in Singapore's footsteps could not find a more worthy task to focus its energies on, the argument goes, than moulding its bureaucracy and its legislation into the likeness of that ideal state. Settle these two pieces of the jigsaw, and the others will naturally fall into place over time.

Without understating the benefits of having good laws and a fine administration, this article makes the case that even these two elements were not first-order issues in the evolution of Singapore's system of urban planning, development and governance. Instead, the Singapore story, if told right, shows that the horse which ought to come

before the cart is a pragmatic, problem-solving, action-oriented approach. This means having a mindset that asks what the most important issues that need solving are and then setting out on the most sensible path to solving them, underpinned by a strong will to see through the solution. These are, to a much greater extent, first-order issues in the journey of urban development.

Rules, legislation and institutional set-up — important as they are — can be refined along the way, inter alia, as the government goes about its business of tackling the big issues of the day. They do not have to be faultless and complete at the outset, nor are they a prerequisite for real change. Rather, they are improved during and throughout the process of change.

The Singapore story, if told right, shows that the horse which ought to come before the cart is a pragmatic, problem-solving, action-oriented approach.

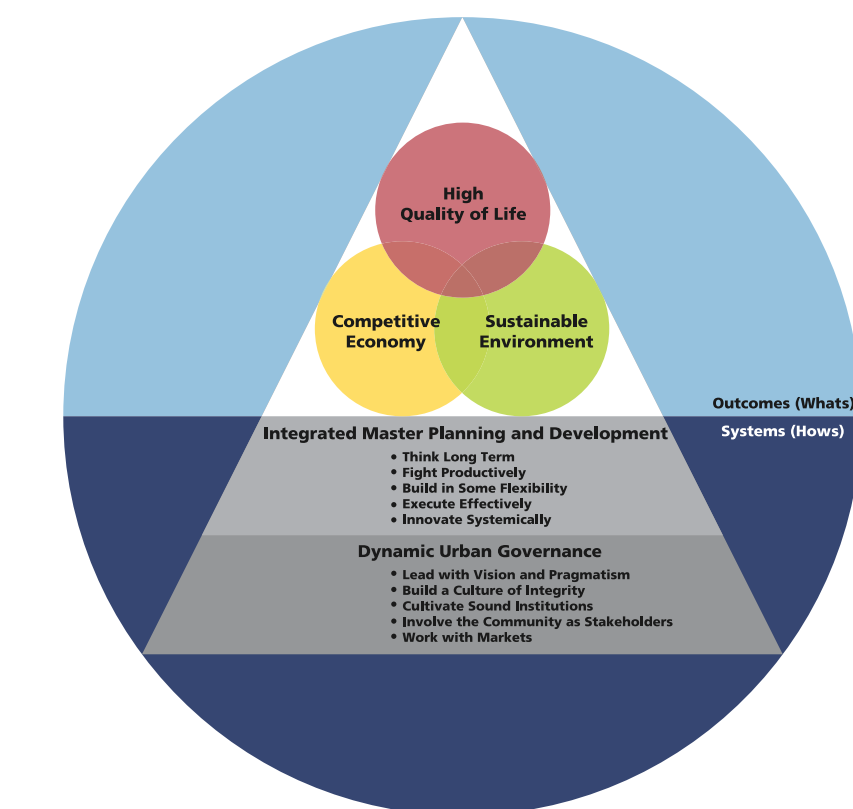
Another way to think about the distinction between laws and administration, on the one hand, and the problem-solving, action-oriented approach, on the other, is to ask the following question: Which of the two is a driver of change as opposed to simply being an enabler of change? An enabler of change is something that would make it easier for change to happen, by facilitating the faster and more effective attainment of that change. But the change must already be underway — the enabler is merely the lubricant. In contrast, a driver of change is the engine — and the fuel — that propels it forward. A driver of change could bring about change without an enabler, albeit with more difficulty. But with no driver of change, an enabler achieves nothing.

Two case studies from the early years of self-government and independence will be fleshed out below to illustrate this argument. The first is the story of how Singapore solved its housing crisis. The second is about the renewal of the city centre.

But what exactly does this pragmatic, problem-solving, action-oriented approach entail? It can be summarised using three Ps:

- The Problem
- The Policy
- The Political Will

**The Problem.** The first P is the Problem, or the identification and prioritisation of it. A developing city first has to decide what the top problems are that it wants to devote its resources to solving — and to start with those problems. Cities never run out of problems that they would like to tackle, and a comprehensive list of those problems would also be an endless one. The city government therefore needs to decide on priorities, on areas of more concerted effort and more substantial focus. These identified priorities will have to be practically



**Figure 1** – The Singapore Liveability Framework by CLC is a way to understand what makes a liveable city. Under this framework, liveability is about finding the right balance between three outcomes – High Quality of Life, a Competitive Economy and a Sustainable Environment. Source: The Centre for Liveable Cities

achievable based on the physical, financial, social and political resources available to it. One should not attempt to “boil the ocean”, as Minister Ong Ye Kung, the Cabinet Minister overseeing public service innovation, said in a speech to senior public servants in April 2017<sup>1</sup>.

The Singapore Liveability Framework by CLC (see Figure 1) offers another way of thinking about how we can identify the problem. At the top of the framework are three bubbles, which together form the liveability outcomes that a city wants to achieve — namely, High Quality of Life, a Competitive Economy and a Sustainable Environment. A liveable city is one that is able to find the right balance

between the three outcomes. Conversely, one way for a city to think about its problems is to ask itself how it is underperforming in the task of achieving that right balance.

**The Policy.** The second P is the Policy, or the prescribed changes to the city government’s programme to decisively tackle the problem that has now been identified. Here, policy refers more to what the broad course of action is. It is a bigger picture view of “what needs to be done” rather than the nitty-gritty specifics of “how exactly it is going to be done”. To give a simplified example, if a major problem in the city is frequent floods due to monsoon rains, then the prescribed policy might be

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something like a very significant ramp-up in drainage and canal capacity as well as detention tanks and ponds. The nitty-gritty specifics of “how exactly it is going to be done” — such as, which agency is best poised to roll-out this programme, which laws might require change, how exactly is land going to be made available for the drains, canals, ponds and tanks — are downstream issues of policy execution that are important to figure out, but are ultimately lower-order issues.

Because policy refers to the broad direction of the solution, there has to be a certain stability maintained on a policy decision over time. How a policy is implemented may change fairly quickly, from year to year, to adapt to shifting circumstances on the ground. But broad policy shifts need to be few and far between, for a few reasons.

First, it takes time for a policy to take effect, so if one is too impatient, one might end up veering off the right course. Second, it also takes time to persuade the people that a particular policy direction is the right one, since any policy must result in trade-offs and individuals or groups who feel they are losing out (even if society as a whole is better off). To change policy frequently might therefore lead to scepticism, confusion and even cynicism among the populace, and a general inability to persuade them that any future policy would be a firm and unwavering one that they ought to put their support behind. Third, without policy stability, the public servants executing the policy may become demoralised or disillusioned, since they may have worked hard on a particular set of implementation measures, only to see much of it ‘go to waste’ with the change in policy. If this happens too often, public servants may adopt a wait-and-see attitude, hedging what they do against the probability that the next policy change might be just around the corner.



Toa Payoh new town is one of the oldest public housing estates built by HDB. Because there was a clear policy solution to the housing crisis, backed by sufficient political will, HDB could build enough flats to end the housing crunch within 10 years of its formation in 1960. Source: [jjcb flickr.com/photos/jjcbaron/4262217937](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jjcbaron/4262217937)

In 1979, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the People’s Action Party (PAP), wrote an essay outlining six basic principles of governance that his government had learned over the previous 20 years in power — one of which was: “Be consistent: don’t chop and change — We have kept faith with ourselves and our supporters. Our policies have been consistent but not inflexible. We won the trust of the people. The next generation of PAP leaders will inherit this trust. They cannot afford to squander it.”

**The Political Will.** The need to stay on course with a policy decision brings us to the third and final P, which is the political leadership of the city government having the will to follow through on a policy, overcoming difficulties it may face from vested interests. Political will tends to be anchored in a long-term vision for the city — wanting to see the city develop along a certain path, and understanding that unless strong leadership

is brought to bear, year after year, that vision will not materialise.

More specifically, political will is important for three reasons. First, there must be political will before a problem and a policy will receive the financial and manpower resources needed. When agencies or departments fight over budget allocations, the fights are escalated to the top, and the call made at the top reflects the level of political will on a particular issue.

Second, more often than not, problems and policies require multiple agencies and departments to work together, because problems don’t have a tendency of falling neatly into the categories by which we have chosen to divide up bureaucratic work. Inter-agency cooperation and coordination needed in these situations can come up against many possible barriers, not least of which is the fact that two departments on the same level in the overall hierarchy

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(i.e. neither reports to the other) will try to advance their respective agendas. They won't want to back down easily. If the policy is not high on the list of the city government's priorities, the bureaucratic deadlock may well go on indefinitely, or may take months if not years to unravel, and even then, only if lower-level officers are very determined to work through differences and make compromises, out of a sense of mission. The better, more efficient way by far of undoing such an impasse is to have the political will at the top, demanding that departments cooperate with one another to achieve a clear overall policy objective, knocking some heads together and perhaps even firing department chiefs, if that's what it comes down to.

Finally, there must be political will to back public servants who have to enforce and implement difficult decisions on the ground. Without 'air cover' from their political masters, very few public servants will have the gumption to take hard-line action and risk controversy in order to see through a policy. Such gumption is especially required when these public servants face backlash against their policy execution by members of the public or their political representatives.

A good illustration of this need for political will is the story of the Singapore River Clean-Up between 1977 and 1987. This exercise saw a great deal of inter-agency work — involving no less than five Ministries, three Statutory Boards as well as government-linked companies. Former Director-General of Environmental Protection and Deputy CEO of the National Environment Agency Mr Loh Ah Tuan was among just 10 senior public servants who received a Gold Medal each for their work in the clean-up. He recalled the importance of political will both in



The Singapore River flows past the central financial district and conserved shophouses. Decisive policies such as urban renewal in the city centre and the clean-up of the Singapore River have brought vibrancy to the heart of the city. Source: Bernard Tey flickr.com/photos/besar\_bears/531662142

facilitating bureaucratic negotiations, and in dealing with unhappiness from residents who had to be resettled because they were polluting the river. On bureaucratic negotiation, Mr Loh recalls the usefulness of the regular reports to Cabinet that PM Lee Kuan Yew had asked for on clean-up efforts. The reports forced ministries and agencies to the table to find compromises and move forward — because if progress was slow, it would be reflected in the next edition of the regular report to Cabinet. In an interview with CLC, Mr Loh added that when public servants faced pushback from Members of Parliament on behalf of their residents, political will again became very important: "We have situations where MPs come and tell us, 'Look, don't touch my constituency', or, 'Withdraw the summon (issued to my resident)', and so on. We tell them, we have a job to do to clean up Singapore River, and if you disagree with our actions, you can take the issues

higher up. They will understand the need for our actions and drop the complaint."<sup>2</sup>

To better illustrate the arguments made so far, two case studies are examined in depth in the following section. Together, they show that: (A) the primary drivers of urban development are Problem Prioritisation, Policy Formulation and Political Will, whereas (B) the system of laws and administration are improved along the way where necessary, and are secondary factors.

#### **Case Study 1: Solving the Housing Crisis**

In the 1950s, the housing shortage in Singapore was quite severe. In September 1950, city councillors pointed out that the rate of housing construction would have to go up by five to six times if the government was serious about solving the problem<sup>3</sup>. Because of the shortage, the colonial government said publicly in 1952 that it

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— Mr Loh Ah Tuan, former Deputy CEO of NEA

would not enforce a housing regulation mandating a minimum of 350 cubic feet of space per occupant in every residence<sup>4</sup>. The result was more and more people crowding themselves into ever smaller spaces, in very unhygienic conditions. This was especially so in the city centre, because without a well-developed public transport system, people could not afford to live too far away from their jobs. Some shophouses had as many as 200 people living in them. Day and night labourers were known to pair up and take turns sleeping in tiny cubicles while the other went to work. Apart from the shophouses, there were “congested squatter settlements with no sanitation, water or any of the elementary health facilities”<sup>5</sup>. By 1959, at least a quarter of Singapore’s population lived in slum or squatter spaces<sup>6</sup>.

Even before 1959, politicians from all parties spoke about how acute the problem was. But prioritising and solving it, was another matter altogether. For example, after the Legislative Assembly general elections in 1955, the Governor’s Address at the opening of the new term of the Assembly included the following statements: “The imperative and pressing need for adequate housing for those in the lower income group, including the solution of the problem of the attap dwellers and the clearance of slum areas is a challenge which the Government appreciates can only be met by the most vigorous and in some cases drastic measures. It is the firm intention of the Government to find the solution to this problem and in doing so it will in the future place more emphasis on the provision of public housing at the lowest possible cost even if this means some lowering of standards. It is also the



Old apartment blocks in Tiong Bahru built by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). SIT was the housing agency formed under the colonial government. It built some flats, but not enough to resolve a housing crisis that became increasingly severe under its watch. Source: Dickson Phua flickr.com/photos/gunman47/14649721988

intention of the Government to find ways and means of encouraging those in the low-income group to own their own houses.”<sup>7</sup>

These statements highlighted the problem, but did not translate into the decisive action they promised. The Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) was the government’s housing agency until it was replaced by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960, one year after the start of self-government in 1959. From 1955 to 1959, SIT built just 12,978 flats<sup>8</sup> in total, a grossly inadequate number in view of the already dire housing shortage when the government came into office in 1955. The total number of private and public housing units built in that term of government was 23,651<sup>9</sup>, compared to a population increase in the same period of 413,000<sup>10</sup>, which works out to be an average of 17.5 persons per

new housing unit, if we assumed the same population density among the existing housing units. In contrast, the new PAP government of 1959 built 54,000 flats by 1964<sup>11</sup>. The share of residents living in public housing rose from 9% in 1959 to 23% by 1964. What accounted for this great turnaround?

It is tempting to conclude that because HDB was founded in 1960 to replace SIT, institutional set-up was therefore an important causal factor. Instead, the record shows that the driving factors were the new government prioritising the problem, formulating a policy solution and backing up that policy solution with sufficient political will. The re-arrangements in institutions and introduction of legislation were dependent, not independent, variables — they were the outcomes.

The new PAP government explained its shift in policy. It genuinely wanted a housing policy that lifted low income residents out of their present straits, as opposed to the previous government, which was focused primarily on the middle income and above.

The budget allocation was an important sign that the new government had placed a strong emphasis on public housing construction. In the first annual budget announcement of the new government, towards the end of 1959 — notably, before HDB had been formed — the budget allocation to SIT was \$25 million, roughly double what the former government had allocated — \$12.6 million — over its entire term from 1955 to 1959. In the PAP government's second budget, announced at the end of 1960, housing allocation rose again, from \$25 million to \$34 million. The total budget that HDB was able to spend between 1960 and 1964 was \$230 million. The new government had put its money where its mouth was, and that was a clear sign that it had indeed prioritised the problem and had come up with a new policy solution for dealing with it, which, in retrospect, was the most obvious solution: simply to build many, many more public housing units. HDB set out to build 52,842 units by 1964, but outdid its own targets by completing 54,000. (As mentioned earlier, SIT only built 12,978 units from 1955 to 1959.)

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An evening view of Chinatown. The area fell under the S1 precinct in urban renewal efforts. Two high-rise developments — People's Park Complex (yellow and green building) and Pearl Bank Apartments (just to the left of People's Park Complex) — were the result of the Sale of Sites programme. In the foreground are low-rise shophouses that have been conserved for their heritage value. Source: William Cho flickr.com/photos/adforce1/5747056293/

death. If we failed, we would not be re-elected," he said<sup>13</sup>.

Neither were the laws the driver of change, important as they were. The bill to establish the Housing and Development Board was actually introduced by the previous government in August 1958, and passed in January 1959, before the general election of May 1959. The newly elected PAP government was simply making use of the vehicle that had been established by the previous government. The new board had more autonomy than did SIT, but essentially still had to carry out the policy of the Minister in charge — and if the policy had not changed, or if the Minister had not secured the funding necessary, the newly established HDB would still have its hands tied behind its back. Its autonomy under the new

legislation made its work easier, but was by no means a silver bullet.

Another sign that the legislation was not the driving factor can be seen in how some of the legislative amendments after 1960 appeared to be playing catch-up, after changes had already taken place on the ground. HDB, backed by the political leaders, had moved very fast in executing the new housing policy, and sometimes the laws lagged behind. During the second reading of the Housing and Development Amendment Bill in November 1964, for example, National Development Minister Lim Kim San noted that the shift in policy towards encouraging the ownership of HDB flats had been announced 9 months earlier, in February 1964. (Prior to this shift, most people were renting from HDB.) As a result, the government had found

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itself in the awkward position of having to introduce retrospective laws. Said Minister Lim: “The first balloting of the sale of flats took place early in February this year, and it is necessary to bring this Bill into force with retrospective effect from the 11th February 1964, in order to validate the action of the Board in selling flats to the public.”<sup>14</sup>

The other major prong in the new government’s successful public housing policy was land acquisition. On this, again, the record shows that it was policy and political will, not legislation, that made the difference. The major legislative change that the PAP government introduced on land acquisition was not passed until 1966. That means that between 1959 and 1964, when it built 54,000 flats, it was operating under essentially the same land acquisition framework as the previous government, which built fewer than a quarter of that number of flats. (The exception is the Land Acquisition Amendment Bill of 1961, but that was a relatively minor amendment that happened in the wake of the Bukit Ho Swee fire and was more focused on how the government can acquire land after a disaster like Bukit Ho Swee.)

### **Case Study 2: Urban Renewal in the City Centre**

In the 1960s and 1970s, with much of the land available to the state being used up around the city for the provision of public housing, the government turned its attention to renewing the city centre, which was deteriorating due to, among other factors, overcrowding and rent control. The city centre comprised only 1.2% of the total land area of Singapore, but it housed nearly 250,000, or almost



The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, photographed here at the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland in 1990. Mr Lee’s vision and political will was important to Singapore’s urban governance story. On the issue of showing persistence in policy, he once wrote: “Be consistent: don’t chop and change... our policies have been consistent but not inflexible.” *Source: World Economic Forum flickr.com/photos/worldeconomicforum/6068188693*

one-eighth of the total population at the time, and this was forecast to increase to about 350,000 to 400,000 people by the year 2000<sup>15</sup>. It was also a central node for government, residential, commercial and educational services. Yet, prime land was being occupied by overcrowded slums and squatter settlements with poor

sanitation and fragmented businesses, which bred crime and diseases, stagnated property valuations and hindered its development potential for economic progress as a newly independent nation.

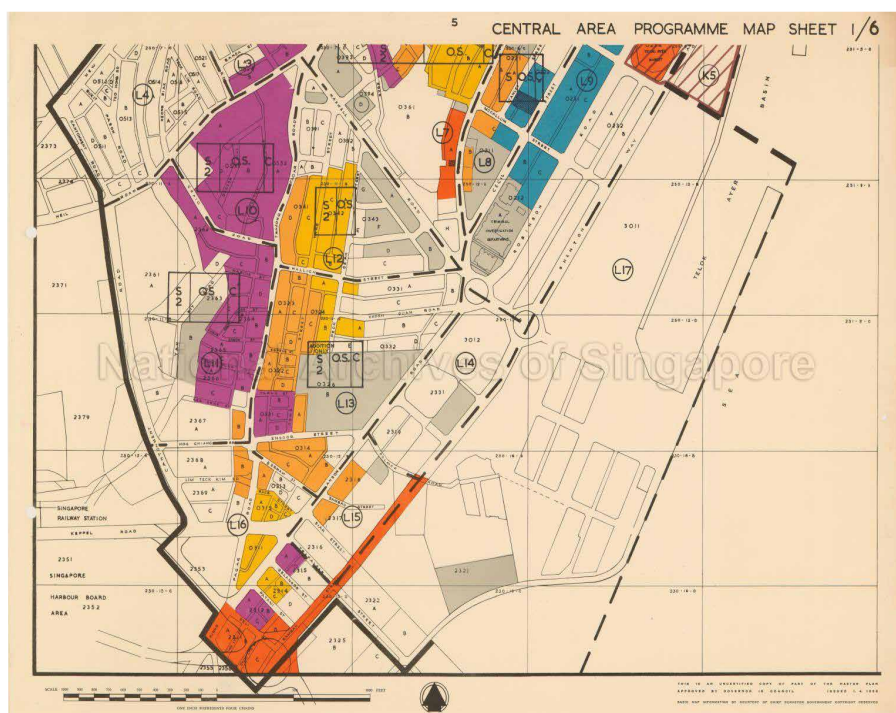
This problem was further exacerbated by the fact that the existing 1958

## Urban renewal comprised the twin challenges of land acquisition and resettlement in the city centre, and re-building the city centre in an integrated manner for new housing and commercial developments.

Master Plan, the city's first statutory blueprint inherited from the colonial government, was inadequate to meet the urgent needs of urban growth. It was formulated based on conservative assumptions of slow, managed growth for a population of 2 million by 1972 (a figure that was reached ahead of time in 1970), and leaned in favour of low-rise developments. In short, the plan could not accommodate the city's fast population growth, and did not facilitate the removal of sources of poverty in slums to raise standards of urban living.

The government thus decided it had to act. But hampered by a lack of expertise and manpower resources to update the 1958 Master Plan for the central area (the Planning Department tasked to control land development in the central area had only three staff), the government sought technical assistance from the United Nations, whose experts recommended a strategy of project-based action executed in stages, precinct by precinct, through public-private partnership for a systematic redevelopment of the city centre. Their recommendations would later lay the foundation for Singapore's first Concept Plan in 1971 as a more long-term, non-statutory plan guiding the city's land and infrastructure needs over the subsequent 20 years.

Urban renewal comprised the twin challenges of (1) land acquisition and resettlement in the city centre, and (2) re-building the city centre in an integrated manner for new housing and commercial developments. And it was with these challenges identified, that the organisational and administrative methods soon followed. Following the



The map of the central area in the 1958 Master Plan. This was Singapore's first statutory master plan, drawn up under the colonial government. The plan was based on conservative assumptions about growth and leaned in favour of low-rise developments. It proved inadequate in meeting the needs of a rapidly growing city.  
Source: Ministry of National Development

UN team's recommendations, an urban renewal unit was set up under the HDB in 1964, which over time grew into a full-fledged department — the Urban Renewal Department (URD) — in 1966, seeing through the whole process of clearing slums and substandard housing, providing alternative residence for the displaced, and carefully re-parcelling and selling sites for development. Two precincts to the north and south of the central area (precinct N1 and S1 respectively) were prioritised for urban renewal given the relative ease with which the land there could be taken back (most plots had already expired or would soon expire their 99-year lease). Land was taken back

for newer and better developments. For example, the removal of the old Outram Prison, which took up more than a fifth of Precinct S1, opened up space for over 1,000 two- and three-room public housing flats and 400 shops<sup>16</sup>. Within two years, about 75% of Precinct N1 and 98% of Precinct S1 had become available for redevelopment.

While the Land Acquisition Act was considered a draconian method to avail land for renewal, the government simultaneously attempted to mitigate the hardship of those affected by slum clearance and urban renewal efforts. Besides offering financial compensation,

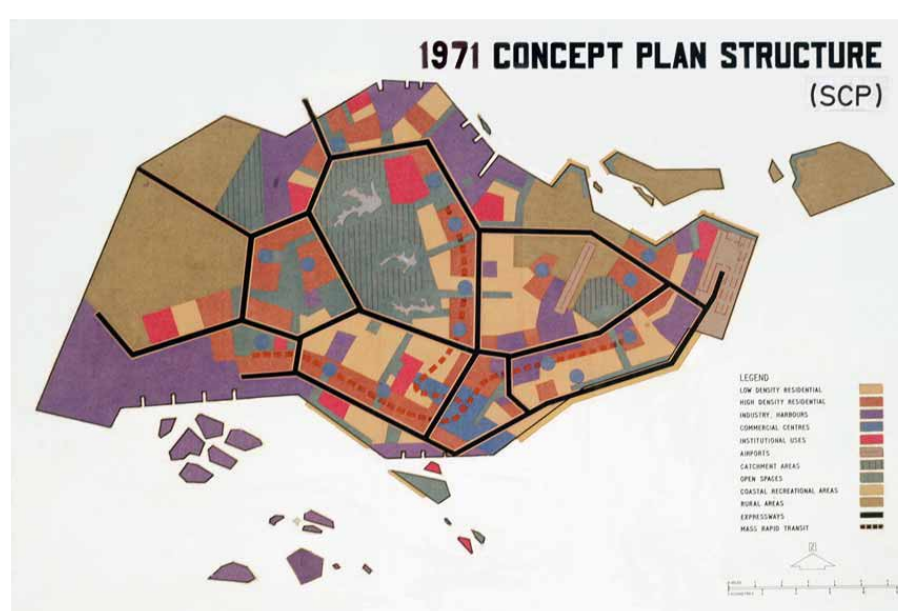


On the ground, the face of the city centre was changing very dramatically, with squatters and badly maintained low-rise structures and shophouses making way for high-rise buildings that would meet the needs of a new modern city centre.

the state allocated public housing units for displaced residents, often moving and resettling them not as individuals but as communities, to respect the community bonds forged, and to allow people to stay close to their families, neighbours and friends<sup>17</sup>.

Through study visits to the United States at the time, officials became aware of negative examples of urban renewal, where dilapidated buildings were demolished and land was subsequently sold to private developers without offering alternative, affordable housing options for displaced communities, contributing to the development of urban ghettos<sup>18</sup>. These were lessons which the URD carefully kept in mind during Singapore's urban renewal process. It also sought to address displaced businesses, which had developed their own ecosystem of ties with the people it served in the city centre. To help retain this, URD came up with design strategies to integrate public residential housing in tall buildings with retail stores at lower podiums of the development complex. Not only did this enable more optimal use of limited land, small businesses could also continue to serve their customers at the heart of the city, and residents could experience a sense of familiarity from the past interacting with shopkeepers, while adapting to high-rise living.

In some ways, the lack of regulatory powers vested in the URD — which later transitioned to become the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) — gave it a sense of autonomy and an entrepreneurial culture to come up with



Singapore's first Concept Plan, drawn up in 1971. The plan was formulated by the government with assistance from United Nations experts. The plan laid the foundations for long-term growth. The 'Ring' structure and the network of satellite towns envisioned in this plan have stood the test of time. Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority

action plans, experiment ideas and implement solutions. The example above was a relatively new approach in “strata-zoning” at the time, when mixed-used developments were still uncommon and traditional methods tended towards mono-functional zoning.

The Sale of Sites programme proved to be a critical engine for the urban renewal process, as success cannot depend on the public sector alone. It harnessed private sector initiative and resources for comprehensive redevelopment through the sale of government land, with proceeds from such sales channelled back to government schemes. The increase in the number and total investment value of development sites was telling

of the success of the programme — within the span of 10 to 11 years since its launch, about 69 sites were sold to the developers, creating an overall investment of \$1.1 billion and 75,000 jobs in building and construction, and other related industries<sup>19</sup>. On the ground, the face of the city centre was changing very dramatically, with squatters and badly maintained low-rise structures and shophouses making way for high-rise buildings that would meet the needs of a new modern city centre.

In implementing the renewal, legislative and administrative tools were put in place to persuade investors and developers to the cause. This was particularly challenging at the time — previous successful tenders

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for development were typically site areas of about 70,000 square feet, but sites were now being sold at almost three times that size. The 1967 Property Tax Order provided special tax concessions for designated developments at a rate of about 12%, a third of the original tax rate, while other incentives included low down-payment rates and interest-free instalments with longer repayment periods. But even as authorities needed to entice the private sector to participate, they were also careful to maintain important governing principles, such as the principles of integrity and non-corruption. Award of sites was done through a transparent process of public tenders, with technical specifications, conditions and guidelines indicated upfront by URD, after extensive consultation with partner government agencies.

This was not to say that the policies and attendant actions were perfect solutions to the identified problems. Lessons were learnt along the way as circumstances evolved. Over time intense urbanisation, coupled with property downturns in the 1980s, exposed the shortfalls of the urban planning and development system, which became more complicated and less transparent over the years. This led to extensive reforms and organisational changes in the URA to clear the opaque “forest of rules”, and restore greater clarity, transparency and certainty in the system<sup>20</sup>. URA would become the central agency for integrated planning and development

not just in the city centre but island-wide, establishing systematic reviews of the long term Concept Plans and shorter term statutory Master Plans, with detailed development charge rates and development guide plans made available to the public. Legislative frameworks (through the URA Act and Planning Act) evolved in tandem, incorporating these changes in governance and policy for the planning and development of Singapore.

But these legislative changes and organisational re-arrangements were not the drivers of change. Instead, what drove change, as this case study shows, was a recognition that there was an overcrowded and deteriorating city centre that could no longer meet the needs of Singapore’s rapidly growing economy and population (that is, the Problem), a decision to renew the city centre through land acquisition, resettlement, re-parcellation and sale of sites (that is, the Policy), and finally, a strong determination and discipline to see through the execution of this solution (that is, the Political Will). The outcome of a highly dense yet highly liveable city in Singapore lent legitimacy to the government’s actions. Mr Lee Kuan Yew later reflected on these changes, pointing out that there were “definite plans” to address the problems, and “we stuck with the plan. There is no corruption and nobody can deviate from the plans... Those were the basics, and that’s how we started.”<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Understanding how Singapore’s urban governance evolved over the years, and which issues were more decisive in that process is important for developing cities that are now trying to forge a path of progress for themselves. But it is equally important for leaders and public servants in Singapore today to draw the right lessons from our own past, if we are to benefit by applying these lessons to our current and future challenges. As our urban context continues to evolve to cope with the trends we face — whether these are the emergence of new technologies, the international forces of globalisation and nationalism, sustained resource constraints and shifting expectations from one generation of Singaporeans to the next — our first instinct should be to ask: what the key problems are, what the broad policy solutions are to tackle them, and whether there is the political will to see them through. Only when we have clarity of thought on these questions is it useful to move on to issues of policy execution, including legislative or regulatory amendments and rearrangements in how we organise the work of government departments and agencies.

## Contributors



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Speech by Minister Ong Ye Kung at the 2017 Administrative Service Dinner, 6 April 2017

<sup>2</sup> Interview with CLC in 2011

<sup>3</sup> The Straits Times, 30 September 1950, 'No Time For Sentiment' Says Rajah

<sup>4</sup> The Straits Times, 27 April 1952, *City Council Can Stop Over-Crowding*

<sup>5</sup> Goh Keng Swee, 1958, Department of Social Welfare, *Urban Incomes and Housing*

<sup>6</sup> The Straits Times, 25 October 2008, *Singapore lauded as slum-free city*

<sup>7</sup> Governor's Address in Legislative Assembly on 22 April 1955

<sup>8</sup> HDB Annual Report, 1960

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> HDB website: [www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/about-us/history](http://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/about-us/history)

<sup>12</sup> The Straits Times, 19 September 1959, *Big Housing Plan*

<sup>13</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, Speech in Parliament on 1 November 1994

<sup>14</sup> Lim Kim San, Speech in Parliament on 4 November 1964

<sup>15</sup> The Straits Times, 29 January 1973, pp. 12. *350,000 people in central S'pore by the year 2000.*

<sup>16</sup> The Straits Times, 5 October 1966. *A prison makes way for 1,000 flats*

<sup>17</sup> CLC Urban Systems Studies, *Land Acquisition and Resettlement: Securing Resources for Development*

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alan Choe (unpublished transcript). CLC Urban Systems Studies, *Urban Redevelopment: from Urban Squalor to Global City*, pp. 25

<sup>19</sup> The Straits Times, 24 December 1978. *Choice housing sites offered for sale.*

<sup>20</sup> CLC Urban Systems Studies, *Urban Redevelopment: From Urban Squalor to Global City*

<sup>21</sup> Lee Kuan Yew: The Chance of a Lifetime. *Urban Solutions, Issue 2 (February 2013)*, pp. 8–13