

# Contours of Culture

Space and Social Difference in Singapore

Robbie B. H. Goh



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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*



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## **Introduction: DialogiCity— Cultural Transformations and Contestations in the Postcolonial City-State**

It has become something of an academic fashion to speak of the city in terms of splits, multiplicities, dualities, and contestations. At one end of this analytical scale, Mooney and Danson (1997: 73–74) observe that the “dual city” trope is a “convenient tool for describing the contemporary urban landscape,” with its “growing divide between rich and poor, or affluent and ‘socially excluded.’” This analytical schema, of the city as a dual or divided entity, clearly fits those studies concerned with the city’s uneven infrastructural or built developments arising from the “segregationist” nature of “racial-caste” politics and policies, or the “inequalities” of housing development and provision (Goldsmith 2000: 37–38; Ratcliffe 1997: 87–89; Karn and Phillips 1998: 128). Its larger theoretical umbrella is Marxist-inspired urban studies, one of whose main tributaries in recent decades has been a French leftist intellectual tradition which is particularly concerned with “movements” and “tactics” of resistance to (and “extravagances” outside of) dominant urban authorities and cultures (Castells 1978; De Certeau 1984; Bourdieu 1999: 110). This scholarly trajectory clearly reaches to include studies of racialized and otherwise segregated communities and their spaces arising out of global urban competition and diasporic movements. Corroborating instances of this schema would include the studies of racialized urban zones (Chinatowns, Indian towns, immigrant worker gathering points in public spaces), slum or ghetto areas (particularly as spaces of the absence or failure of public amenity provision), high crime zones and red-light districts, as spaces widely contrasting with the development and social praxis of areas associated with the socio-economic and racial elite.

While it may be tempting and even useful to analyze urban landscapes in terms of such developmental splits and dualities, a number of problems are posed by what such studies may imply, deemphasize or omit. In the first place, it might be objected that the model of urban duality seems to be suited to a particular kind of city, with a particular cultural and developmental logic. Mooney and Danson (1997: 73) acknowledge that such a model is "more developed in American studies," although it is increasingly proving itself adaptable to "urban analysis in a European context" as well. Indeed, the characteristic qualities of "dual city" analyses — an evolutionary conception of industrial-commercial urban growth, with an emphasis in the present stage on the decline of general urban planning and services, and consequently the creation of depressed inner city zones — reflect a delineation from the "Chicago School" of urban studies and the related analyses of industrial American cities in the several decades from the 1960s. As Savage and Warde (1993: 38) observe of this American-grown approach, "it could be argued that contemporary cities are becoming increasingly differentiated according to their role in the world economy, which makes it unhelpful to generalize about a single evolutionary path for all." A similar objection might be made to the "dual cities" paradigm: notwithstanding the range of possible angles that individual studies could take, the analytical model itself, with its focus on uneven developments and segregated urban spots, not only tends to limit data and analysis to certain kinds of urban phenomena (poverty, crime, racism, and their manifestation in "hard" aspects of landscape and policy), but also has a relevance limited to the largely North American and Western European urban centres in which such urban developments have been the historical pattern.

The fast-growing cities of newly independent and formerly colonized nations in South and Southeast Asia do not fit easily into such a model. While it is hardly uncommon to find in such cities sharp polarities of rich and poor, social elites and underprivileged groups, it is much harder to analyze these urban landscapes in terms of dualistic and segregated cities. As a number of useful recent studies have shown, many Asian cities are strongly governed by "local cultures," "local traditions," particular historical legacies and "struggles among social groups" (Kim et al. 1997; Evers and Korff 2000: 17), which intersect in complex and interesting ways with the general forces of economic and infrastructural modernization. These local particularities thus create quite different urban conditions from the more homogeneous patterns — the socio-economic dominance of a white elite, marginalized darker races and immigrant groups, urban flight and inner-city decline, and related features — familiar in the American-European dual city paradigm. In many Asian cities, immigration and immigrant groups (largely from other Asian countries) are certainly factors,



but so too (in a scale and manner quite different from most American and European cities) are emigration, brain drain and the multiple national interests and habitations of wealthy citizens. The complex multilinguistic and multicultural conditions of such Asian cities, too — in turn reflections of particular histories of conquest, relinquishment, re-conquest, nationalization projects and so on — create very different urban cultural landscapes from the relationships of dominant and marginal languages/religions/cultures evident in many American and European cities. It is not at all uncommon to find rich and poor, established and newly-arrived social groups sharing a common religion and language in many Asian cities: for example, Buddhism and traditional Chinese-derived religious beliefs (ancestor worship and the pantheon of deities, each with its specific function) in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Hanoi and Singapore; Islam, the mosque space and Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia (the Malay and Indonesian languages, which are to a certain extent mutually intelligible) as factors in common between Malaysian transnational citizens and poor Indonesian migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur; Chinese languages/dialects and customs used in common among a variety of different socio-economic groups in Johor Bahru, Singapore, Taipei, Hong Kong, and Bangkok.

Issues of city and state, nascent nationalisms, postcolonial heritages, competing multiculturalisms, the balance of emigration/immigration, are particularly nuanced when studying the postcolonial city, in ways which are not often or always evident in the major urban centres in America and Europe. In contrast to the much more gradual development of European and North American nationalisms and national histories from the eighteenth century onwards, which form the contexts and causes of many urban centres in the West, many Asian cities in newly-independent nations arise out of quite a different historicity. The invention of Asian nationalisms in the 1950s and 1960s takes place in a relatively compressed time frame, with a sharp changeover from colonial to independent authority (which nevertheless has to accommodate many of the inherited features of colonial rule), and with many of the cultural, racial and linguistic problems inherited from the recent colonial period (such as those caused by the historical importation of immigrant labour in large numbers from other colonial territories, or the creation of language policies which variously favour English or one of the vernacular languages while suppressing others). This relatively sharp compression of national identity, compounded with the social, cultural and economic parameters inherited from a recent colonial past, are of course writ large in the capitals and major cities of Asian nations, creating multiply layered sites where competing meanings and historical attachments are at work.

This overlay of competing meanings to a certain extent resembles, but

also differs significantly from, recent theories of global cities viewed chiefly as "immense concentrations of economic power and ... command centers in a global economy" (Sassen 1999: 105). Recent work on global cities by Sassen (1996a; 1996b; 1999), Holston and Appadurai (1999), Harvey (1997) and others has tended to see urban sites in such cities as compressed and overwritten zones in which the social praxis of different groups, competing interpretations, claims and values are available. Harvey's (1997: 22, 23) image of the "palimpsest" is a useful one, for figuring such cities as consisting of "a set of heterogeneous processes which are producing spatio-temporalities as well as producing things, structures and permanencies in ways which constrain the nature of the social process." The palimpsest, never quite scraped clean, retains traces of previous writings even in the face of the latest inscription; this not only figures the global city (as the spatial compression of social differences), but also the history (as the trace of earlier inscriptions), and the textuality (in architecture, design and planning, but also in artistic and media images, public discourses, sculpture, graffiti and other interventions) that are crucially involved in constructing urban identities.

The theorizing of global cities as sites of fluid and heterogeneous "social processes," as sites of contestation of multiple claims and values, takes our understanding quite far from the "dual city" paradigm with its tendency to focus exclusively on the positivist data of built structures and socio-economic statistics. Harvey's (1997: 23) call for a conceptualization of the global city in terms of "a dialectical relationship between process and thing" implies, among other things, that social identities are never merely a function of received urban structures, but that the intervention of social processes is capable of (re)making the things that constitute a city (and its constituent zones, neighbourhoods and buildings). The dialectics of the city, in other words, conceives of the city not as a monolithic site, but as dynamic product of human agency; like art, literature, culture as a whole, the city is a product of human expression, not singly and in predictable or linear ways, but the result of social tensions, anxieties and contestations.

This "city as text" (Duncan 1990) has been claimed by some postmodern theorists as a celebration or at least an enabling of pluralistic participation and openness — the city as consisting of "ex-centric' space," the mode of "those who are marginalized by a dominant ideology" (Hutcheon 1988: 35). It thus also enables an intriguing and potentially fruitful application of the theories, interpretative strategies, and positions employed by disciplines like literary criticism and theory, and cultural and media studies, to urban landscapes. Benjamin (1997: 44) observes that "the urban" has from classical times always brought with it "the problem of metaphors and thus of language." Metaphors

and language are arguably more than whimsical alternative representations of the city, revealing the nature of cities as manifestations of a "dominant cultural logic," a "cultural act of classification" (Jameson 1991: 6; Shields 1996: 227). The "city as text" is to be read in symbolic terms, as articulating the complex desires and anxieties of its cultural context, and (to a certain extent like literary texts, albeit with a different semiotic constituency) permitting plural interpretations of and engagements with the urban landscape. This, however, leaves the problem of whose voices and interpretations should be taken into account in critical engagements with the city: to simply replace dominant and official discourses of the city with alternative and marginal ones, is to tend towards an alternative monologic.

Related to this concern, although it may initially seem like its obverse, is the fact that unlike many literary and artistic texts, where complex and polysemous language and symbolic structures are used in order to create an "aporetic" reading experience (Shields 1996: 227), the city is arguably driven by an overwhelmingly dominant discourse located at the overlap of municipal planning, governance, global capital flows and property development cartels. The very qualities of the great global cities which attract transnational human flows and catalyze thinking about multiplicity and human processes (vast physical size, wealth of resources, a globally linked economy offering large-scale and varied employment, and the like) are also the qualities which perpetuate the effective dominance of a central ideology and authority, thus creating the "new geography of centrality and marginality" which Sassen (1999: 105) observes in major commercial centres like New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam and others. The textual interventions and multiple subjectivities sponsored by global cities do not lead to a simplistic replacement of dominance and authority with plurality and de-centred processes; as Harvey (1989: 44–46) warns us, postmodernism's championing of "localized struggles" and "pluralistic ... strategies" "have not generally had the effect of challenging capitalism," which remains the motor force of globalization and global city formations.

Reading the city as text is necessarily a commitment to plural, co-existing meanings available in urban landscapes — a lesson which is usefully adapted from literary studies, where it has long been an admitted and even celebrated truth. To proceed otherwise — to insist that representations and discourses of the city in film and television, advertising, literature, individual praxis and opinions should somehow constitute the same order of data as the physical mass of the city's dominant spatial forms and the political and economic forces which created them, or even that the former should somehow displace the latter's dominant position — is unrealistic in terms of spatial politics, and

unsound in terms of scholarly methodology. A study of the cultures of a city, including the city itself as cultural expression, seeks to interrogate and inflect the monologic thrust of the dominant landscape by an insertion of other, plausible voices that are articulated in various experiences of the city. These other voices have varying justifications, from the popular film or television show whose urban imaginary is seen by and arguably resonates with a great number of the city's inhabitants, to the isolated comments of a malcontent whose complaint at most represents the views of a small minority. Such readings of the city cannot ignore or supplant the dominant political-economic discourses, but bring to bear other co-existing meanings which in various ways challenge, modify, complicate (as well as sometimes agreeing with) the dominant discourses. While this kind of approach does not materially change the fact that some kinds of urban discourses and logics are more dominant or representative of larger social groupings than others, it does call attention to the real heterovocality of urban responses and experiences, and thus argues for the inclusion of these other voices, data and experiences in a more wholistic view of the city.

Such a methodology, which includes cultural approaches without necessarily invalidating or supplanting more positivist data, seems particularly useful for newer Asian cities, which are less significant as major centres of global capital but have their own global ambitions, strategies and claims. Urban structures in many of the newly independent Asian nations display much less predictable patterns of economic hegemony and marginalization, in part because both economics and culture are complicated by political and historical factors which do not normally figure significantly in American and European global cities: these may include (varying according to the city and nation) the shortage of certain resources (land, cheap labour, skilled labour), the role of religions and rituals (caste structures, taboos and animosities which impact on socio-economic relations), language factors (not only the language of an elite group, but problems of plural and competing languages, and their relationship to the global language English), and related issues. The same nationalizing forces, which strove in the 1950s and 1960s to forge a common identity out of these particularities, remain in evidence as a culture of governance that makes a significant imprint on urban planning and development. Governance — not an immutable or universal thing, but the local manifestation of a general will to central authority and cohesion — thus becomes both an erstwhile ally or exploiter of global capitalism (inasmuch as the latter aids its developmental logic and thus fosters its authority), as well as its local competitor for dominance (inasmuch as they offer competing ideologies of individualism and its relation to statehood and collective identity).

The cultural politics of such Asian cities on the brink or in early stages of global competition might thus be fruitfully analysed, in terms derived from the Russian theorist M. M. Bakhtin (1981: 5–12), as an inherently “dialogical” process involving a highly “polyglossic,” heterogeneous social condition. While the adaptation of terms from literary and cultural theory might seem merely to return to postmodernist accounts of the city as a site of plural possibilities (and thus heedless of actual structural inequalities), Bakhtinian theory is highly sensitive to power structures, inequalities and their role in shaping culture. His account of literary history and the struggle between genres such as the “epic” and the “novel” is nothing more than a theory (approached via cultural forms) of “ruling social groups” and how their power is both manifested (in the chosen literary form) as well as challenged and undercut by other forms (Bakhtin 1981: 4). By considering power relationships as they manifest themselves in culture and literature, Bakhtin is able to offer a theory of how cultural forms contain and channel social conflicts, without relying on an insistent radical politics and revolutionary cultural processes which are the weak points of many Marxist accounts of social contestation. The “dialogics” of the city, if we may be permitted to explore such an analytical paradigm, is not to be confused with a “dialectical materialism” whose usefulness can only be measured in terms of the desired end results of “hard” social processes like activism and reform. Rather, dialogical contestation in the city can refer to and account for a wide range of cultural manifestations such as architectural form, verbal discourses, performances and representations, as well as the culture of social praxes; these all acquire significance, not based on whether or not they “achieve” actual change in the built environment, but in terms of how well they interrogate dominant structures and thus throw light on processes of control and containment.

“DialogiCity,” as an account of some forms of postcolonial urban contestations, is in many ways suited to the example of Singapore; Singapore’s relatively recent independence in 1965, late entry into the modernized cities stakes, and even more recent project to compete as a global city from around the mid-1990s, call attention not merely to the dominant role of global capitalism, but also to the ways in which this modulates, influences and acts against and together with nationalism and governance. The compressed time frame in which all this has taken place, together with the residual historical overlays of colonialism, different immigrant origins, and vernacular languages and cultures, almost beg an analysis in Bakhtinian terms of “heterovocal” cultural expressions which are collectively an interrogation of relatively new and susceptible forms of dominance. This analysis of the dialogical constitutions of social identities and zones within the newly independent nation and its



urban formation, is not towards a simplistic repudiation of governance — for what viable alternative would take its place? — but is part of a revisioning of both culture and governance in the context of transnational flows.

In this project, of articulating an urban model of heterovocal space, the work of social theorist Michel de Certeau offers an important theoretical basis that in many ways complements that of Bakhtin. De Certeau's analysis of "everyday practices" — walking, talking, reading, shopping, cooking and even dwelling itself — as a kind of "usage," "consumption" or "making do" (*bricolage*) which is both submissive to dominant power structures and subversive of it, is highly sensitive to the heterovocal, insinuating nature of textual practice and the semiotics of urban space (De Certeau 1984: xii–xiii). His critiques of Foucault's panoptical apparatus and Bourdieu's structured *habitus* as conceptions which concede the essentially "monotheistic" nature of social order, show his own differing conception of the social "polytheism of scattered practices" (1984: 46–57). This polytheism does not fit into the easy dichotomy of authority and subversion, dominant and marginal spaces and groups; as De Certeau insists, "marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive"; the space of the city is thus not a clearly demarcated dual space characterized by a relationship of contestation, but a more complex "network" of intersecting discourses, signs and practices (1984: xviii; 18). De Certeau's awareness of the textualized and semiotic nature of such practices, as much as his insistence on the multiplicity (rather than duality) of social structures and orders, harmonizes with the Bakhtinian understanding of certain narrative forms as the subtle and insinuating politics of plurality. A notion of "DialogiCity" inspired by such an understanding would not concretize urban structures into "authorized" and "unauthorized" spaces, but would rather examine the multiple and ongoing discursive engagements (including their contradictions, disagreements and ironic collusions) which characterize urban culture, particularly in an overdetermined space like Singapore.

Each of the chapters in the present volume focuses on select Singapore topographies which, under the scrutiny of multiple and related texts, discourses and theories, reveal the dialogical interplay of governance, global influences, and particularized identities — an interplay which the city attempts to conceal and occlude as part of its normal processes. Chapter 1 logically begins at the beginning — with the Civic District which is conceived of as the city's cultural, historical, commercial and administrative origin. As the place of intense memories commemorated by "landmark" sites, the Civic District is also the place of a neo-colonial remainder which inserts itself (not without difficulty) into the commercial ethos of the downtown area. If the neo-colonial nature of these landmark sites can be incorporated into Singapore's project of becoming

an arts and tourism hub, this transnational positioning carries with it an inherent cost, of elevating certain kinds of cultural memories and architectures at the expense of others. The neo-colonial logic of the refurbished Civic District, in other words, becomes the germ of a larger urban pattern which manifests itself throughout the city-state.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with different aspects of perhaps the most dominant constituent (at least in terms of area and affected population) of Singapore's built environment — the public housing estates built and managed by the Housing Development Board (HDB). Chapter 2 examines the ideology of “upgrading” which is written implicitly and explicitly into the public housing landscape, in the form of various HDB-initiated upgrading projects, in financing and eligibility policies, and in the stylistic gestures towards postmodern style that characterize much of the upgrading efforts since the 1980s. This ideology of upgrading is thus the corollary in the public housing landscape of a governmental project of propagating individual materialist acquisitiveness. While on the one hand this project reinforces the government's push towards global competitiveness, on the other hand it raises a problem of managing and containing the socio-economic aspirations of the bulk of its residents — the so-called “heartlanders” who are conceived of as local and vernacular citizens rather than globally competitive players.

Chapter 3 analyses the main spatial features of Singapore public housing as means of creating a neutral zone to mediate potential clashes within a multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual setting. This strategy (and its echoes, doubles and resonances) is extended into such aspects of the public housing landscape as street design and representation, conceptions of the Singaporean family, language policies, the social discourses of patriarchal governance, and other such features. Yet as successful as these strategies have been in propagating an extensive built environment and symbolic system, they come at a certain cultural cost, which has been raised with increasing frequency and success by a variety of cultural texts.

Chapter 4 goes on to examine the official discourse of “multiculturalism” as it is maintained, not in the government-dominated space of public housing, but in sites where other elements and factors enter to complicate the racial landscape. The Malay Village and its surrounding Geylang neighbourhood are analysed in the first part of the chapter, as examples of commercial (rather than governanced) packagings of Malay race, culture and religion. In the latter part of the chapter, the “Little India” area of Serangoon Road is analysed in terms of Singapore's policy on foreign workers, immigration and perceptions of race, class and values. “Multiculturalism,” created as an official position through constitutional practices, public housing sites and other means, reveals

its cracks and fissures in the face of commercial ambitions and the human flows brought about by globalization.

Chapter 5 turns to the relatively small stock of private property in Singapore, as the logical complement (not only in terms of the built environment, but also as social construction and symbolic values within the city-state) of public housing. Despite its small size and the ways in which its supply and development are regulated by the government (features which distinguish the Singapore private property landscape from that of many cities in America, Europe and Australasia), private property plays a disproportionately large role as the repository of globalized values and influences. This raises other aspects of the cultural loss and absence seen in the Civic District — manifested here as a symbolic association between private property and “foreign” spaces.

Chapter 6 brings together the thematics of the “heartlander-cosmopolitan” divide, vernacular and local identities in competition with global influences and “foreign” spaces, and other related issues discussed in preceding chapters; and considers these in relation to urban planning and visionary “futures.” While urban concept planning has long been a prerogative of the Singaporean government, it has itself opened up the possibility of public input, diverging views and differentiated zones. This is in itself a visible response to globalization and the perceived threat of the brain drain of talented Singaporeans who feel no attachment to their homeland because they see no possibility of affecting its planning. While at the present stage this is still very much a controlled and regulated version of public participation in planning, it also indicates a trend of alternative voices, mappings and visions of Singapore’s future as a global city, which are often much more strident and disturbing than the officially sanctioned feedback.

Dialogical urban cultures, it is suggested, will be the direction among the small and newly independent nations of Southeast Asia (and perhaps even further afield); the discrete national boundaries that were the goal of mid-twentieth-century nationalisms, are seen as giving way to a dynamic tension of different social identities, fostered by transnational media and communications structures, but still identifying themselves according to dominant urban hubs. The resulting heterovocality is not a developmental phase of the Asian city in a stage of global competition, but its ultimate and characteristic condition; it is expected that this will place increasing and particular pressure on the governance of the multicultural, multi-ethnic Asian nation, particularly when it is compressed into a single urban space as in the case of Singapore.

The authorial positioning required of such a project is clearly a more delicate one than that of a study which relies exclusively or mainly on hard




positivist (historical and/or synchronic) data, in which it is various forms of quantitative data which does most of the "talking." I write this book as a Singaporean by birth and citizenship, one whose personal experiences of the rapid changes in Singapore's urban and cultural landscapes, flaneurial studies of individual sites and groups, and interpretations of cultural signs, inevitably go towards forming one of the discourses that appear in this book. While this "insider" position is balanced, to a certain extent, by my having lived for protracted periods in and done fieldwork on other cities and cultures (Sydney, Seattle, Birmingham, Chicago, Seoul, Bareilly, and others), this of course does not change the fact that the insider's perspective comes with both privileges and perils: an insider may have linguistic, cultural and other insights not readily available to the dedicated scholar who comes from an "outside" position, but this also comes with deep attachments and personal convictions which complicate the detached objectivity the outsider is more likely to possess. At the same time, however, this subject-position is checked against other discourses: not only the voices of other informants and readers of the city and its associated cultural output, but also the arguments and opinions of other scholars, relevant quantitative data, and even the discourses of governmental bodies, corporations and planning authorities. Certainly the authorial voice in such a study must constantly be aware of, and avoid, the danger of installing itself as the final and conclusive word on the urban environment. Yet having said that, it is also true that the authorial voice has a certain place, and is less intrusive and suspect, in a cultural study such as the present one, where it is required to fit into the range and possibilities of meanings formed by other voices and a variety of different discourses and data. As is the established methodological criterion of literary and cultural studies, the present volume can only stand to the extent that it offers a plausible and engaging reading of the urban text based on the evidence presented; it cannot, within this methodology, offer a monologically conclusive reading, nor does it aspire to.

A final word on existing scholarship on Singapore, an acknowledgement of intellectual debts, and a positioning of my own work in relation to that of others: this volume, while it attempts a cultural scope and method not (I believe) employed in earlier scholarship, and deals with a distinct new phase of Singapore's urban cultural development, nevertheless obviously builds on the important work of a number of scholars. Chua Beng Huat (1995 and 1997), Brenda Yeoh (1996), Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong (1995), John Clammer (1998), and others have done much to theorize and put into historical perspective Singapore's contested landscapes, its tradition and methods of governance, its containment of its multiracial and multi-ethnic population, and other related issues. I would have left the field to them if I did not believe that the present

volume has a story to tell, not just in some of the material which is not always included in sociocultural geographies — literary texts, film, advertising, a plethora of websites, and other voices and documents — but also in a distinct new phase of Singapore's urban cultural development. The work of my colleagues, coming as it does largely before the explicit major push towards global competition articulated by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's government in the mid-1990s or thereabouts, are less concerned with the ways in which Singapore governance and planning reveal the impact of global pressures, competition and influences.

In looking to the future of global cities, we inevitably look also to their past, recorded and retained (whether or not in palimpsest-fashion) through a wider range of cultural documents, media technologies, and subjective wills-to-action. Dialogical cultural contestations and overlays are poised to be enduring features, not only of cities in the newly independent nations of Asia, but — given enough time — in other urban hubs, controlling other diverse hinterland-zones, as well.



## **Conclusion: Asian Urbanism and — Globalization Dialogical Contestations and Symbolic Violence**

Singapore space suggests some of the ways in which Asian urban cultures will develop: away from the sphere of armed sectarian violence which now ruptures many Asian nationalisms (Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and others), towards urban spheres of influence, constructed by economic pacts, spatial constructions, media images, policy discourses and other narratives, and often crossing national boundaries. If Hobsbawm (1990: 14) is correct in maintaining that “the basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity,” then the characteristic features of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalisms — communities unified by language and culture, dedicated to a central cause or rallying point, under a strong central power — will not be the salient factors in the distinctive power grids or hubs which emerge in the postmodern global order. National boundaries and identities, while not necessarily becoming irrelevant, will be less distinct within the play of multiple discourses and identities at transnational levels; instead, distinctions at the level of “the city” — business environments, lifestyles and amenities, infrastructural features, relative costs, and the whole affective framework of the emotions, attitudes and responses evoked by particular locales — will loom larger in governmental, touristic, media and other discourses.

Singapore’s deliberate and strategic “branding” (Batey 2002) and promotion of its own image abroad — which takes many forms, from the planned advertising campaign to feature Singaporean “key figures” in leading periodicals like the *Financial Times* and *Time* magazine (Teo 2003: 1), to the narratives and images propagated abroad by agencies like the Singapore Tourism Board

and the Economic Development Board — are part of the nation's strategy for increasing its international profile and reputation. That reputation has certainly grown in the early years of the millennium, in many ways out of proportion to the size of the nation: Singapore's tough anti-terrorist stand and its staunch support of the US (in general, but particularly in the matter of the Iraq war) have strengthened its position in relation to the US and its allies, and were contributing factors in the signing of its Free Trade Agreement with the US in May 2003. Singapore's handling of the SARS crisis has also been lauded by the World Health Organization (as well as other nations) as a model for other countries, and has served in some ways to justify the nation's well-known brand of tough paternalistic governance. In addition, as long as Singapore's economic and infrastructural development continues to be significantly in advance of many of its Asian neighbours, it will continue to be upheld as a socio-economic model, not just for aid and collaborative efforts, but for outright emulation of its policies and strategies as well — Cambodia's King Sihanouk, hosting a recent visit by Singapore's President S. R. Nathan, went so far as to call Singapore the "pride of Asia" (Nirmala 2003: 4).

This image enhancement, which is likely to intensify the process of learning from and adapting various Singaporean policies (the Central Provident Fund, public housing, road pricing and other traffic management measures) on the part of other countries, is also reinforced by the exportation of several large-scale Singaporean built and spatial strategies. The Housing and Development Board, for example, has in recent years been contracted to build "little Singapores" — low-cost and large-scale housing estates — in other Asian countries, most recently on the outskirts of Hyderabad in the fast-developing Southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (Aggarwal 2003: A14). Joint projects by Singapore's HDB and the EDB to construct industrial estates in China, Indonesia and elsewhere in partnership with local authorities and concerns not only give a financial boost and planning expertise, but effectively export and impose the characteristic model of Singapore governance and spatial-cultural strategies through the working models of these Singaporean government-linked organizations.

While it is certainly early days to be sketching an Asian future in which the Singaporean model (or some approximation of it) becomes a dominant or influential paradigm, the ways in which various aspects of Singapore policies and developmental strategies have quietly but steadily been exported, adopted and adapted in a number of other countries, are both structurally predictable and suggestive. It is not merely that Singapore's socio-economic development is so far ahead of most other Asian nations as to constitute the most logical model in the region for emulation; on those grounds alone, Tokyo, Kuala

Lumpur, Hong Kong, Seoul and other urban centres would have their own success stories and claims to a greater fame than Singapore's. The steady expansion of Singapore's strategies is also due to a focussed expansive mentality that actively promotes and seeks out such opportunities, but additionally to a cultural model which is infinitely adaptable to other Asian nations because of its inherent characteristics of symbolic and spatial containment, the neutralization of (racial, social, economic) differences, the propagation of desired (abstract) social identities. In this respect Singapore's model of governance is so clearly different from that of its neighbour and rival Malaysia, whose own spectacular socio-economic growth is accompanied by an explicitly and unapologetically pro-Malay and pro-Islamic government and cultural landscape. While countries like Malaysia are models for the successful perpetuation of traditional cultural identities and discourses within (controlled and adapted) free market conditions, Singapore is arguably the leading Asian model for the construction of new and abstract (ethnically and culturally contained) social identities and symbolisms through complex spatial-cultural mechanisms.

It is something of this symbolic inventiveness and energy which is exported to willing partner nations together with Singapore's characteristic modes of (economic, developmental, architectural, spatial) operation. While many of those modes will clearly be transformed by the different local conditions — different inhabitants, ancillary structures, local authorities and so on — in which they will find themselves, what is likely to survive and perpetuate are various strategies of symbolic production, spatial regulation, and ideological propagation within these exported "little Singapores." Spatial-cultural strategies of neutralizing traditional and ethnic differences, restricting/channelling street and agoric life and activities, foregrounding symbols of "cosmopolitan" social identity, marketing icons and districts of "world-class" arts and tourism venues and new industrial activities, and other such interventions in the meaning and interpretation of key sites, can and no doubt will be translated into the local conditions of many Asian multiracial and developmental societies. The attractions of such strategies — displacing sectarian conflict and violence with symbolic controls, producing different forms of social identities which simultaneously fulfil a number of functions (inducing upward mobility and "upgrading," disciplining the labour force, displaying ethnicity for controlled consumption while erasing it in potentially divisive areas), enhancing tourist revenues, general infrastructural development — are manifold, and are likely to induce more states, municipal authorities and governmental organizations in Asia to avail themselves of Singapore's readiness to export its brand-name.

The expansion of such a spatial-cultural order is not without its price, as

the foregoing analyses of key Singaporean sites have shown. If the control and displacement of sectarian violence and overt social conflicts is a welcome and desirable goal, this may come at the expense of a symbolic violence: not the actual physical violence to bodies (genocide, ethnic cleansing, ethnic rape, religious persecution), but the modification and control of cultural and social identities through symbolic manipulation, regulated lived experiences, controlled/constrained movements, authoritative discourses, and other such measures. This is not to deny the role that is obviously still played by hard and punitive measures (fines, law suits, policing, jail sentences) in the authoritative landscape of Singapore, but merely to observe that these are not the most complex, insinuating and far-reaching of its mechanisms, and are likely to play a less significant role than that of official symbolic constructions in Singapore's future landscape. In the Singapore context, the trauma of symbolic violence can be seen in the strong emotions expressed in the alternative responses it provokes. The strongly worded scatological and profane views on Singapore life expressed in the *Samuel Leong* webpage (no less than in occasional *kopitiam* gossip, in casual conversations in taxis, and other channels) are just the extreme end of a larger distress and sense of loss which appears in a variety of other discourses and practices. Carnavalesque humour, where it is used, is no less pointed, no less an expression of deeply felt emotions, than the vitriolic tirade: the "Heartlander" cartoon strip which appears in the *Talkingcock.com* webpage epitomizes this, with its symbolic violence (the sword duel between the arrogant cosmopolitan and the outraged heartlander) an expression of outrage at the controlling manipulation of one's social identities and functions, only thinly disguised as satirical humour. Although there are differences of degree, it seems clear within the overall context of Singapore's spatial-cultural logic that disciplining and controlling strategies in everyday life — the regulation of movement and play in public spaces and streets, the supplanting of certain kinds of speech (Chinese dialects, ungrammatical "Singlish") with official languages (Mandarin Chinese, grammatical English), the diffusing and thus defusing of ethnic sites and memories — are extensions of deeper social surgeries aimed at excising unwanted elements and grafting/nurturing desired ones. The resulting affects — the distress at having one's (non-criminal) practices disciplined and curtailed, at having to passively accept certain pre-defined social identities, the loss of non-official aspects of identity — are no less real for being constructed through the symbolic order.

As Singapore's types (if not exact mechanisms) of spatial-cultural ordering are exported and extended beyond its shores, so are its dialogical tactics, voices and media. This is in part due to the gaps, contradictions, chronotopic layers and violent disfigurements inherent in those official strategies, which also

become transplanted to other shores, and beg critical engagement. In addition, the international marketing of Singapore will inevitably also bring an increased international awareness of its non-official productions — the artistic troupes, filmic and literary narratives, websites, and the non-official ambassadors in the form of the thousands of Singaporean students, workers and other medium-to-long-term visitors to other countries, with their individual interpretations and discourses on Singapore life. While not all of these will offer dialogical engagements with official discourses (although some clearly will and already do, perhaps most noticeably the disturbing filmic landscapes in the works of Eric Khoo, Jack Neo, Royston Tan and other filmmakers, which are increasingly garnering international reputes and audiences), the net effect of opening up a wider and more participatory arena for discussion, with more opportunities for individual voices, is an inherently dialogical scenario.

The symbolic violence of Singapore's model of spatial-cultural control (as much as its strong policing and legislative measures) calls forth a different kind of response than the kinds of direct action and protest (strikes, urban social movements of various kinds, riots, petitions, vandalism) familiar in many European and North American societies. Singapore space deflects physical responses by the diffusive and indirect nature of its controlling mechanisms — by displacing social identity from the level of physical praxis, and reconstituting it at the symbolic level of spatial knowledge and spatial experiences. In this very gesture, by insisting on the symbolic importance of urban space (beyond its mere physical nature) it enables dissenting interpretations and alternative voices as constructions of urban orders. If such official spatial strategies control a wide range of everyday practices, they cannot control the alternative interpretations and narratives which emerge as it were at the margins of urban space, in the dialogical discourses of artists, writers, email correspondents, bloggers, and persons-in-the-street. It might be said that dialogical criticisms are the double of the official symbolic order: the latter calls the former into being, as the consequence and effect of its strategies. This, of course, carries a scholarly corollary and mandate to credit such dialogical cultural texts as part of the vital urban landscape, rather than as less concrete, ephemeral and thus problematic subjective positions. As space increasingly becomes a cultural and textual/linguistic site in many of the rapidly growing urbanisms of Asia, dialogical voices and contestations correspondingly become critical urban data, offering valuable insight not in spite of their multiplicity and varied textual strategies, but because of this.





## Notes

### CHAPTER 1

1. The outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in early 2003, which started in South China before spreading to Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam and elsewhere, re-energized popular discourses of "dirty" Chinatowns and their Chinese inhabitants and businesses in North American cities like Toronto (which was particularly hard-hit by the virus), San Francisco and elsewhere (*Straits Times* 2003c). Two years earlier in Britain, a government report which blamed an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease on a Chinese restaurant in London's Chinatown, led firstly to racial anger against the Chinese community in the population at large, and then to a voluntary closure of Chinatown and protests by British Chinese against the report (Lee 2001b: 11).
2. Thus both De Certeau and Bakhtin have to be distinguished, not only from the adamant institutionalism of someone like Foucault which, as De Certeau (1984: 46–48) argues, offers little possibility for the survival of "scattered practices," but also from the rather abstract idealism of Deleuze and Guattari's account of "rhizomic" social organisms. In insisting that "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 7), and in similar pronouncements on society which use the rhizome as its ideal model, Deleuze and Guattari suggest and rely on a view of social possibilities that are more empowered and ideal than is reflected in actual conditions.
3. The desire on the part of such nations to demarcate their differences from "the West" is often overt. An Islamic nation like Malaysia, for example, incorporates some of the religious edicts of Islam into the social values of the *Rukunegara*; that



is, the set of principles and guidelines for national growth and harmony in the first decades after independence. These often stand in direct opposition to the values seen as “Western” in derivation: Hashim (1994: 10) describes how global corporate advertising has to conform to Malaysian policy banning the promotion of pork and alcohol products, and featuring female nudity, all of which are offensive to Islam. Singapore has undergone its own phase of strenuously opposing “Western values” with Singaporean values derived from Chinese, Indian and Malay culture, and perceived as conducive to the development of a moral society (Ho 1989: 673; Stravens 1996: 277).

4. In this context we are reminded of Jacobs’s (1970: 233–234, 241) model of urban economic growth and its creation of “systems” of production and distribution which bring the city into relationships with increasingly distant regions. Although Jacobs’s primary emphasis is on economic systems, the model she describes clearly embodies cultural influences as well. When she observes that “differentiation” is the logical conclusion of such production, and that “in real life, real and important differences abound, whether in nature or in a market, whether in the resistance of trees to disease or in the information about current events needed by people in differing districts,” she might well be describing (an early version of) the chronotopic networks which arise with the systematic interaction of distant regions.
5. Etymologically (according to the O.E.D.) *palm* (“again”) and *psao* (“to rub smooth”).
6. The fact of its construction by convict labour prompts the *History of Singapore* webpage to declare that the cathedral “lacks the fine details of its early 13th century English prototype” (*History of Singapore* [online]). This bit of cultural cringing may be indicative of the ways in which the overdetermined styles and methods of production of the colonial government persist as a kind of virtual colonialism in the present day, in which the past (including the ruins) of an imperial culture are juxtaposed with a more recently emerged postcolonial one, to the disadvantage of the latter.
7. Thus, not only the many mission schools established by the Methodists, Anglicans, Catholics, Presbyterians and other denominations, whose recently built campuses located in various parts of the island still embody prominent features of the Palladian-Cathedral architecture; but also secular buildings like the Raffles Town Club at the corner of Dunearn and Stevens Roads, a private members’ club whose architecture is a luxurious update on the Romanized Cathedral or Capitol. There are also a number of instances of public housing void spaces which rather incongruously gesture towards (stylized) cathedral architecture — see Figure 3 on p. 40.
8. One of the few government-sponsored sites in the Civic District dedicated to Asian rather than European-derived cultures, is the Asian Civilisations Museum on Armenian Street (it has another premise on Empress Place), which showcases largely Peranakan (Straits-acculturated Chinese) cultural artifacts. Yet even this rare exception, which (like the nearby Armenian Church) is located somewhat off the main Civic District beat, arguably makes more of a token gesture than a major impact. Unlike the commanding physical presences of the major cathedrals

and concert halls, CHIJMES, and other Civic District edifices, the Asian Civilisations Museum is a relatively modest building whose architecture is something of a Straits hybrid: while it has wooden window-shutters and some other stylistic elements generally reminiscent of Straits-Chinese architecture, it also boasts wrought-iron fences and gates with fleur-de-lis motifs, heraldic-looking column carvings, and broad arcades. These elements of siting and architectural symbolism may go towards explaining why some early responses to the museum have missed any ethnographic discourse of “Asian glory” (Adams 2003: 153).

9. Thus claims Tay Kheng Soon, one of the pioneering Singapore architects and a champion of the return to a “Malayan” spatial idiom and to the spirit of inclusiveness and ethnic mix characteristic of that culture (Tay and Goh 2003: 24).
10. An informant who is a ceramicist and involved in the exhibitions scene in Singapore points out that the limited exhibition space in the Singapore Art Museum (itself partially a result of the conserved architecture and the marketing of space for commercial events) imposes a serious constraint on the size, type and duration of exhibitions that the Museum can host. It might thus be said that colonial-religious architecture and the marketing of commercial space influence a policy of balanced and rotating exhibits, which in turn create a certain fluidity of cultural identity in keeping with the mixed symbolism, origins and aims of the museum edifice.
11. The “civic republican” or “commonwealth” ideology is spelt out in key texts such as James Harrington’s *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1992), and Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1966). For accounts of the social and political legacy of civil republicanism in England, see Pocock (1985) and Robbins (1959).
12. It is possible to speculate on at least one of the motivations for this choice of a European rather than Asian cultural moment: the desire to maintain the harmony among the different races in Singapore, by refusing to appear to privilege any one culture and history. While this is nowhere explicitly stated in the “Renaissance City Report,” it does resonate with the fact that when cultural acts are represented in many official publications, there is a conscious attempt to include the different Asian traditions (thus the Chinese opera artiste and the South Indian and Malay dancers in their respective costumes on the cover of the *Official Guide: Singapore*). Quite apart from the controversial nature of such a posited motivation (i.e. whether or not it creates as many problems as it forestalls, or whether it might not be possible to refer to several cultural models, drawn from the different races), the politics of racial harmony is itself an aspect of the neutrality of culture, and a significant contributing factor to the need to create an abstract space susceptible to a plurality of interpretations.
13. Or, as Chairman of Singapore’s Economic Development Board Teo Ming Kian puts it (speaking of the work of potter and cultural medallion winner Iskandar Jalil), “Pottery and the arts have a vital place and contribution to the knowledge-based society that Singapore is becoming” (M. K. Teo 2001: 12).

## CHAPTER 2

1. For a more detailed account of the history of immigrant housing in the Singapore River district, in the Singapore Improvement Trust (S.I.T.) flats which preceded the HDB, and in the rural kampungs before the mass resettlement to HDB estates in the latter 1960s, see Yeoh (1996: 136–165); Yeoh and Kong (1995), and Chua (1997).
2. These are the words of then Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker in 1970, looking back on the first ten years of the HDB's activities, and clearly reflecting the developmental and modernizing thrust which characterized the early years of the HDB (Housing and Development Board 1970: 3).
3. For an historical account of the geography of immigrant communities and their "adaptive strategies" in response to living conditions in late colonial times, see Yeoh (1996, especially Chapter 4), and Chua (1997).
4. Figures obtained from Housing and Development Board, "Brief background on HDB," *HDB Infoweb*. In addition, 1.7 percent of all HDB households also owned private residential properties either in Singapore or abroad, and 2.3 percent also owned non-residential properties such as retail shops and office space (Housing and Development Board 1995a: 61).
5. The HDB's "Single Singapore Citizen Scheme" was implemented in 1991, and allowed single citizens aged 35 years or above to buy a 3-room or smaller flat, but on the resale market. Additionally, they were restricted to buying flats in the less desirable outlying areas; this geographical restriction has only been lifted with effect from 28 August 2001. Single buyers are eligible for CPF cash grants (currently at S\$15,000) to assist them in such purchases, to qualify for which they have to fulfil the HDB's other criteria on income level and ownership of private property (Housing and Development Board, "CPF Housing Grant for Singles"; *Straits Times* 2001e: A3).
6. This income ceiling refers to gross monthly income; applicants who do not fulfil this criterion cannot qualify for subsidized HDB mortgages.
7. Such purchasers are prohibited from selling the flat within five years of the date of purchase.
8. Knight Frank's Director of Research and Consultancy Dr Amy Khor, commenting on the Singapore property market in the decade 1990–2000, cited in *Singapore Property Guide* (2000a: 14).
9. The Central Provident Fund (CPF) is the governmental body responsible for the administration of funds paid into it as compulsory deductions from the salaries of workers in Singapore. The CPF Board reviews its interest rates (paid on the individual accounts held in each contributor's name) every three months, generally pegging it to the average interest paid on monthly fixed deposit and savings accounts by the "big four" local banks (the Development Bank of Singapore, the Overseas-Chinese Banking Corporation, the Overseas Union Bank and the United Overseas Bank). Neither the CPF nor the HDB is obliged to maintain a strict peg, however. The CPF interest rate paid on the "ordinary" accounts (which form the bulk of its funds) in the first quarter of 2000 was 2.5 percent, although the

banking average was only 2.14 percent (*Straits Times* 2000a). The HDB subsidized rate in the same period was 2.6 percent, 0.1 percent above the CPF ordinary account rate. In comparison, the “big four” Singapore banks charged an average of 4.25 percent for home loans.

10. Castells (1988: 2) observes that in many of Singapore’s public policies and services, “there is a form of Welfare State.” He goes on to argue that such “strong development policies,” involving considerable government intervention, were necessary in Singapore’s development to a position of global competitiveness.
11. In a follow-up story, the *Straits Times* reported certain flat owners and property agents as holding the view that the change in the HDB’s loan policy “may hurt those who have genuine reason to downgrade,” such as empty-nest retirees on fixed pensions, and families who hit hard times and are unable to maintain mortgages for their flats (*Straits Times* 7, September 1999).
12. In the words of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in a speech entitled “Chasing Your Singapore Dream” delivered at the Nanyang Technological University on 20 December 1996.
13. The essential terms of the protracted debate emerged in the following letters and articles, all published in the *Straits Times*: David T. E. Lim, “Discussion and Consensus Work only When We Listen” (16 February 2000); Tay Kheng Soon, “False Hopes about Park and Library (17 February 2000); Simon Tay, Zulkifli Baharudin and Cherian George, “Role of Civil Service in Civil Society” (17 February 2000); and Lim Huay Chih, “Public Consulted on Library, Chinatown” (25 February 2000) and “Open-Ended Debate Would Paralyse Government” (2 March 2000).

### CHAPTER 3

1. This dates back to early open spaces developed in Singapore by the colonial housing authority the Singapore Improvement Trust: see SIT report 688/28, cited in Yeoh and Kong (1995: 93).
2. Clubs featured as one of the “5 Cs” (which started out in earlier years as the “4 Cs,” a conscious or unconscious mimicry of the “4 Cs” that are supposed to define the quality of a diamond) touted in popular lore as the signs of wealth or social importance: “cash, car, [credit] card, condo[minimum] and club [membership].” Club memberships are bought and sold on the open market for varying sums, according to demand, and at their height (and for the most exclusive clubs, with extensive golf courses and recreational facilities) were changing hands for more than S\$200,000, although much more modest fees were charged for smaller club memberships. Nevertheless, membership fees, luxurious appointments and facilities, and limited places, all combined to make clubs the symbol of social arrival, especially in the imagination of the lower-income residents of public housing. The craze for clubs took a severe beating as membership prices plummeted at the end of the 1990s, a victim of both a speculative bubble market and the Asian economic crisis.

3. Top-spinning, a traditional Malay pastime involving beautiful handcrafted wooden tops (*gasing*), had something of a cultural exhibition quality in open spaces in Singapore up to the 1960s and 1970s. Although that traditional form has since receded under the pressures of modern life and the built environment, there have been several modern revivals through the slick marketing of various mass-produced plastic versions, the latest being the “Beyblade” craze that took hold of Singaporean children around 2002–2003; Beyblades (and their imitators) encouraged contests by having cutting protrusions and accessories, and it became common to see children in any available open space crouched around tops engaged in impromptu “battles.”
4. Some recent examples which all took place within a few months of each other, and representing only a small number of such cases, include a serial robber found and arrested at the void deck of Block 21 Holland Drive (Nadarajan 2003a); a man who assaulted a passing couple in the void deck of Block 682B Woodlands Drive 73, and who died while being subdued (Nadarajan 2003b); a drunk who spent the night in the void deck of Block 12 North Bridge Road, only to be robbed while unconscious; and a foreign domestic helper who was found crying in the void deck in Choa Chu Kang Avenue 3 after being sexually molested by her employer (*Straits Times* 2003b). See also Goh (2003b) for examples of media narratives of the void deck as a place of crime.
5. In fact, the name of the “Toa Payoh” HDB estate, one of the oldest estates, means precisely “big swamp.”
6. In addition to field navigation, analysis of the street patterns of HDB estates is based on the *Singapore Street Directory*, 20th ed. (Ministry of Law 2000).
7. An interesting example is the “Portraits” currency notes, recently introduced into circulation, which reverses this avoidance of historical personages, but in a significantly guarded manner. Unlike for example the presidential portraits on US currency, which feature a variety of personages on the different denominational notes, all notes in Singapore’s “portraits” series regardless of denomination have the same image, that of Singapore’s first President, Yusof bin Ishak, who held office from 1965–1970, and is thus the only leader with anything like a historical “distance” from the present. As many of the leaders responsible for the successes and shape of contemporary Singapore are still alive or else fresh in public memory, the “portraits” series is forced to rely exclusively on the portrait of Yusof bin Ishak. This invocation of a historical personage is further desensitized by the inclusion on the reverse of various scenes of national life (“education,” “sports,” “arts” etc), which really distinguish the denominations. Supposedly causes championed by President Yusof, these scenes redirect attention to the abstract construction of the nation, and away from the racial and cultural sensitivities that might be stirred by the depiction of historical personages — these scenes are carefully culturally inclusive, for example the S\$50 bill which includes a musical instrument from the different ethnic-cultural traditions under the aegis of “the arts.”
8. Shops are usually set back from HDB streets not only by the pavement, but often by drains, hedges and a grass verge as well. Vehicular access is thus redirected to

the car parks behind HDB blocks. Where shops are accessible from and close to the street notwithstanding these planned obstacles, there is often traffic blockage due to cars and goods vehicles parked temporarily while their drivers run down to conduct “quick” business with the shops.

9. The conspicuous absence of HDB sites and experiences in the STB’s promotional strategies recently led a *Straits Times* reader to write in suggesting that the STB sell the “experience” of “living in HDB flats” to tourists (*Straits Times* 2001f: H2). If the recent *Straits Times* on-site poll of tourists at ten select “tourist attractions” (which included the predictable sites like “Little India,” “Sentosa,” “Night Safari” and the like) is any indication, the media conception of what constitutes a tourist attraction confirms this omission of HDB spaces, and perpetuates it in the popular consciousness (Arshad et al. 2001: H2).
10. Among the many social tropes the film touches on are paternalistic control, discourses of “upgrading” and self-improvement, materialism, the place of foreigners (Filipina maids, China brides) in Singapore society, emigration, familial breakdowns (adultery, parental absence or neglect, emotional and psychological abuse), youth problems (sexual promiscuity, schooling, values), and others.
11. From the point of view of the sociology of space, it might for example be objected that Khoo’s 1997 film, which focuses on an obviously older style of HDB flat (with its limited space, primitive single toilet, and windows looking out onto a common corridor), ignores the rapid and extensive structural changes that were made to many HDB flats in the late 1980s and 1990s, thus exaggerating the unpleasantness of the HDB experience for thematic effect.
12. In another film, *eAhLong.com* (2000–2001), a loanshark is seen harassing a debtor by ostentatiously hanging a pig’s head on the door of the debtor’s HDB flat, visible to anyone passing by on the common corridor.

#### CHAPTER 4

1. This measure not incidentally reduces the electricity bills and thus the operating costs of what is ultimately a commercial enterprise. The Malay Village cannot altogether avoid modern lighting, of course, but these again make some concession to an authentic appearance and experience, with the “unsophisticated” air of naked lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling, or with rattan shades which match the traditional crafts on sale in the Village.
2. My reading of some of the tensions and contradictions in the spatial structures and design elements of the Malay Village is undoubtedly dependent to a certain extent upon local knowledge of the Malay community, its values, lifestyle and manners, and should not be taken as a purely detached and removed interpretation of overt data. As a speaker of basic “pasar” Malay (i.e. sufficient for small talk and market transactions), growing up with a number of Malay friends and acquaintances at school, as team-mates in casual and formal sports, and later (up to the present day) in the workplace, and with a father who not only spoke fluent Malay but had many Malay friends with whom he was on close enough terms to be invited



frequently to their homes, I acquired an ingrained and first-hand (if still an observer's) sense of Malay manners to find the project of the Malay Village jarring and unsettling. Yet my personal response and reading also acquire a degree of objective cross-referencing in that I am in the final analysis an outside commentator on Malay social concerns in Singapore society rather than an interested and motivated "inside" reader, and that my reading is corroborated by some of the observable and legible evidence of the Malay Village and its relationship to the surrounding Geylang Serai area and its Malay community.

3. The page on "The Islamic Dress Code" was added in response to the "Tudung issue": at the start of the school year in January 2002, four female Malay students in government schools turned up for classes wearing a *tudung* (a scarf worn by some Muslim women as a mark of "modesty"). The schools objected to this as a violation of the respective school uniforms, and in the ensuing debate the Prime Minister endorsed the schools' position, emphasizing the fact that government schools were part of a societal "common space" which had to conform to Singapore's attempts to build a "harmonious multi-racial, multi-religious society" (Osman 2002: 1). The *Kampung Net* statement on "The Islamic Dress Code," which declares that "only [women's] faces and hands are permitted to be shown," and accompanies this with a photograph of a woman and a young girl (of an age roughly corresponding to the primary school girls involved in the *tudung* issue), defends the religious conservative position implicated in the issue, without directly opposing the government's position on the importance of conforming to school uniform codes (*Kampung Net*, "Islamic Dress Code").
4. One of these lanes, Desker Road, was in its heyday (up to the 1970s and even into the 1980s) synonymous with prostitution, although the Geylang district bordering Geylang Serai has since become the area in which such activities are concentrated.

## CHAPTER 5

1. According to a 1989 estimate, the government "holds title to just under 70 percent of the island" (*Singapore Property Market* 1989: 6).
2. With effect from 15 May 1996, capital gains from the sale of properties sold within three years of their acquisition became subject to income tax on a rough sliding scale where the more brief the owner's tenure on the property, the higher the proportion of capital gains would be subject to taxation (100 percent if the tenure had been less than a year, two-thirds if between one and two years, and only one-third if the property had been owned for between two to three years). Since the taxable amount would be taxed at the marginal rate applicable to the individual's income for that year, this constituted a significant tax disincentive, and thus an effective prohibition against casual speculation in property.
3. Malay private property households were the only exception, and even then not by much: 41.1 percent of such households spoke predominantly English, while 56.8 percent spoke Malay. This is still a remarkable reversal of the trend in Malay households in HDB apartments, where more than 90 percent of households (in all categories except the largest HDB flat-types, the 5-room or executive flats) spoke Malay (Census of Population Office 2000b: 8).

4. The Residential Property Act stipulates that a foreigner may only purchase a “non-restricted property,” defined as a flat in a building of six levels or more. Thus houses and apartments in low-rise and low-density buildings are precluded, unless the would-be purchaser seeks approval from the Minister of Law. This effectively ensures that a foreigner’s stake on the land itself, and thus its redevelopment and re-utilization, is countered by the corresponding stake of a larger number of owners, the majority of whom statistically would be Singaporeans (Chew 2000).
5. It is unfortunate that this otherwise useful survey does not cross-reference its categories, for example, to show the nationality and age of the higher-income households, in order to allow more precise conclusions to be drawn. As it is, the link between pretensions of upward mobility and social superiority on the one hand, and the desire to dissociate oneself from public housing on the other, is suggestive.
6. It is not possible to strictly and simply correlate private property owners with the corresponding top 11.1 percent of households in terms of income, of course. Figures from the 2000 census show that even among the lowest 10 percent of households by income, 10.6 percent live in private property (“Advance Data Release 7”: 7), a phenomenon due to factors such as retiree households which report low income, inheritance of property, purchase of property at much earlier and lower prices, etc. However, with the salary caps applied by HDB as a restriction on those who qualify for public housing, and with private property prices in recent decades being much higher than the price of even the larger HDB flats, it is in general true that households in private property represent the highest categories of income and purchasing power. Furthermore, a very high national home ownership rate (92.3 percent) means that private property households also tend to represent a much higher net worth (because of the value of their properties) than HDB households.
7. To this has been added more recent variants on the “stakeholding” strategy, such as the “New Singapore Shares” given to all eligible Singaporeans in 2001/2002. These shares pay a regular dividend each year, plus a “bonus dividend, where applicable, equal to the real GDP growth rate of the preceding year” (CPF Board 2001: 1).
8. The racial politics of income, work and class continue to haunt Singapore’s explicitly and diligently meritocratic society. As the preliminary data from the 2000 census shows, the Chinese continue to enjoy the highest median household income among Singapore’s indigenous ethnic groups (S\$3,848), with the Indians second at S\$3,387, and the Malays last at a significantly lower S\$2,708. The Chinese median income rose 4.8 percent from 1990 to 2000, 4.5 percent for the Indians, and only 3.7 percent for the Malays (“Advance Data Release 7”: 3). The Malay issue continues to surface in political dialogues, in part because of the underlying question of possible divided loyalties among Singaporean Malays, in light of the fact that many have friends and family members among the Malays of neighbouring Malaysia. Recently Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew felt it expedient to have a frank discussion with leaders of the Singapore Malay community on issues of national integration and the role of the Malays. He took pains to



- point out the progress made by the Malay community within Singapore's integrationist and racially egalitarian system: "Thirty years [after independence], with English medium schools, integrated HDB estates, nation building and economic progress for all races, the position of the Malays has evolved, and will continue to change" (K. Y. Lee 2001: 4).
9. The meticulous and comprehensive *Singapore Street Directory* (20th ed.), with its alphabetized listing of all of Singapore's major private housing projects (Ministry of Law 2000/2001: 127–147), provides a useful survey of the titular themes of Singapore private housing, and clearly shows the distinction between the group of older, local-themed names, and the majority of newer projects with their connotations of distant places and cultures. For this and other detailed information on earlier condominium projects in Singapore and their developers, I am indebted to Sim Loo Lee and Ho Siew Lan's useful *Guide to Condominium Housing in Singapore*.
  10. To cite just two significant examples: the Singapore Ministry of Education prohibits the many foreign schools operating in Singapore to admit Singaporean children; this is to ensure that the latter "will be imbued with values, as well as citizenship education, that will help develop bonding and a sense of national identity" (Liew 2001: 26). Certain forms of foreign media are still controlled: the 1990 amendment to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act regulates "the sale and circulation of foreign publications produced outside Singapore, at intervals of not more than a week, and which carry articles commenting or reporting on politics and current affairs in Southeast Asian countries" (Tan and Soh 1994: 41).

## CHAPTER 6

1. Cited in Tien and Chandradas (2001: H4). The "Starville," a condominium project by Koh Brother Development and AIG Global Real Estate Investment (Asia), located at the junction of Lengkong Tiga and Lengkong Empat in the Siglap area in the East of Singapore, was launched in the middle of 2003.
2. Perhaps the only incongruous presence on this map is the Singapore Zoo, if it is considered as a part of the recreational life in Singapore (prominent recreational spots like the extensive East Coast Parkway near the airport, or the tourist attraction Sentosa island off the south central coast, are omitted). Considered as an adjunct (however tangential) to Singapore's biomedical ambitions, however, the zoo's presence fits into the logic of the map: Swiss company Novartis, for example, has established its Institute for Tropical Diseases in Singapore, while home-grown Merlion Pharmaceuticals focuses on "natural products" including bacteria and extracts from fungi. Within the logic of the biomedical industry which dominates this map, the zoo's inclusion transforms it into a mark of Singapore's tropical setting, a quality tourist landmark which is not incidentally a site for the collection and display of the region's flora and fauna. It may be the same logic which dictates that the rest of the island (apart from the built-up biomedical structures) is rendered as a lush carpet of tropical vegetation.

3. A non-governmental mapping which takes up this organic metaphor, albeit in ironic vein, is the cover of lifestyle and entertainment magazine *I-S*, whose cover for the 5–18 July 2002 issue features a map of Singapore rendered as a single-cell organism viewed under a microscope. Although tongue-in-cheek, the map (in its ironic stance) still points to the dominant features of the government discourse: Singapore's small size is rendered microscopic, while its potential for growth (under careful, laboratory cultivation) is emphasized. In a synecdoche (part-for-whole metaphor), this Singapore is literally its biomedical industry — precisely a costly laboratory growth itself.
4. The major factor imposing a "height constraint" on housing blocks in some areas is Singapore's airports and airbases, and the need to preserve clear lines of approach for airplanes.
5. It is perhaps this mutable and variable treatment of Singapore's islands that *Straits Times* cartoonists lampoon (in a tongue-in-cheek response to official discourses on "remaking Singapore") in a recent cartoon which shows Sentosa island transformed into an "Offshore Banking" haven (*Straits Times* 13 April 2002). While the cartoon's main point seems merely to offer a far-fetched and improbable idea as a contribution to the reinvention of Singapore, it does also evince the prevailing ideology of the malleability of Singapore's land mass, particularly its smaller islands. Sentosa island's remit to date has been that of a resort island and tourist attraction, and its imaginative transformation into an "offshore banking" zone (quite apart from the improbability in legal terms) consciously or unconsciously pokes fun at official conceptions of land as capable of rapid and radical transformations.
6. Although the name "Esplanade" has some historical justification (it was the old name, dating from colonial times, for the popular promenade which stretched along the coast beside the Civic District's *Padang*, and thence could also be applied to the present-day stretch of the Marina Bay coast adjoining the older site), the problems of pronunciation it now poses indicate some of the ways in which colonial remainders become messy, pluralized and contested in a global era.
7. Singapore has historically been dependent upon Malaysia for the bulk of its supply of untreated water, which it buys at a relatively low price, purifies and (among other things) sells back to Malaysia. This has continually been the cause of rifts in relations and negotiations between the two countries. Singapore has taken a number of steps towards reducing its dependence on Malaysian water, including the use of reclaimed water (called "Newater"), which featured prominently and with obvious psychological effect in the 2002 National Day celebrations. At the same time, Newater is also part of Singapore's "Green Plan 2012," its ten-year plan to accord with global action on environmental sustainability. Singapore's Environment Minister Lim Swee Say, who represented the nation at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), touted Singapore's Newater scheme as a significant contribution to environmental sustainability, by "turning every drop of water into more than one drop by reclaiming clean water from waste water" (cited in *Straits Times* 2002c: 10).

8. The subcommittees and their titles and briefs are listed on the “Remaking Singapore” webpage.
9. The “real” Samuel Leong is something of a mystery, and more evasive than the better-known leading figures behind other satirical Singapore websites such as Colin Goh (of *Talkingcock*) and Lee Kin Mun (of *BrownTown*). Ellis (2001) traces the Sammyboy webpage to a site hosted in California but “registered to a Samuel Leong . . . in Auckland, New Zealand,” although the latter was untraceable. In the opinion of other informants, and judging also by the topics and state of knowledge displayed on the website, the author (whether “Samuel Leong” is his actual name or a *nom de plume*) is indeed Singaporean in origin, although quite possibly based elsewhere.



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