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Clean and Disciplined: The Garden City in Singapore

Jesse O'Neill

The history of the garden city in Singapore and Malaysia hinges on a speech delivered on the 11th of May 1967. The speaker that morning was the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who explained the moral imperative of garbage disposal to staff at the Cleansing Department. After cleaning the old city, he said, they would make it beautiful with trees and shrubbery, and he named this ambition for landscape reform a 'garden city' (Lee 2012, 83). By August of the same year, Lee (2012, 177) was stating the plan with greater conviction: Singapore's garden city would be 'the greenest and cleanest'. Long after Ebenezer Howard's *peaceful path to real reform*, the garden city was inaugurated as state policy in Singapore.

In the early twentieth century, the English garden city movement was quick to spread internationally, first through Europe and North America, and then globally across the European empires (Bigon 2016; Freestone 1989). Throughout the British Empire, including Malaya and Singapore, garden city ideas were embedded in town planning and health reform policies. But Prime Minister Lee's speech in 1967 severed the term from those earlier colonial uses, as he claimed the garden city as something inherent to new national aspirations. What started as a global design concept was renovated to become a local instrument that might shape the physical and social landscape and support postcolonial civic development. It is a common tactic to see design in Singapore as a product of top-down state functions (cf. Huppertz 2018, 141–147; Chan 2011), and the garden city is no different, as government agencies effectively turned the design of the environment into a rhetorical device that would guide national discourse for decades.

Postcolonial Ambition

On that day in 1967, it is unlikely that Lee was thinking specifically of Ebenezer Howard or any other early theorist of the garden city, but his words were nevertheless loaded with that association and reveal indirect connections. The garden city was introduced to Malaya in the 1920s by Charles Reade, the first Government Town Planner in Kuala Lumpur, and secretary of the British Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (Goh 1988). By that time, the movement had largely shed Howard's original ideas of reforming land ownership and citizen-led political change, and mostly presented schemes for greenery, open space, and quality housing (Freestone 1989, 216). The garden city had become a model for the aesthetic techniques of suburbia. Reade's (1912; 1913) own writing emphasised formal organisation and hygienic conditions above all else. So Lee's choice of words, which invoked the garden city as a means to speak of public health and beautification, was therefore – whether or not he understood it this way – quite consistent with the movement's earlier realisations. But in the Malayan context, there was more to the term than just this.

In Malaysia, the garden city was a motif employed to sell new residential schemes and guide municipal improvements, and by the 1960s it had become code for western progress and modern lifestyle. In 1962,

a year before Malaysia's political independence, the outgoing Commissioner of the Federal Capital, A.D. York, expressed an optimistic vision for Malaysia's future, where Kuala Lumpur would become 'the most up-to-date city in southeast Asia' (Straits Times 1962, 11). To describe this vision, he called on the image of the garden city, by which he meant the beauty of nature alongside modern amenities and technologies. In 1968, Kuching also proposed to fill its streets with trees and colourful flowers, despite having no hope for success (Straits Times 1968c, 8). Their need to import foreign plants made the idea expensive, and Kuching was a poor city. That Kuching would declare such intentions, even when they were beyond financial reach, shows that in politics the garden city was more about making aspirational statements than any detailed planning. Its connotations of thoughtful design, comfort, and physical improvement spoke of developed living conditions and economic viability. This is what the Malaysian cities really wanted, and this is why they chose to name their ambitions that way. The garden city's image of peaceful order and natural landscapes provided a graspable expression of the desire for self-improvement. And although some limited planting schemes had already begun in Singapore in the early 1960s (Barnard 2016, 238), the decision in 1967 to finally call this a garden city has to be read against the backdrop of this rhetoric of development, which existed across the region.

Lee was utilising a well-recognised language that sought to create impressions of modernisation and economic growth, and considering Singapore's situation at the time, such interests are unsurprising. In 1967, the country was in a tenuous position. A 1962 United Nations report had stated that Singapore would be unable to survive on its own (Turnbull 2009, 299), yet this was its position after being expelled from the Malaysian union in 1965, barely two years after independence. For the first time, the island city was its own country, with an uncertain relationship to Malaysia and still timid after the heightened military tension with Indonesia during the *Konfrontasi* of 1963 to 1966. The language of crisis that existed in Singaporean politics at the time is often overemphasised, and largely served to secure greater power for the political elite of the People's Action Party, but it is also true that the security provided by Britain's military was slowly disappearing, that independence had made the country's strong economy uncertain, and that there were grave problems regarding labour and living conditions. Overlapping these issues was the matter of coming to terms with what it meant to be Singaporean, given that this was not really a way in which the people who lived there had thought of themselves before (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 29).

Part of the purpose in using the old language of garden city planning was therefore to invent Singapore as a physically and economically secure nation. For Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh (2003, 4), this invention of Singapore was achieved through the rapid creation of new cultural discourses, structuring new 'sentimental' nationalised landscapes of religion, ethnicity, and housing. But the garden city was also one of these discourses, a colonial leftover that could be adapted to guide the nation's character and literally define its landscape.

The Cleansing Machine

The first part of Lee's garden city plan was state-led, and required establishing the official mechanisms of order and cleanliness. This involved the cleaning staff who first heard the policy in May 1967, and concerned provisions of waste management and landscaping. The initial step was to remove garbage from the streets and design public litter bins. In September 1967, refuse vans drove through residential areas, ringing their bells and drawing people from their homes in the first of many public clean-ups (Straits

Times 1967b, 4). As waste collection became increasingly regular, the project continued by establishing a Trees and Plants Unit within the Public Works Department. By October, they had expanded state nurseries and planted 9,000 new trees along roadways and canals (Straits Times 1967e, 10).

In 1968, official responsibility for the garden city fell to Health Minister Chua Sian Chin, who emphasised nature as providing a path to hygiene (Straits Times 1968b, 8). Under Chua's instruction, the state's mechanisms grew through public education programmes and community events. That year, the 'Keep Singapore Clean' campaign began to teach communities about the need for cleanliness, planting schemes continued, and new policies discouraging littering and public urination were introduced. This initial clean up set expectations for the larger developments to come.

Figure 6.1. 'A Clean Round-up for Our Singapore'. 1978. Ministry of the Environment Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Lee's (2012, 77) 'cleansing machine' advanced during the 1970s through the Public Works Department, and later the Parks and Recreation Department. Administrative systems for the garden city were implemented, organising Singapore into *curated* planning regions. Parks and Recreation established departments for horticultural research, civic decoration, and management of the Botanic Gardens. These sat alongside their Design Unit, which employed local landscape architects from the School of Ornamental Horticulture, as well as expatriates on secondment from Japan, like Ren Matsui, who designed some of Singapore's most important city gardens in the early 1980s (Lim 1980b, 4). By 1980, the state systems of design and gardening were maintaining over half a million public trees and three million shrubs, and had designed new major parks across the island (Straits Times 1980b, 9). The overall project was about creating an attractive and ordered city, free of general mess and adorned with plants.

Through its initial successes, Singapore's garden city scheme had become much larger and more ambitious than any previous plans in the region. Although many colonial developments across Malaya had called themselves garden cities, what they really amounted to was little more than tidy new suburbs built at the edges of older untamed cities. This included the 1923 Wah Garden City in Singapore, the 1933 Garden City in Malacca, the 1947 Merrywood plans for Kuala Lumpur, and the 1956 Miri development in Sarawak. These, and developments like them, were all somewhere between ten and 100 acres in size, accommodating anywhere from two dozen to several hundred 'European style' modern homes (Singapore Free Press 1923, 53; Straits Times 1947, 7; Straits Times 1956, 5). Under colonial administrators, the aspirational reform of the garden city hardly moved beyond single estates. But for an independent Singapore, the plan expanded the garden city to the scale of a small nation. Ebenezer Howard's (1902, 20, 30) original plans had called for a garden city of 6,000 acres and 32,000 people – but now Singapore planned one that comprised some 145,000 acres and a population of at least two million.

Such a dramatic change of scale was achieved through the politics of land ownership. In 1966, new laws allowed the government to cheaply acquire private land for public use (Turnbull 2009, 317). This meant that the state had all the land it needed to see through its environmental reform, allowing a rapid urban expansion through the Housing and Development Board. Restrictions of land ownership had been a great limitation for colonial planners, as recognised by Charles Reade (1921, 165). What he found on arriving in Kuala Lumpur – which reflected the situation across Malaya – was land owned in irregular plots by irregular groups of people, each with their own interests. Land was variously owned by British concerns, by Malays, Indians, Chinese, and other communities, which made difficult any plan for terrain to be

communally pooled for totalising redevelopment. Garden cities require land ownership, and in Singapore the state was now the owner, meaning that the entire nation could be rebuilt through the official mechanisms of the garden city.

Invested in Gardening

Even at its inception, Singapore's garden city policy was understood not to be just the work of state departments, but as a series of values to be instilled in citizens. The policy was an 'attack on the rubbish creators' (Lee 2012, 79), that is, the residents of Singapore. State cleaning and planting could only be effective if it was respected and maintained by the public, therefore the other side of Lee's garden city was a plan to shape public attitudes. In effect, remaking the environment required a remaking of community values.

Public involvement began with the state education campaigns about civic hygiene, and quickly extended to other events. From 1968, 184 community centres were put in competition with each other to create the most beautiful gardens (Straits Times 1967a, 7). Then, public awards were used to motivate people into tidying their environment (Straits Times 1969, 11), as competitions extended to include cleaning and gardening at residential blocks (Straits Times 1967c, 5). This had the effect of informally collectivising neighbours into a cleaning and beautification workforce that alleviated strains on the Cleansing Department. The public were also increasingly involved in planting public trees and gardens through the founding of a national Tree Planting Day in 1971, which prompted residents, school groups and social clubs to support the efforts of the Trees and Plants Unit. And to maintain the results of this work, a kind of neighbourhood watch for ecological vandalism encouraged people to report anyone seen damaging city plants (Straits Times 1967e, 10). Gradually, Singapore's garden city plan was made the concern of its people. It was their responsibility to grow gardens, keep streets clean, and change old behaviours to fit new national ambitions.

Figure 6.2. School children taking part in community gardening on Tree Planting Day. 1973. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

These official planting days and competitions gave people reasons to garden, and necessitated a wider public knowledge of gardening. Policy-makers argued that basic botanical information should be taught in schools, and that it was a key responsibility of teachers to instil a love of nature in their pupils (Straits Times 1971, 12). In 1971, the Ministry of Law started publishing gardening books to this end, and tax incentives were later given for personal gardens that were seen as contributing to the national plan (Business Times 1977, 12). People maintained community gardens in housing estates or in the public corridors outside their flats, and gardening became a national hobby. This was the strategy of investing citizens in public works (Lee 2012, 85). Had the state simply planted trees along roadsides, it would be the work of someone else. If the people planted those trees themselves on Tree Planting Day, they would be theirs. If they cleaned the streets themselves, it was thought, further littering would become a personal affront. Gardening would create a morality among the people, echoing Ebenezer Howard's (1902, 17–18) own claims that a city among nature would make people better.

The government's view was that the people of Singapore needed to develop a 'keener sense of responsibility' in order to enhance the state's economy and labour output (Straits Times 1968b, 8), and

this is why the people were told to tend their gardens. It was hoped that this would shape a national character that was ‘rugged’, hard working, and persevering (Hudson 2013, 18). Remaking the landscape through city parks and pretty flowers was therefore a means to reshape people. It was not so much the aesthetics of the garden that appealed to Singapore’s pragmatic government as it was the ethics of gardening, and the hope that a popular investment in the garden might turn people from foreigners in their own country into a responsible collective citizenry. After all, it was recognised at the time of launching the garden city campaign that laying flowerbeds down median strips of major roads was not simply about beautification, but was also a practical means to prevent jaywalking – or, the use of plants to regulate vehicular and pedestrian traffic (Straits Times 1967d, 7). Ordering the natural and urban environment provided the means to restructure public behaviour.

Garden City Values

As the cleanliness of the garden city became entrenched in public discourse, its popular meanings expanded beyond greenery to include any aspect of city life that the state or the public wanted to restrict. The garden city quickly became a prominent topic in newspapers, with letter writers telling readers what other things should be curbed by the plan: traffic, bad smells, diesel fumes from buses (Straits Times 1968a, 12; New Nation 1972, 8; New Nation 1975, 8). Journalists restated government proposals and added their own concerns: getting rid of hippies, creating a lively arts culture, and building playgrounds (Straits Times 1967a, 7; Yeo 1971, 9; Straits Times 1972a, 19). And the state continued its campaigns for behavioural reform, instructing people not to spit in public, to throw their garbage away, and to be courteous (Loong 1971, 12).

The notion of cleanliness, or the absence of dirt, began to take on meanings more aligned to the ideas of Mary Douglas (2003, 3), where ‘pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order.’ Cleanliness in the garden city was an absence of the matter, behaviours, and beliefs that were imagined as *out of place* within Singapore’s desired new social system. As Kong and Yeoh (2003, 32) argue, the state at this time began a programme of cleaning up social mess – all those unwanted customs and beliefs that they sought to get rid of in order to create their new citizenship. It was a broad scheme aiming to eradicate ‘unsuitable’ western cultural practices and confirm regional values and traditional ethnic moralities (Wee 2007, 34; Hong and Huang 2008, 96). This would remove disrespect for the country, political radicalism and dissent, a lack of courtesy, laziness, and anything that countered the broader aspirations for a peaceful, clean, hard-working, middle-class urban environment within the garden city of Singapore.

The language of the garden city had turned from one of natural imagery representing western modernisation into a broad instrument for control, allowing a state-sponsored removal of physical, social and moral pollutants. The dangerous idea in this is that an environmental concept of nature extends to politics and society, where dissent or fringe youth groups can be modelled as *unnatural*, and thus requiring removal. In this context, the physical presence of public gardens and flowerbeds acted as a veneer, creating an image of the state, as well as outward signs of citizenship and engagement. The presence of city gardens implied an absence of contrarians and anti-social activities. Wherever the plants were neat and the trees were tended, the hand of the state was present through its citizens, nothing out of its desired place.

The purpose of the garden city as a means of ridding Singapore of unwanted influences that challenged paternalistic planning was evident from the beginning, though this point is often overlooked. While the Prime Minister's speech of May 1967 is widely recognised as the launch of the garden city policy, the actual focus of that speech is rarely considered. Lee's primary purpose that day was to explain working conditions to public cleaners, and note the state's success in dismantling trade unions, which Lee (2012, 76) claimed encouraged corruption and inefficiency. The government had already positioned itself against any form of trade unionism that was independent of state control (Fernandez & Loh 2008, 220–221), and the first national parliament in December 1965 began measures to create a more disciplined workforce, limit strikes, and encourage stable environments for employers and investors (Turnbull 2009, 310). The speech in 1967 told public cleaners that for success they needed to conform to the state's expectations of their work, and that if they fell behind they would be punished. Lee spoke of the need for efficiency, and the need for cleanliness to improve the country's morale. He laid out his plan for the mechanisms of tidiness, where his audience that day would 'provide the proper physical means for control' (Lee 2012, 78). And he spoke of the need to condition the public – saying that those who 'cannot be persuaded and educated into doing the right thing must be disciplined' (Lee 2012, 79). By adding to these disciplinary measures some 'fountains, greenery, trees at circuses and other places,' he said, 'we could make this a garden city within a matter of three years' (Lee 2012, 83). That one line is the actual extent of his reference to the garden city that day. The greater concern was with public order and control. 'We will develop this very tightly organised, highly disciplined society, educate our young and maintain standards, imbue them with a series of social responsibility and group discipline' (Lee 2012, 83).

The state's concern with the beauty of nature was an outward expression of a much deeper project of national and social engineering. The garden city was something to be cultivated within citizens, encouraging their collectivisation, changing their values and activities, and demanding a level of civic vigilance. By establishing expectations, and by encouraging engagement with public works, the primary aim of the garden city was to condition a sense of duty and national identity. This was perhaps the most politicised use of the garden city since Howard's original scheme at the end of the nineteenth century, though one of a much more authoritarian nature.

Touring the Garden

Through state efforts, the garden city programme was popularly adopted, and by incorporating those earlier discourses of development it continued to express an optimistic ambition for improvement and stability. By the early 1970s, Singapore's position was far less tenuous. The government, led by Lee, was virtually uncontested and genuinely popular, the economy was expanding, unemployment was negligible, and living standards improving (Turnbull 2009, 312–313). The garden city, as a public discourse invented by the state, was becoming internalised in citizens' conception of themselves, and started to be used increasingly in shaping the country's international image. As the Ministry of Health and the Public Works Department continued their work on the garden city, another agency, the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board, began contributing their own picture of Singapore's modern 'garden attractions' (Yeoh et al. 2001, 4).

The garden city turned into a way of visualising Singapore for the outside world. At Expo '70 in Osaka, Singapore was portrayed to great success as a garden paradise in order to attract tourists and investors (Straits Times 1970, 4). Among the state's many ambitions was to turn the country into a tourist hub for

the region. To attract first world tourists they needed to provide first world conveniences, and the image of the garden city helped in this. Indeed, some elements of this plan had pre-dated the official policy, as in 1965 the Minister for Law and National Development, E.W. Barker, had commented that general improvements to public parks would foster an impression of economic stability (Straits Times 1965, 11). That year, Barker had the central business district of Raffles Place turned into a 'pleasure garden' of flowers and fountains. Underneath the garden was Singapore's first underground carpark, confirming the connection between the garden and infrastructural modernity.

Figure 6.3. View of Raffles Place, after construction of an underground carpark and rooftop 'pleasure garden'. 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

For the Tourism Promotion Board, the garden city reflected the techno-futurism of Singapore as a global city. The Board's chairman even chastised local artists for continuing to portray Singapore through the rural lens of village lifestyle (Straits Times 1972b, 18). Instead, he wanted modernisation: paintings of high-rise buildings towering above urban tree lines, where the city was both a beautiful garden and a global centre of commerce. In this guise, it was essential for the garden city to continue its older meanings of modernisation, where the image of the garden acts as a container for everything that might capture the attention (or allay the fears) of wealthy travellers (cf. Yeoh et al. 2001, 7).

A small campaign from 1982 represents the touristic garden city perfectly. It was launched just after the opening of the new Changi airport, a modern, high-tech terminal where tourists were greeted with gardens and fountains that would reinforce the country's advertised image. The campaign was a promotional postcard, showing a butterfly landing on the flower of a red ginger plant. But such specific instances of the natural world were not really the point. What mattered was the way the garden could become an all-encompassing vessel for the city: 'While most countries have a park in the city, Singapore has a city in the park' the postcard read. While other cities have beautiful gardens, nowhere else is the garden so omnipresent, so integral to the very conditions of national life.

Figure 6.4. Singapore Tourism Promotion Board postcard: 'While most countries have a park in the city, Singapore has a city in the park'. 1982. Author's collection.

The back of the postcard was printed with a simulated letter, extolling the pleasures of this garden.

Hello! Arrived safely in Singapore. Breezed through the spectacular new Changi Airport. Talk about efficiency. Singapore's described as '2nd busiest port in the world', '3rd leading oil trading centre', and 'a modern city state'. It's much more with lush greenery everywhere (fields of colourful orchids), and it's so incredibly clean. Found a rich blend of cultures, and the food – wow! Shopping's great, reasonable prices and such a wide range. Loved exploring the quaint old places while enjoying living standards like home.

The garden city is efficient, it's a commercial hub, it's modern, comfortable, multicultural, and the shopping is fabulous. This image is everything that William Gibson (1993) would later famously deride about the country in his article for *Wired*, which defined so many international attitudes to Singapore and was banned by the Singaporean government. In many ways, Gibson's impression of sterility and authoritarianism were all products of the garden city.

But Gibson's account was overstated. There was always more vitality, more dirt still uncleaned. He was overtaken by the rhetoric, and by the fact that the garden city was more an aspirational public discourse than a real place. What connects all the uses of the garden city in modern Singapore – whether the tourist campaigns, the government's efforts to shape national character, or even the colonial language of residential development – is that they are all images. The garden city was a vehicle for Singapore to express what it wanted to be. The physical planting of trees and gardens, the tangible results of this discourse, served only as an impression that the ambitions of the day – whatever they happened to be – were becoming real.

Conclusion

In 1967, Singapore was promised a garden city within three years, but instead this language shaped planning, national identity, and international promotion for decades. In the 1980s, a new phase of the plan was announced: the country was 'going colour' (Lim 1980a, 8). There would be more colourful flowers, sweet fragrances, and fruit-bearing trees on city streets. Around that time, though, the scale of real change became recognisable. By one account, the tropical 'wilderness' of Mount Faber, a popular attraction, had been replaced by a more controlled and inviting planned parkland (Straits Times 1980a, 1); a natural environment replaced by its simulation. The artificial nature of the garden city's products were being noticed, as an image displacing the real.

Colonial administrators had brought the garden city movement to Malaya in the 1920s, where it became the aspirational language of western lifestyle, hygiene, public order, and development. By the 1960s it also embraced new public amenities, modernisation, and economic vitality. In its first decades, the garden city spread British values and lifestyle ambitions among the Malayan middle classes, and implied the Empire's role in facilitating local reform. But from 1967 the idea of the garden city in Singapore was reshaped. The state made the old language of development and progress their own, turning it into a more widely encompassing, ambitious, and eventually a more successful programme than had ever been achieved before.

The garden city was brought into the service of creating a new national system. It was used to improve living conditions, mould behaviours, establish physical order and control, and construct images of security and enjoyment. The incorporation of nature into the urban environment became an instrument – a rhetorical image, and a wider public discourse – that helped to invent a nation and a national population. In Singapore, therefore, the garden city was ultimately a tool of political capital.

Postscript

Take one ounce each of light rum, Galliano, and lemon juice. Take four ounces of apricot nectar, and three quarters of an ounce of green sugar syrup. Put them together with cracked ice and shake well. Pour this into a twelve ounce glass and garnish with a red cherry, mint leaves, lemon, a Vanda Tan Chay Yan orchid, and a miniature figurine of the Tourist Board's iconic Merlion.

The cocktail is called a 'Garden City', and was sold at the bar of the Shangri-La Hotel in 1981, a building that the *New Nation* (Mahbubani 1980, 21) once called the epitome of the garden city in Singapore. This is what the garden city turned into after its adoption as state policy. Far from being strictly a method of

urban planning, it was an image of relaxed lifestyle, and an idea of everything that was good about city life. In Singapore, the language of the garden city was so pervasive that it could be used to define any experience.

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