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Author(s)	Wong Tai Chee
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Land Use Development in Singapore: A Modernisation Process in Geographical Perspective - A Summary of Research Results

Wong Tai Chee

Fascinated by the fast pace of Singapore's land use transformations since the 1960s, the author has been inspired by an exploratory spirit to investigate the forces and ways in which this transformation has taken place. From a small project started in 1997, this land use research has been expanded to the scope of a book consisting of six chapters and 40 maps¹. So far, five journal or book papers have been published arising from the research. The book is aimed to be a useful text for junior college and tertiary level students in Singapore and abroad.

The **post-independence** path of Singapore is guided by a developmental and modernist approach. According to Johnston and Gregory² (1981: 223), **modernisation** is defined as an agent which 'involves social mobilisation, the growth of a more effective and **centralised** apparatus of political and social control, the acceptance of scientifically rational norms and the transformation of social relations'. Progress and development are modernist concepts that have been strongly associated with economic growth, anti-traditional behaviours and social rationality in human history. Ideologically, this approach in the Singapore context may be interpreted as a dual-policy of 'middle class progressive regime' to justify political mandate and commitments, as well as a 'regime devoted to lower-class opportunity expansion' characterised by constant need to improve general progress of the populace.

In Singapore, political imperatives and convictions in improvements of material standards of living as a symbol of good governance is a key driving force towards changing the old for the new. Prevailing ideological thinking and economic priorities **have** influenced national leaders in action plans and scope of change, reflected in the form of massive multinational investments, export-led market expansion, transfer of technology and workforce upgrading. In parallel, planning concepts available of the time have been responsible for the ways in which urban morphology changes.

Chapter 1 deals with the transformation of Singapore's Central Area that saw the replacement of **slums** by a dynamic business hub. This morphological change is virtually an elimination of dualism in physical structure typical of a colonial port city within the old core-periphery framework. Through removal of the inherited colonial urban **land-use** structure and the built form, Singapore has seen functional

transition from a low-ordered service-oriented central place to an increasingly higher-ordered service centre. Since the early 1990s, however, globalisation and widespread use of Internet and other advanced telecommunications between Singapore and global cities such as New York, London and Tokyo have called for a constant adaptation of the dynamic capitalist business world. Particularly due to the decentralising and deterritorialising effects of the information and communications technology (**ICT**), the new downtown core of Singapore is also subjected to a new challenge that makes the orientation of change uncertain.

Chapter 2 examines infrastructure as a modernising agent from earlier emphasis on physical infrastructure to infostructure (**ICT**), a new commodity and a key product of the globalisation process. Infrastructure has been widely recognised by post-war developmentalist states as a precondition for economic takeoff. It supports and facilitates the government administration, private **business** operations and daily activities of the general public. In Singapore, it has also **served** in the last three decades to attract multinational corporations whose leading technology, global marketing networks and competitive products have bolstered the city-state's **export-led** economy. From the 1980s, the **shift** to infostructure **serves** the medium to long-term goals to transform Singapore into a regional trade, financial and knowledge-based information hub. Indeed, the **ICT** plan is a key strategy of deepened global integration aimed at lifting Singapore from a semi-peripheral economy to the heartland of the core-dominating market place.

Chapter 3 focuses on Singapore's industrialisation, an engine of growth dependent however on multinationals. Dependency is perceived here as a relative term associated with whether the end could justify the means. If the development process has led to a sharp rise in material living standards that warrants a sustained political governance, using multinational corporations equipped with high technology and world-class management skills as a means to lead a dynamic industrialisation drive and achieve that end is conceivably justifiable. The first section of the chapter **presents** the theoretical framework and the rationale of industrialisation as a basis for economic development, and the role of the state as an initiator and facilitator. After 1965, Singapore's deep-rooted primary resource-based **entrepôt trade** has been modified from a manufacturing-based export-led trade, with heavy input from the **MNCs**. Section two

investigates the industrialisation strategy and the circumstances in the shift from the labour-intensive in the 1960s-1970s to knowledge and skill-intensive model after the mid-1980s.

Chapter 4 investigates housing development. Housing policy is indeed a real test of state determination of persistence and vigour as it involves voters' welfare and basic concern. With effective implementation and Home Ownership Promotion by the Housing and Development Board, housing has largely been resolved as a basic need issue. Nonetheless, by nature of its varied quality, housing reflects different levels of comfort to users and, to many, a social status. Consequently, despite continued State efforts to upgrade public housing quality, housing has a social representation that motivates household mobility as an implicit part of social upgrading process. General affluence and rising numbers of the middle classes have increasingly exerted pressure for more private housing distinctively different from public housing. This rising demand has met with response from the State that sees a necessity to facilitate access as a negotiating term for support of the government's economic priority model. The effectiveness of this model relies essentially on material incentives offered by the government that seeks to renovate itself frequently in response to popular demand. Rising aspiration for private housing is however hindered by price spiral and limited land supply.

Development of recreational spaces is the focus of Chapter 5. In Singapore, rapid urbanisation and nature conservation are two contrasted issues that are conflicting in objectives.

Even with limited land space, Singapore has to fulfil a multiple status as a city-state, global city and nation-state. To accommodate economic growth, nature has to give way to the expanding built environment. As an alternative, man-made greenery is increasingly seen as an aesthetic representation of nature and quality of life that can counter the debilitating effects of polluting, congested and impersonal urban life. The chapter looks at the conceptual relationship between recreation and quality of life as well as the complex triangular relationship of growth, equity and environmental preservation.

The last chapter re-examines Singapore and the interdependent world with which it is well integrated by trade links and technology transfer. Dependent on external resources varying from fresh water supply to highly complex issue such as use of international capital, technology, and foreign talents, further land use change is expected to continue to be influenced by such links. Impact of globalisation on Singapore is also examined with respect to how the nation would have to face an increasingly uncertain world and future to stay cohesive. The sense of vulnerability is constantly felt in each stage of rising globalisation, where protectionism and cyclic recessions persistently threaten liberalised trade.

¹ Book publication is being negotiated with Kluwer Academic Publishers.

² John R. J., Gregory D. 1981. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Blackwell, Oxford.