

CLC Lecture

Constructing Singapore Public Space

Alvin Chua



“[P]ublic space is developed not just by talking and sharing ideas but by doing things together”.

Non-hierarchical, pluralistic, and a space where people negotiate in their everyday life. These are some defining characteristics of Singapore’s public spaces, said Dr. Hee Limin at the launch of her book, *Constructing Singapore Public Space*.

The director of research at CLC detailed the historical evolution of public spaces in the city, noting how their social uses and discourses within them do not fit neatly into the established, mainly, Western theories and models. Instead, the Singapore’s public spaces are home to a variety of spatial practices that play an important role in shaping both state-people and people-people relationships.

One example is in public housing estates, which Dr. Hee noted have shifted from “pragmatic spacing between buildings” to become “a focus of community building and tangible images of liveability”. This evolution of public spaces from “spaces to networks” has been carved out by residents through their everyday use, resulting in a “spatial culture and social systems that may sometimes surprise the town planner.”



“Singapore is also about a plurality of spatial occasions...”

Such dichotomies have also played out differently in Singapore’s other public spaces. For instance, Little India is a space for both insiders and outsiders, and also contains temporal spaces occupied by weekend crowds and subversive ones such as the Desker Road red-light area. The city’s main retail belt, Orchard Road, however, is a space of friction where ideas of self and others are constantly evolving as people visit the direct for work and to encounter diversity.

On how these different types of spaces shape social relationships, Dr. Hee explained that the question to ask is what form democracy has taken within the idea of public space and practice. “In Singapore’s context, public space is the medium through which negotiation takes place through recurrent everyday spatial practices,” she said. “In simple terms, Singaporean identity and Singaporean public space is developed not just by talking and sharing ideas but by doing things together.”

As social landscapes continue to change, Dr. Hee urged urban planners to develop networks of public spaces rather than homogenous and undefined ones. “There’s a need to create more concentrated experiences, greater varieties in choice of spaces for Singapore’s increasingly diverse population, and create new adjacencies for encounters between different groups. We need new opportunities for new stakeholders in public space, so that the publicness of public space is preserved.”

As spaces that are defined by the spatial practices of its users, he likened Singapore's public spaces to theatrical sets where actors and props shift with time to give "different kinds of tones and tenors".



URA's PubliCity event, 2015. Photo Credit: URA Library Archives

During the panel discussion, Professor Peter Rowe of Harvard University wondered if the development of Singapore's public spaces had something to offer the world. As spaces that are defined by the spatial practices of its users, he likened Singapore's public spaces to theatrical sets where actors and props shift with time to give "different kinds of tones and tenors".

"Singapore is also about a plurality of spatial occasions that allows us to make of the space what we will and move on. This is a very contemporary idea, one that is rather liberating and one that I hope Singapore hangs on to," said Professor Rowe. He added that urban designers ought to differentiate between space as an event versus a container. "We need to shift the discussion of space-making into a realm that's probably a lot more performance-oriented, contemporary and has a temporality to it."

Expanding on this notion, Dr. Hee noted how void decks in public housing estates are transformed into community spaces by simple actions of the residents, such as the elderly bringing down some plastic chairs. This is why public space design should grow with spatial cultures so as to stay relevant to people's everyday lives. "As a designer, we should design something that's not too bounded, then you observe and you study, and you see what happens, and you do more when people get together and add more design elements, differentiate the space."

Even as public discussion increasingly happens online today, Dr. Hee says these virtual spaces are often self-selecting and reinforce certain ways of thinking. This is why physical public spaces are still valuable to the city.



“Good public spaces are those where you create adjacencies and places of friction; where different groups get a chance to bump into each other,” she said. “You become richer for the experience and build knowledge. That develops and transforms spaces and the identities of people in the end.”

About the Speakers



AUTHOR AND PANELLIST

Dr Limin Lee

Director,
Centre for Liveable Cities;
Author of “Constructing Singapore Public Space”

Dr Limin Hee is Director of Research at Singapore’s Centre for Liveable Cities, where she focuses on research strategies, content development and international collaborations. Dr Hee’s own research focuses on urban liveability and sustainability and their agenda for architecture, urbanism and public space. Recent book publications include *Constructing Singapore Public Space* (Springer-Nature, 2017) and *Future Asian Space* (NUS Press, 2012).



PANELLIST

Mr Michael Koh

Fellow,
Centre for Liveable Cities;
Former Chief Executive Officer,
National Heritage Board

Mr Michael Koh has 25 years of experience in the public service including 7 years as CEO of the National Heritage Board and 4 years concurrently as CEO of the National Art Gallery. He was also the former Director of Urban Planning & Design at the Urban Redevelopment Authority where he spearheaded the planning and urban design of the new mixed use Downtown at Marina Bay, revitalisation of Orchard Road as a shopping street and creation of an arts and entertainment district at BrasBasah Bugis.

About the Speakers



PANELLIST

Prof Peter Rowe

Raymond Garbe Professor of Architecture and Urban Design;
Distinguished Service Professor,
Harvard University

Prof Peter Rowe is a recognised critic and lecturer in the field of architecture and urban design, and served as Dean of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard from 1992 to 2004. His research and consulting focus includes cultural interpretation and design, urban form, economic development, historic conservation, housing provision and resource sustainability, among others.



PANELLIST

Dr Jane M. Jacobs

Professor, Social Sciences (Urban Studies),
Yale-NUS College

Dr Jane M. Jacobs is Professor of Urban Studies at Yale-NUS College. She has published widely on the themes of heritage, cities of difference and postcolonial urbanisms. Her most recent co-authored book is *Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture* (MIT Press, 2014). Her current research is on the relationship between professional and everyday practises of building research and innovation.

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>

© 2017 Centre for Liveable Cities

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the Centre for Liveable Cities.