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Singapore's Garden City: The Political Language of Urban Planting

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ABSTRACT

The idea of Singapore as a 'garden city' was created in the late 1960s, shortly after Singapore gained independent statehood. Bearing little direct relationship to the earlier Garden City Movement, it aimed to transform Singapore's urban landscape into a clean and green international city. This chapter considers the idea of the garden city as a political tool, which acted as a government-led approach to urban management that pursued aims of modernization and nation building. I discuss the policy's origins in the tree planting campaign of the early 1960s, and how the shortcomings of that scheme informed the state's later approaches to the garden city. I discuss the relationships between the garden city and other social reform campaigns of the 1970s. And lastly, I trace the expansion of the garden city policy into newer strategies of urban planning. As the garden city developed as a policy, and as it found successes in transforming Singapore's built environment, economy, and international image, the policy showed itself as more than just roadside tree planting and designing urban parks. In many ways, it became the model for Singapore's wider economic and social reforms, guiding more than five decades of development and shaping the values of Singaporean citizenship. Beyond creating a landscape of urban greenery, the garden shaped the long-term success of what began as an uncertain postcolonial nation.

INTRODUCTION

Singapore is a dense city-state with modern architecture and abundant tropical vegetation that has long been labelled a 'garden city'. The term has been used since the late 1960s to promote Singapore to international investors and tourists, as well as to shape how Singaporeans themselves understand their built environment and national identity. I have previously argued that the idea of a garden city in Singapore, which began in 1967 with aims of cleaning and greening the urban landscape, quickly became a shorthand for any experience of a convenient and relaxed modern lifestyle that resulted from the physical and social transformations introduced by Singapore's government after becoming an independent nation in 1965.[1] Other authors have addressed the subject through similar lines of thought, variously positioning the garden city as representing economic growth, being an index of changing urban planning processes, illustrating government foresight, or demonstrating the Singaporean government's authoritarian sense of control.[2]

Evidently, Singapore's garden city is much more than urban planning and laying gardens. It was political policy that developed over decades as an image of urban life that

supported state ambitions of modernizing infrastructure and economic development. In Singapore, the garden city was investment in a political language of national security and growth, but it has not been the only approach to understanding the state's environmental, physical and economic planning. As such, in this chapter I sketch a wider history of the garden city in Singapore, looking to earlier policy that informed it, and later policies that extended it.

PLANTING AN IDEA

Singapore's ambition to be a garden city was established on 11 May 1967, when prime minister Lee Kuan Yew introduced the idea to government workers in the Cleansing Department.[3] Once they had cleaned the city and instilled ideas of urban hygiene, they would proceed to make the place beautiful with trees and shrubbery. This was not the first use of the 'garden city' in Singapore; it had been applied earlier in localized garden suburb developments like the Wah Garden City of 1923, which drew directly from the English Garden City Movement.[4] However, Lee's speech showed no direct connection to that earlier movement or its key figures. Instead, this was a proposal for a new context of decolonization, responding to the desire to establish a new and successful nation.

Lee's 1967 speech was not his first attempt to establish a state-sponsored planting programme. Lee had been prime minister since home rule was achieved in 1959 and remained in office until his retirement in 1990. And while coordinated planting schemes existed in Singapore's Rural Board as early as the mid-1950s, Lee launched his own campaign for urban planting in 1963. This programme promised that the government would plant 5,000 public trees, and it implored city residents to plant an equal number themselves.[5] The campaign began with Lee planting an Angsana in his constituency, which marked the beginnings of the Singaporean government's longstanding involvement in horticultural bureaucracy.[6]

In this period, Lee and his People's Action Party were attempting to reform Singapore in anticipation of its decolonization and joining with the Malaysian union. The recently established Housing and Development Board was moving people out of urban squalor and into modern housing developments, and the Jurong Town Corporation was beginning to industrialize the city's economy and workforce. The early 1960s saw the beginning of a process of transformation in the living and working practices of Singaporeans. This involved dramatic transformations in the built environment and meant extensive land clearance and new construction. At the launch of the tree planting campaign, it was estimated that for every ten trees cut down, only one was being planted.

Interestingly, though, the reason given for the first tree planting campaign had nothing to do with beautifying the urbanizing city, countering the effects of industrial growth, or softening modern architectural styles. In the following decades, these were common reasons given for the value of the garden city, but in 1963 ministers were determined to explain that there was nothing that could be deemed superficial about their interests in tree planting.[7] Instead, they claimed that the importance of trees lay with the need for water. They proposed that more trees encouraged cloud formation and moisture retention, thereby increasing rainfall and improving the island's water supply.[8] Ever since the opening of Singapore's municipal reservoir in 1878, the island had never been able to store and provide enough water, relying on piped water from the neighbouring Malayan state of Johor, and in the 1960s water security was still a key concern.[9] For Singapore's government, greenery was never an end in itself, it always had other motivations.

ESTABLISHING THE GARDEN CITY

From its start, politicians and community leaders became the faces of the tree planting campaign, regularly being photographed going out and planting saplings themselves.[10] But it was always intended that the public should take an equal role in the initiative. This did not really happen. Early in 1967, the Ministry of National Development declared the tree planting campaign unsuccessful, partly because it lacked expert botanical advice, and partly because the public had shown that they did not yet care for trees.[11] The campaign needed to be relaunched. In April a new National Tree and Parks Committee was formed, with an aim to advise on encouraging popular interest in gardening. And in May the prime minister launched the garden city policy, which absorbed tree planting within a larger framework for establishing order, cleanliness, and greenery within the city.

After the garden city's launch, various branches of Singapore's government were quick to act. By September the Housing and Development Board was already giving more attention to tree planting on its estates, though they still noted a need to cover saplings with barbed wire to protect them from inconsiderate residents.[12] A specialized Trees and Plants Unit was then established within the Public Works Department,[13] and by October they had already planted 9,000 new trees.[14] To provide all the plants that would be needed for roadside planting, the Botanic Gardens transformed parts of their grounds into nurseries that supported government building and landscaping.[15] From the start of the policy, responsibility for realizing the garden city fell to many government departments – parks officials, housing bodies, the Public Works Department, and the ministries of Health and National Development. At first, there was no centralized plan other than a drive for rapid planting. This drew criticism in a parliamentary debate at the end of 1967, when backbenchers claimed the policy was un-coordinated and often ineffective.[16] But the government's aim in this initial phase was for visible results as soon as possible, showing the public that there was a real prospect of urban transformation. This view also defined the plants that were used. The Chief Parks Officer, Tan Peng Gee, explained that the trees preferred for public planting were not necessarily the most beautiful, but were practical. For urban roadsides Pride of India, Yellow Flame, and Pong Pong were preferred. They were fast-growing, and Tan considered them 'upright and compact'.[17]

As official planting continued, the greater concern returned to popular engagement, which had been the downfall of the 1963 planting scheme. The garden city was launched with a call for Singaporeans to take on increased personal responsibility for maintaining a clean, healthy and green environment. Though rather than just requesting public help, this time engagement was achieved through a gradual series of legal measures and highly-visible mass social engagements. Fines for littering and damaging public plants were greatly increased, a neighbourhood watch programme for garden vandalism was set up, and in the early 1970s tax cuts were introduced for people planting and maintaining gardens of their own.[18] Community centres organized cleaning days in local areas, and competitions between housing estates aimed to reward those who could create the cleanest and most beautiful housing blocks, drawing the image of modern architecture into the sphere of the garden city.[19] Teachers were given the duty of teaching children to respect plants, and their students were given plants to care for at home, which allowed them to also instruct their families in the values of gardening.[20] Further plant nurseries were established along Dunearn Road to provide the public, turning this street into 'the floral mile'.[21] And at the start of the 1970s the Ministry of National Development entered the business of publishing gardening books, teaching the public about the forty preferred species of Singapore's garden city (Figure 1).

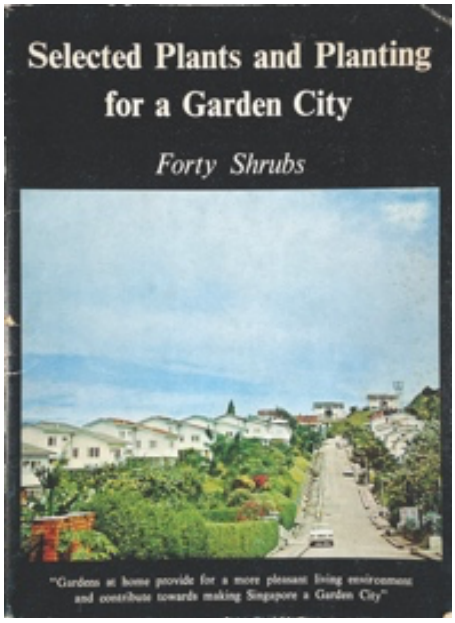

Figure 1. Cover of *Selected Plants and Planting for a Garden City: Forty Shrubs* (1971), published by the Singapore Ministry of National Development. Author's collection.

In 1971, as public engagement with the garden city seemed increasingly secure, the government decided to relaunch its tree planting campaign by creating an annual Tree Planting Day (Figure 2). These days became major events throughout the 1970s, where individuals and community groups would plant tens of thousands of trees across the city in a single day.[22] In the weeks leading up to Tree Planting Day, nurseries at the floral mile cut prices of saplings by as much as half, hoping to boost engagement with mass planting.

Figure 2. Minister for Culture, Jek Yeun Thong, planting a tree on Tree Panting Day at East Coast Park (1974). Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

At the beginnings of Singapore's garden city, the aim was speed and quickly visible results. This produced mass planting schemes, and whether the results were well-considered was not so important. It led to the use of fast-growing plants to show rapid change, and it necessitated recruiting the public as an informal national workforce. Where the earlier tree planting campaign failed to engage the public, the garden city forced a popular engagement, and in doing so it began to change the habits of Singaporeans, just as much as it changed the nation's physical landscape.

THE POLITICS OF GARDENING

Between launching the tree planting campaign in 1963 and the garden city in 1967, Singapore's political situation had changed dramatically. In 1963, Singapore prepared to cast off its British colonial status and join the new nation of Malaysia. By 1967, Singapore had joined Malaysia, been caught between the confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia, seen race riots, left the Malaysian union, and become its own independent city-state. Combined with pre-existing housing and economic crises, heightened concern for its water supply, and a vague concern of Malaysian invasion, Singaporean politics in the late 1960s pursued a 'survivalist' mode that aspired to securing national unity. It was a period where the

government attempted to reinvent Singapore to ensure its security, and the garden city was a key tool for achieving this.

If the public fully engaged in the garden city policy by planting and maintaining gardens themselves, it was hoped that they would then develop a greater sense of commitment to the progress of the new nation. As Goh proposes, the idea of a 'green' Singapore became a strategy for nation building.[23] Since gardening takes work and demands regular care, they would become rooted in the fortunes of Singapore, and less likely to associate with ancestral homelands or view themselves as citizens of other countries. Although it was suggested in research from the early 1970s that the government often overestimated any attachments to these distant homelands, the state still aimed to invent a new idea for what it meant to be Singaporean.[24] Survivalist politics essentially created an ambition for social engineering.

A united Singaporean people, however, was not enough. Prior to the merger with Malaysia, it had been determined that Singapore's economy was not strong enough to survive on its own. Now that Singapore was alone, economic growth was an urgency. As the state sought to draw international investment and expand its manufacturing sector, the presentation of Singapore as an ordered and clean city, whose citizens contributed to national improvement and showed respect for their environment, was seen as contributing to the state's financial security. As early as 1965 Lee Kwan Yew had spoken of his 'visions of a beautiful garden' that 'would be bearing gold and silver underneath'.[25] Planting gardens was therefore viewed as a means of creating order that would draw wealth and provide security. As a part of this way of thinking, the modernized garden city was also seen to draw tourists. In the 1970s, tourism promotions were launched in Japan, which portrayed 'Singapore as a garden city that is beautiful, a safe place for female tourists, and a heaven for shoppers.'[26]

In this way, the idea of the garden city was becoming an elastic term. From its beginnings it literally referred to increased planting and a green city environment. Over time, it also came to infer ideas of cleanliness, modernization, economic development, a respectful population, and order. Broadly, it represented the scope of the famous motif put forward by Lee Kuan Yew, that Singapore had transformed from a 'third-world' to 'first-world' nation. However, the garden city policy did not lay out all the requirements for this complete social and economic transformation, and as such, the government began launching a rolling series of campaigns that each aimed to alter people and city in smaller ways.

At the end of the 1970s, writers at *Berita Harian*, Singapore's Malay-language newspaper, began complaining about the number of official campaigns and the confusion that they thought could result.[27] They referred to Singapore as a 'campaign nation', questioning the effectiveness of running so many at the same time. The writers went so far as to suggest these showed the heavy-handedness of a government that did not trust its population to know what is important. There was no doubt that there had been benefits from these campaigns, but they questioned whether there had really been lasting effects, since old habits often resumed once the campaign had ended. By this time there had been campaigns for tree-planting, road safety, saving electricity, saving water, health, the metric system, and speaking Mandarin. There had been the Use Your Hands campaign, the Keep Singapore Clean campaign, the Sports for All campaign, gracious living, and its follow-up, the Courtesy campaign. Each addressed a particular matter of social, economic, or political necessity, intending to reform some small part of modern life in Singapore.

I would argue that in comparison to the other campaigns, the garden city was somewhat different. It began with direct and practical ambitions, promoting the cleaning and greening of the city, however in implementation these elements were separately covered by the tree planting campaign and the Ministry of Health's 'Keep Singapore Clean' campaign. The garden city was therefore wider that these individual campaigns, addressing

modernization and national identity, and over time it connected with a range of these smaller campaigns. As individual campaigns targeted specific behaviours, the garden city provided an overarching vision for what Singapore could become – connecting the various campaigns and giving them roles within a wider national aspiration. For example, the aim to re-invent Singaporeans as a hard-working and 'rugged 'people was intending to create a workforce that would help draw international manufacturing industries to Singapore.[28] This informed to the promotion of mass participation in sport and exercise as a national duty, which became the Sports for All campaign in 1973. This campaign established a need for sporting grounds and accessible open spaces that would be provided by the urban planning principles deriving from the garden city. If the initial phase of the garden city was criticized as un-coordinated, after several years it had become a highly unified system of interrelated policies, programmes, and social reforms.

As a broader policy for urban and social development, the garden city weaved together and contained smaller campaigns, acting as a guiding principle not only for planting but for state development. Where many other campaigns had positive results but not measurable output, the garden city had a quantifiable measure of success through the planting of trees and the percentage of land occupied by green spaces. As Barnard and Heng have said, 'nature had become a metaphor for Singaporean development. It was to be tamed and directed, much like the populace'.[29] In many ways, the visibility of trees, shrubs, and flowers, whether planted by state departments or residents, demonstrated the extent to which the population supported the government's plans and methods, and thus the extent to which they adhered to the wider range of campaigns. The garden city was really an all-encompassing approach to national development and social reform, where trees could become a measure of success. And as the idea of the garden became firmly entrenched, it increasingly featured an aspect of national identity, which was reinforced through architecture, tourism campaigns, government graphics such as the Wayside Trees stamp series (Figure 3), Chingay parades at Chinese New Year (Figure 4), and National Day parades.

Figure 3. Two panel details from the *Wayside Trees of Singapore* stamp specimen, showing Yellow Flame, Cabbage Tree, Rose of India, and Variegated Coral Tree. Designed by Tay Siew Chiah (1976). Author's collection.

Figure 4. The 'Our Garden City' float in the Chingay Processesion (1991). Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

GROWING THE GARDEN CITY

In the early 1980s, newspapers announced that the government was initiating a second phase to the garden city. There would be more flowering plants, more colour, more fruit-bearing trees, and generally a more beautiful appearance in the city. But, as Barnard and Heng infer, we might actually consider this second phase as having begun earlier, in 1975, since that year seems to mark a transition from the amateur aims of rapid planting to a more refined and expert-driven approach to gardening.[30] The lack of expert botanists early in the garden city efforts had been noted, but at that time it hardly mattered, because the greater concern was to gain public support, but by the mid-1970s the rhetoric of the garden city was firmly established. At the beginning of the decade the Botanic Gardens, recognizing the need for specialists, established a new diploma for Ornamental Horticulture and Landscape Design that was based on the Diploma in Horticulture launched at Kew Gardens in 1963.[31] In 1973, the Parks and Trees Unit of the Public Works Department combined with the scientific experts at the Botanic Gardens under the oversight of the Ministry of National Development, being reorganized in 1975 as the Parks and Recreation Department. It was the gradual development of expertise from the middle of the 1970s that allowed the introduction of the public 'second phase' in the 1980s. This resulted in the common sight of flower bushes on road overpasses (Figure 5), introducing vertical planting on new buildings like the Shangri-la Hotel (considered the epitome of the garden city at the start of the 1980s[32]), and development of major new parks.

Figure 5. Pedestrian overpass planted with colourful flowers as part of 'phase two' of Singapore's garden city (c.1985–1990). Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

It was also in the 1980s, however, that ideas about the natural environment began changing. While it was undoubtable that the garden city policy has transformed Singapore's physical environment, often for the better, environmental groups such as the Nature Society began taking aim at the precarious notion of 'nature' that developed under this model. They made the point of how artificial the 'garden' had become, reflecting little of the original natural conditions of Southeast Asia. They argued that in many ways the attempt to create a 'garden city' acted as an attempt to fight against ecology and replace it with an invented and controlled landscape that was more about accommodating modern buildings than it was about plants, animals, and natural systems.[33] These movements would later have effect on Singapore's landscape policies, but they took time to be accepted. In the meantime, urban development continued under the older model, where manicured garden landscapes expanded around the new towns that spread across the span of the island.

An expansion of the garden city method was proposed in 1991 by Liu Thai Ker, head of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which he called the 'Green and Blue Plan'.[34] This proposed an interconnected network of park and water spaces that frame urban townships. It also defined the types of green spaces that would be considered, which including natural areas, major public parks, adventure parks and sports fields. Importantly, and central to the proposal, the model established the idea of 'boundary separators', which were to be green linking spaces that connected major parks and served as green belts to define the limits of urban areas. The image created by the proposal was one of distinct city estates and neighbourhoods that existed as urban islands within a larger network of parkland. Here, parks no longer existed just as elements within urban areas, but rather, the urban areas existed within a larger contiguous parkland – reversing the hierarchy of the earlier garden city. The idea was transformative; the news article that reported the proposal commented that Singapore would, as a result, soon look more like a 'city in a garden' than a garden city. That

title – the ‘city in a garden’ – was adopted by Singapore’s government as an official replacement of the garden city policy in 1998.[35]

Criticisms of the new model followed those of the garden city – namely that it was the planned obliteration of nature in favour of the controlled simulacrum of the garden.[36] But the policy endured, resulting in more artificial construction of nature within and around urban areas. At the turn of the century, a large part of the ‘city in a garden policy’ resulted in new approaches to architectural development that made use of vegetative façades on buildings. This has defined the urban environment in Singapore for the past two decades, with green walls, rooftop gardens, and sky terraces turning architecture itself into a new site for garden growth. In 2002 the Minister for National Development, Mah Bow Tan, addressed this idea as a tension between land scarcity and the desire for greenery, aiming for ‘more greenery skywards […] to ameliorate the harsh and stark concrete facade’ of contemporary buildings.[37] This led to architectural firms creating buildings that expanded the natural vegetative capacity of the sites they worked with, greater connections between existing parks, and new icons of the architectural landscape that promoted the urban garden, such as Gardens by the Bay in 2012 (Figure 6), and the Jewel in 2019.

Figure 6. View of Supertree Grove, designed by Grant Associates, which sits within the larger Gardens By The Bay, designed by Wilkinson Eyre (2012). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

RETURNING TO NATURE

Early arguments against the garden city by environmentalist movements had little initial effect in urban policy, but over time they began to shape understandings of the city and its connections with nature. Parliament passed a law in 2005 strengthening the powers of National Parks Board, giving them oversight of new developments in relation to plant loss, raising fines for developers’ illegal cutting, and aiming to strengthen conservation laws.[38] Between 1986 and 2007, green cover of Singapore island had increased from 35.7% to 46.5% of the island, though it is noted that most of this is artificial, with primary and secondary forest only occupying 2.5% of land.[39] It was through small moves in the twenty-first century that the arguments of early environmentalist groups were adopted within the urban strategies of the ‘city in a garden’.

However, recognition of these ideas about the distinction between the natural environment and the artificial garden have recently produced another policy shift. In mid-2020, the ‘city in a garden’ policy gave way to the new policy of the ‘city in nature’. Like previous shifts, this will come with an expanded programme of new nature pathways, gardens and tree plantings, and is also being framed as a response to climate change and the need to clarify divisions between nature reserves and areas of future urbanization. The language of this change suggests a transition from earlier creations of manicured grounds and monoculture plantings to the establishment of areas resembling the jungle and mangrove native to the island, with wildlife and a greater range of local plants. It marks a desired transition away from constructed nature to regain the forms of ‘primitive ’nature that were largely lost through Singapore’s half-century of urban growth and controlled gardening as guided by the model of the garden city.

In 1967, when Lee Kuan Yew introduced the idea of the garden city, it was proposed that Singapore would become a garden city by 1970. However, the power of this idea, and its ability to enter other areas of national planning – framing modernization and economic development, guiding national identity and international promotion, and reforming citizens’ behaviours – proved to have a much more lasting effect. Instead of a three-year plan, the

garden city became a framework for urban and social planning for more than five decades. Developing from the failed tree planting campaign of 1963, it was re-introduced to find popular success in the 1970s. It entered a new phase in the 1980s, before taking over the entire island of Singapore, at which point the garden city became the city in a garden in 1998. From this point it established an idea of the garden as a nation-wide structure that shaped the city. This model began to absorb its own criticism, and transformed again into the city in nature policy, which proposes to conserve and restore a natural environment that has long been lost to urban and economic growth, which only further cements the idea of the garden within the national framework of Singaporeans. Even though the garden city is now a historical policy, it continues to define Singapore's approach to the development of the urban environment and its ideas of national identity. It made greenery an element of political discourse, a measure of the success of campaigns for societal reform, and a yardstick by which to evaluate the political success of Singapore's government in transforming its physical and social environment.

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