Inclusion through Intervention

Living with Diversity the Singapore Way

When it comes to ensuring the harmonious integration of Singapore's diverse ethnic, religious, nationality, income, age or disability groups, nothing is left to chance.

Singapore is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multiple. As a small sovereign city state without a hinterland nor natural resources, galvanising the people to gel as a community has been fundamental to Singapore's success story. As the founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew shared in his memoir *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*, his biggest challenge was "how to build a nation out of a disparate collection of immigrants from China, British India and the Dutch East Indies". This, coupled with a significant foreign population that has been attracted to Singapore to live, work and study, has created super-diversity in today's Singapore.

Like many modern cities, Singapore also faces the issues of an ageing population and growing income disparities. These test the resilience of its social fabric. But unlike many cities where instances of cultural intolerances are rife, and different social groups lead separate, seemingly "parallel lives", Singapore has managed to foster a community of togetherness—a *Singaporean intercultural "habitus"* (how people tend to think and act based on socialisation)—despite the differences. What are some of the key principles that have guided Singapore's model of living with diversity?

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Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan Jin (far right in green) at the opening of Bishan-Ang Mo Kio's inclusive playground.

Setting the Frame, Building Bridges

The 1960s and 1970s were tumultuous times for Singapore. Beleaguered by an Independence precipitated by racial politics, and founding years embroiled in ethnic riots, Singapore verges on the obsessive when it comes to managing ethnic relations with institutional measures. Singapore's constitution was thus founded on the concept of equal rights, where rights and freedoms cannot be classified, defined and distinguished in terms of race, language or religion. Mr S. Rajaratnam, in his speech to Parliament on the Report of the Constitutional Commission in 1967, reiterated that since rights and freedoms are the same for all citizens, minorities need not shield themselves with so-called minority rights, and that the democratic principle of equal rights is the most practical safeguard against tyranny by the majority. Multiracialism, meritocracy, the use of English as a lingua franca, compulsory primary school education in a secular public school system, and national service for males at 18 years serve as the pillars to build bridges across divides. While these pillars set the frame, strategies had to be put in place to ensure that living across difference was not just about high-level policies and political discourse, but also translated in concrete ways that have become internalised as part and parcel of everyday life in Singapore.

Embedding "Software" in "Hardware" to Achieve Social Goals

The public housing programme, which houses 80% of Singapore's citizen population, became the key vehicle through which this was achieved. In *A Chance of a Lifetime: Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore*, Professor Chua Beng Huat, a sociologist who worked with the Housing and Development Board (HDB) when early flats were being built, recalled: " My personal story is a testament to the idea that the HDB has heart, and has always been concerned about people's everyday lives …

"I saw an ad in *The Straits Times* that the HDB was looking for a sociologist. So I went to see Liu Thai Ker (then CEO of HDB). I asked: 'Why do you need a sociologist?' … he said, 'I don't know what the sociologist would do but I know I need one' … obviously, he knew he was building housing for the whole nation, but it wasn't just a physical structure that was being built. The HDB had to consider the everyday lives of Singaporeans, because the physical environment was going to influence their lives in very serious ways. So, he knew he needed to worry about that, even though he didn't necessarily know where to begin."

Thus, in building flats, it was not just about the physical structure but how the environment affected people's way of life. The mix of housing types (rental and owner-occupied flats ranging from 1-room to 5-room units) within each HDB town was important. It encompassed the spectrum of the poor and middle classes to prevent ghettoisation.

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In contrast to many cities where public housing tends to concentrate the socially disadvantaged groups, Singapore's housing estates—while predominantly designed for public housing—have some private housing developments. Everyone, regardless of type of housing they live in, has equal access to public transportation and facilities such as shops, markets and parks. This principle of spatial equity underpins the quality of everyday life and public spaces necessary for a fair society.

01   The racial riot in 1964 highlighted the need for tolerance and acceptance in Singapore.

02   Public (left) and private housing (right) surround a school in a residential estate.

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Every town's full range of facilities provides porosity for people living within and at the fringes of the HDB estate to inadvertently encounter each other when they access these facilities. Schools, clinics, libraries, *kopitiams* (local cafes), markets, shops, hawker centres, playgrounds and parks have become "third-places"—spaces outside the home and work that people are familiar with and which help them get through the day.

Singapore's varied ethnic cuisines are also co-located at hawker centres, local coffee shops and markets. Not only does this ensure that people of all races have convenient and equitable access to the food they like, it also encourages the act of eating together while sharing a table despite dietary differences.

These shared spaces are the everyday anchors that foster the convivial spirit and enable diversity to become commonplace through the opportunities made available for inter-group mixing.

The most far-reaching of Singapore's social interventions is the Ethnic Integration Policy, which leaves nothing to chance. It ensures that each neighbourhood and block is racially mixed by stipulating racial quotas that correspond to the ethnic composition at the national level. The aim is to prevent ethnic enclaves from forming. Thus, a particular ethnic group would not be able to buy a flat if their quota has been reached for that particular block and neighbourhood.

As then PM Lee Kuan Yew explained: "We had to mix them up. Those who say we should cancel these restrictions … just don't understand what our fault lines are and what the consequences can be.

These are safeguards we have put in, which have prevented the communities from fragmenting and being alienated from one another." The belief was, and continues to be, that putting people of different races together would compel them to interact, and hence understand one another better.

Schools in HDB towns have naturally become integrative spaces as most children from different races and backgrounds go to schools close to their homes where they learn to interact across diversity from a young age. These attitudes carry over into the spaces of everyday life. Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam considers Singapore's education and housing policies the lynchpins of social cohesion and equity. In an interview at the St Gallen Symposium in 2015, Mr Tharman noted that "once people live together, they're not just walking the corridors everyday … Their kids go to the same kindergarten, they go to the same primary school … and they grow up together … where you live matters … it matters tremendously in the daily influences that shape your life".

01   Children playing together at a playground.

02   A wide range of hawker centre stalls caters to all dietary needs.

The design of micro-spaces takes the effort to foster integrative communities a step further. The ground floors ("void decks") of HDB blocks are designed as informal social spaces for residents to chat and for children to play. They are important social sites that have become quintessentially Singaporean—it is common to see Chinese funerals and Malay weddings held at void decks, sometimes even simultaneously. The proliferation of kindergartens, student care centres, senior citizen clubs that occupy part of void deck spaces further encourage chance encounters between residents. Beyond the ground level spaces, "courtyards in the sky", which are common corridors that link neighbours, and rooftop gardens introduce more communal spaces for interaction.

Promulgating the "Kampong Spirit"

Whilst the State can envisage and institute a framework of harmonious co-existence with policies, tools and props, it is up to people to foster the "kampong spirit"—a term that refers to the neighbourliness and community cohesion that often marked *kampongs* (local villages) of yesteryear. As Dr Liu Thai Ker, former CEO of HDB and Chief Planner of Singapore put it: "I have built you the kampong, show me the kampong spirit."

The Community In Bloom scheme is one example that has fostered this spirit. NParks, the national agency responsible for parks and gardens, established frameworks and guidelines to make it easier for groups to set up community gardens. To date, some 1,000 community gardens have fostered community spirit and brought 25,000 residents of diverse backgrounds together as recreational gardeners.

Fostering Collective Identity and its Challenges

In cities where differences among classes and ethnicities are so stark that it makes communal living impossible, Singapore has managed to craft a model that has enabled people of different backgrounds to co-exist in harmony. Managing diversity in the Singapore context is deliberate and concerted—backed by an institutional apparatus supportive of equity across difference. A good distribution of public amenities and the provision of communal spaces have served as social levellers that have ameliorated differences, leaving no group feeling like the underclass.

Despite these measures, a survey in August 2016 on race and racism in Singapore, conducted by Channel NewsAsia and the Institute of Policy Studies, reported that nearly 50% of respondents recognised that racism can be a problem and judged new immigrants as more racist than Singaporeans.

Alongside racial cleavages, diversity has now taken on cultural and local/foreign dimensions. As new and old sit uneasily together, cultural adjustments can become flashpoints for conflict.

In 2011, a "curry war" erupted when a migrant family from China complained about the wafts of curry emanating from an Indian Singaporean neighbour's apartment. The mutually-agreed mediation outcome was that the Indian family would cook the aromatic dish when their neighbours were not home. When this was reported, the issue bubbled over into one of nationalistic pride as Singaporeans perceived the outcome as unfair. Amidst the negativity, a Singaporean rallied others to "Cook and Share a Pot of Curry" to help newcomers appreciate local cultures.

01 Events at void decks of public housing range from funerals to weddings.

02 Five families gather along the corridor of their flats to break fast.

03 Programmes like Community in Bloom bring neighbours together for a common purpose.

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These incidences and the survey on racism are reminders that the work on diversity and inclusion are never quite done.

As a global city that attracts migrants from the world over and has an increasing number of inter-ethnic marriages, Singapore will need to build on the foundations it has put in place to manage an increasingly diverse society.

The transnational challenges of security threats and unemployment woes due to disruptions in the economy will test Singapore's social resilience. And as people direct their anxieties at the foreigner stranger, xenophobia might rear its ugly head. Nonetheless, there are everyday delightful examples that remind us that the "kampong spirit" is very much alive in Singapore—such as Muslim families inviting their non-Muslim neighbours to "break fast" with them during Ramadan season at their common corridor outside their homes.

Amid the fast paced city life where routines can grate, taking individual responsibility to promulgate a curiosity towards learning about others, a spirit of inclusivity, and a practice of everyday conviviality can shape a collective culture that engenders a more socially progressive society and liveable city for all. ○