

CLC Lecture

# A Short History of Global Cities

Alvin Chua



**“The strategic question is, how does Singapore lead and service the next cycle? ”**

**Prof Greg Clark**

With urbanisation and cross-border connectivity increasing inexorably, the world is at an inflection point. That was the case made by Professor Greg Clark at a CLC Lecture as he delved into the historical patterns of global cities and identified the trends shaping our contemporary cycle.

Saying that the great urbanisation of the world may well be “the single most important anthropological episode that the human race has ever been through”, Professor Clark noted the major global issues that are likely to prove transformative in the long run.

These are the issues of peak humankind, with the world’s population expected to stabilise at around seven billion, the emergency of climate change and the growth of exponential technologies such as life sciences, automation and artificial intelligence.

“We are living with an interesting jigsaw puzzle...in which we’re trying to piece together this shift towards the urban, with the tools that emerge from new technologies, the imperatives from the climate emergency and the promise of population stabilisation at the global level,” said Professor Clark.

“The next 30-40 years become very important in establishing our long-term relationship with the climate and the planet...where and what the human population centres are going to be and which infrastructure is going to support them. What are the patterns of trade and exchange and mutual innovation that will come from a global system of cities that has a settled population?”

Another factor in the equation is the changing nature of urban economies, including the sharing economy enabled by digital platforms and the urban circular economy around food, water, waste and energy. The experience economy is also setting prominence on public spaces and place-making, while the innovation economy including big data is commercialising knowledge and asking questions of the role of cities.

Professor Clark detailed the historical antecedents that remain relevant today, quoting the arguments made in his recent book *Global Cities: A Short History*.

“The desire to trade leads to the desire to be better connected. Diverse populations — migrants, merchants and entrepreneurs — arrive to participate in a city that’s decided to be open to global flows,” he noted.

“Because of the arrival of these people, the processes of innovation are spurred and accelerated. That gives the cities greater influence, it allows it to generate soft power...(and) organise trade, license and franchise innovations. That leads to the instinct to constantly discover or colonise new markets, build trade routes and establish connectivity...and the ability to take advantage of geopolitical opportunity and change.”

“Whether we’re talking about Alexandria, or Baghdad, or Berlin in the 19th century, or Singapore today, there’s a positive triangle of reinforcement between trade, innovation, urbanisation and cities and their growth.”

Professor Clark also gave his opinion on anti-globalisation sentiment, which has been on the rise in a number of countries. “Among the criticisms of globalisation are that it is unfair, unjust, its benefits are exaggerated and costs not properly calculated, (it causes the loss of) national sovereignty and identity, immigration is uncontrolled and undermined, and that metropolitan elites are in charge and benefit the most,” he said.

“My view is basically that this anti-globalisation moment is an interruption, a disruption. It will cause an important set of corrections that are needed and necessary, but I don’t see globalisation and the emergence of global cities as about to stop.

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“In fact, I think we’re on the crest of a new cycle in which there’ll be many more globalising cities, principally because people, capital, technology, tourism and trade are still driving forces for all of us. This impetus is very deep in the human psyche.”

**“[W]e are on the crest of a new cycle in which there’ll be more globalising cities.”**

Turning to Singapore, Professor Clark listed a series of questions that will determine the future of a city-state that has “consistently, in solving and resolving it’s own problems through innovation, become a source of leadership and inspiration for other cities and countries.”

Just like the other successful world cities, Singapore faces lots of issues to do with the externalities associated with growth. Although Singapore has done brilliantly well in healthcare and housing, these challenges will remain.

“When does the emergence of the role of non-governmental leaders become a force? Is the ecosystem right for enterprise creativity and innovation? Is the entrepreneurial drive there to make that happen?”

Part of the answers, he continued, lie in capitalising on the nation’s expertise in innovation and advanced urban services. “Singapore has this DNA around innovation, such as (in its water story), it’s about how this DNA of innovation expresses itself in terms of the next set of tools of urban development, and how we move beyond accepted urban solutions,” he said.

“It’s the way in which Singapore starts to articulate its role in advanced urban services, the global circular economy, and in the experience economy as a place of decision-making, gathering and soft diplomacy.”

# About the Speakers



## **SPEAKER**

### **Prof Greg Clark**

International mentor & advocate for cities

Prof Clark is an expert in city and metropolitan economic development, technology and smart cities, urban investment, national and local policies. He regularly chairs summits and congresses on development issues and acts as a moderator for leadership forums and boards, such as the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum.



## **MODERATOR**

### **Dr Chua Yang Liang**

Head, Research and Strategy  
ARA Asset Management

Dr Chua has over 20 years of research and planning related experience. He currently heads up the Research and Strategy team at ARA Asset Management — a premier integrated real estate fund manager in Asia. Prior to ARA, Dr Chua was with JLL.

## About CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>

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