ESSAY

Citizen Participation for Inclusive Outcomes

It Takes a Village to Plan a City

Drawing from a recent study, *Planning for Communities: Lessons from Seoul and Singapore*, by the Centre for Liveable Cities and the Seoul Institute, **Remy Guo** explains how citizen participation in urban planning and rejuvenation leads to inclusive outcomes.

Urban rejuvenation goes beyond the enhancement of physical assets in the city. It also involves relocating residents or businesses and overhauling their once-familiar spaces or infrastructure. Yet, these affected stakeholders tend to be left out of planning decisions, especially in traditional top-down processes that involve only public officials and experts.

Singapore and Seoul have been successfully transformed through decades of government-led urban development initiatives. These include comprehensive public housing in the former, and public-private partnerships with major development corporations in the latter. But in recent years, both cities are beginning to involve citizens more actively in the process of urban planning and rejuvenation. The following examples illustrate how this process has become more inclusive through collaboration with citizens.

Bonding the Community through Participation

Citizen participation is most commonly applied at the neighbourhood level. The intimate scale allows residents to relate meaningfully over common issues, while providing more room for decision-making by residents, with the government playing a facilitative role. This approach not only allows residents to customise solutions to local needs, but also creates more intangible social outcomes.

In Singapore, public housing neighbourhoods built by the Housing & Development Board (HDB) constitute the living environment for more than 80% of residents. Recognising the importance of neighbourhood design for social cohesion and community building, the HDB initiated a study in 2012 with the National University of Singapore (NUS) to review and distil good neighbourhood designs that facilitate community bonding.

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Tampines residents discuss ways to improve the estate's community spaces using models.

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The study took place from 2012 to 2014 over two phases. The first phase involved focus group discussions, site observations and a survey involving 2,200 residents from various precincts. The survey revealed that residents who frequently used their precinct's amenities registered a stronger sense of community. Thus, casual exchanges at neighbourhood spaces like lift lobbies and walkways could help to deepen neighbourly relations. Nine key strategies and six design typologies to enhance community bonding were distilled from the findings from the first phase.

Two design concepts were identified in the second phase for prototyping in Tampines, a 30-year-old HDB town. One was the Social Linkway involving interventions along popular pedestrian paths to encourage interaction between residents. The other was the Neighbourhood Incubator, a one-stop hub for community activities.

> **"Co-creating with residents is key to … fostering a stronger sense of ownership [of neighbourhoods] to ultimately build stronger communities."**

A participatory design approach was developed based on the earlier identified strategies for community bonding, to test how residents' participation could boost their ownership of community spaces. Working with relevant government agencies and the local Town Council, the HDB-NUS team involved over 1,800 Tampines residents through pop-up engagement booths, interactive boards, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and design workshops. Through these

01 Residents planting on the trellises at the Green Link.

02 Residents painting art banners that would be displayed at the Art Link.

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activities, the HDB-NUS team learned how existing spaces were used, how they could be better designed and which social functions could be incorporated to boost usage and interaction among residents.

Residents were invited to co-create the Social Linkway at Tampines Central Blocks 830 to 863, which is made up of four segments—Green Link, Play Link, Learning Link and Art Link. At the Green Link, volunteers came together to grow plants on a trellis, while at the Art Link, residents helped to paint wall murals and art banners. Over at Block 857, the Neighbourhood Incubator was designed as a multi-functional space. Equipped with movable stools, it could be easily converted to host community workshops or get-togethers such as potluck sessions and flea markets.

After the two projects were completed in end 2015, the HDB conducted studies on the usage rates and community interaction levels over two months. The new spaces enjoyed an average of almost 200 unique visitors daily. In particular, the average stay period at the Learning Link increased from 10.9 min to 24.4 min after the interventions were introduced, a duration long enough for a chit-chat. With the success of this pilot, the HDB aims to draw from the research findings to improve the processes for other estates' upgrading and renewal programmes.

The two projects show that physical design is only part of the solution for better neighbourhood spaces. Co-creating with residents is key to building consensus, encouraging utilisation of the planned facilities and fostering a stronger sense of ownership to ultimately build stronger communities. This calls for greater attention to bring the community on board, rather than solely focusing on the physical outcomes.

Balancing Community Benefits and Private Interests

The rejuvenation of old neighbourhoods requires a delicate balance between meeting residents' private interests and the broader needs of the community. In Seoul, until the early 2000s, the rejuvenation of older, substandard residential areas was often carried out without sufficient consideration of existing residents' needs. The process usually involved the full-scale demolition of existing neighbourhoods, to make way for large apartment complexes constructed to boost urban housing and the city's economic growth. This approach created social issues like the lack of alternative housing options and employment opportunities for displaced residents.

Since the 2000s, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) has shifted the approach for urban rejuvenation. Instead of full-scale demolition and redevelopment, it now supports community interest in local rejuvenation through relevant policies and programmes. One such initiative is the Residential Environment Management Program (REMP). Introduced in 2012, REMP aims to preserve, renew or restore existing residential areas according to the community's needs.

Seowon Village is a neighbourhood that benefited from REMP. Developed in 1979, the neighbourhood covers over 32,000 m^2 and houses 156 households. Prior to any discussions on neighbourhood rejuvenation in 2009, the neighbourhood retained the ambience of an idyllic village with two-storey pitched-roof houses. However, it also had issues such as the lack of parking spaces and unattractive streets hemmed in by 2-m-high property boundary walls.

As part of REMP, a resident council was set up with elected representatives. This council served as the core group for a collaborative planning process involving the district government, the SMG planners and the residents. Possible solutions were assessed

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from both professional and community perspectives, and rigorously debated among residents during community workshops.

For example, to accommodate additional parking spaces and address the problem of illegal street parking, the residents worked with city officials and urban designers to develop guidelines for shared parking spaces within private yards. Guidelines were customised to accommodate differences in individual properties, while ensuring consistency in the overall design. Today, low fences, open lawns and flower beds have replaced previously unfriendly boundary walls, creating a more convivial living environment.

Residents also reached an unexpected consensus on building height limits. Based on planning regulations, buildings in Seowon Village could go up to three storeys high. However, as discussions between residents and experts revealed that maximising building heights could result in negative impact on the village, such as increased traffic or reduced sunlight in the public streets, over 85% of residents agreed to a two-storey building height restriction to preserve the character of the village.

Seowon Village's success under REMP demonstrates the value of enabling deeper communication with residents. Supported by information and professional advice from experts, residents could better appreciate the implications of each proposal and make better-informed choices. More importantly, the process encouraged residents to consider perspectives beyond individual property rights to achieve more inclusive outcomes for their neighbourhood.

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01 Discussions with residents on the rejuvenation plans for Seowon Village.

02 Seowon Village's high boundary walls (left) were lowered to create a more welcoming neighbourhood (right).

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Building Social Consensus through City-Level Planning

In contrast to neighbourhood-level planning, citizen involvement in city-level planning tends to be more limited. This is due to the complexity of issues or potential market sensitivities like the impact of redevelopment on private properties. In Seoul, where 53% of land is owned by private landowners, the urban planning process had been typically led by professional planners in the government and academia.

The Seoul Plan 2030—a comprehensive urban master plan to guide Seoul's urban development until 2030—created unprecedented scope for citizen involvement. In 2011, newly elected Seoul Mayor Park Won-Soon pledged to shift the focus of the city's policies from physical development to improving quality of life, through communication and collaboration with citizens. Under the direction of the Mayor, the SMG took a leap of faith and established a transparent and collaborative process for the preparation of Seoul Plan 2030. Seoul's decision to actively involve the citizens is despite the uncertainties of an untested multi-stakeholder planning process, which stands in contrast to tried-and-tested passive engagement methods like surveys and exhibitions.

To develop an appropriate citizen engagement structure and establish the roles of various stakeholders for Seoul Plan 2030, the SMG first set up an Advisory Group comprising 33 experts from academia and civic groups. Based on the Advisory Group's recommendations, a 100-member Seoul Plan Citizen Group and a 16-member Youth Group were formed to develop the planning vision. Participants were randomly selected by a research consultancy to ensure that they had no attachment to specific interests. Membership was also balanced across factors such as gender, age, residential area and nationality. To also collect opinions from the general public beyond the Citizen Group and Youth Group, the SMG initiated platforms like a website, public debate and surveys.

The SMG organised several roundtables for the Citizen Group and Youth Group to discuss key challenges and issues, and to create a vision for Seoul's future. The SMG held back from controlling the outcomes and limited the experts' role to providing policy and planning information as well as professional assessments, so as to help citizens make better-informed decisions. The experts also mediated disagreements between participants. Although most citizens were initially critical of the government's efforts, interacting with experts improved their understanding of the policies and enabled them to offer constructive suggestions.

The key outcome of the discussion was the vision statement for Seoul Plan 2030: "A happy city of citizens built on communication and understanding". Mayor Park endorsed this vision, following which the SMG established a Development Committee for Seoul Plan 2030 to develop specific planning strategies. The committee, comprising diverse stakeholders from government to experts and citizens, focused on specific themes ranging from education and women to history and culture. The final plan was completed in September 2013 and presented to the Mayor as the collective effort of participants from various sectors.

> **"By incorporating diverse views through a rigorous, deliberative approach... [Seoul Plan 2030] was more readily accepted by the public."**

01 Citizen Group discussions were also open to foreigners living in Seoul.

02 The Youth Group was also involved in the discussions.

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While the planning process took about two years, the Seoul Plan 2030 benefited from the social consensus obtained throughout the process. By incorporating diverse views through a rigorous, deliberative approach, the plan laid out rational and inclusive strategies for Seoul's future and was more readily accepted by the public. This support from the citizens could help to safeguard the validity of the plan in the long term, in spite of inevitable changes in the city's political leadership. This contrasts with the previous urban master plans, which were plagued with public objection and were often scrapped whenever a new mayor took office.

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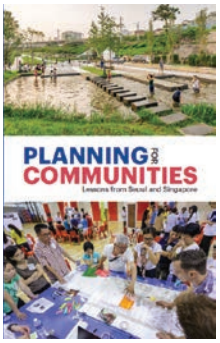
As societies become more diverse and urban spaces get increasingly contested, passive forms of engagement—such as ad-hoc surveys or voting on pre-determined options without adequate information—may no longer suffice to give insights on deeper issues or provide directions for the future. To ensure that different stakeholders' needs are comprehensively examined and incorporated into rejuvenation plans, city leaders need to involve citizens from the planning stage. Although this could entail longer time frames than expert-led planning, the examples from Seoul and Singapore show that active citizen participation is a surer way to forge consensus and ensure inclusivity in rejuvenating our cities.



This essay is based on findings found in *Planning for Communities: Lessons from Seoul and Singapore*, published by the Centre for Liveable Cities and the Seoul Institute. Download it at www.clc.gov.sg.

01 The Seoul Plan 2030 discussions involved citizen participants, experts and city officials.