



ESSAY

Singapore's Community Engagement Journey

Making Trust a Planning Asset

When community engagement is done right, a conflict between the government and civil society, instead of being a destructive event, can be a creative opportunity for mutual support. For this to happen, trust between parties is paramount. **Louisa-May Khoo** shows how this has been consolidated over the years in Singapore.

Community engagement is an important theme in urban governance, and increasingly commonplace in the contemporary planning processes of many cities. It can take many forms: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, co-creating and empowering; with each moving up the scale of participation from weak to strong. In its weaker forms, engagement can be regarded as political propaganda, seen as mere tokenism and a tool towards securing acquiescence. In its stronger forms, community engagement can be a key ingredient of social capital, elevating the people's ownership of a

decision and their participation in its implementation.

However, the process can become protracted and can lead to outcomes that are less just, especially if they are "hijacked" by specific interest groups. The community engagement process hinges on a delicate and dynamic relationship between the state and civil society stakeholders, built upon trust and mutual respect. This essay tells the story of Singapore's journey in community engagement for urban planning, with lessons for other cities.



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A 1987 exhibition titled *Conserving Our Remarkable Past* was put up to familiarise the public with conservation schemes for Singapore's ethnic districts.



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From Show-and-Tell to Dialogue

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, the state focused on addressing urgent development challenges such as housing provision and sanitation. This meant urban planning was regarded as scientific and technical, for which the expertise of bureaucrats and professionals was prided. Expediency of implementation was also a key consideration.

The idea of using community engagement as a means to build trust between people and the government only took off in the 1980s, after basic development needs had been addressed and economic growth took off. The quality of the urban landscape and the distinctiveness of Singapore's identity started assuming greater importance.

The stewardship of the country had also passed to a new generation of leaders, who brought with them a more consultative style of governance. In line with this changing socio-political climate, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the nation's planning agency, led the way. For its Central Area Structure Plan, it held public consultations for feedback on its proposal to conserve seven areas in Singapore including ethnic districts such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. An exhibition that displayed the detailed conservation plans was conducted in 1987. These initiatives were greeted with much media coverage and public excitement.

More extensive consultations with local stakeholders followed, with the formulation of Concept Plan 1991 and the crafting of 55 medium-term development guide plans

(DGPs). As local area plans, the DGPs were first exhibited as draft plans to solicit feedback from the public. These exhibitions were held in high-traffic commercial centres to maximise public outreach. Several public dialogues chaired by cabinet ministers were also held to show sincerity in the desire to engage the public and provide legitimacy to the process.

Hard Knocks: Tussles and Trade-offs

While these visionary plans were often welcomed, crystallising these plans into concrete development projects sharpened planning dilemmas and brought difficult decisions on trade-offs to the fore. Like newlyweds still ill-equipped to translate a shared vision of a meaningful home into reality, planning officials and stakeholders in the community engagement process

dealt with hard knocks that would hone the process moving forward. Trust—and the lack thereof—emerged as a key factor in skewing planning outcomes.

The old National Library, now a memory, was a reinforced low-rise structure with red brick walls that stood at Stamford Road. It has since made way for the Fort Canning Tunnel to alleviate through traffic to the downtown retail district of Orchard Road. There was a public outcry when plans for its demolition materialised in 1998. Former National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan recounted that the move was necessary.

“I think we did the right thing. At that time, the traffic engineers were really quite worried about the traffic in that area. It would have been very bad...but people probably do not

01 A Kampong Bugis Development Guide Plan consultation session in 1991, chaired by then Minister for National Development S. Dhanabalan.



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appreciate that, now that they're actually driving through the tunnel and everything is smooth," he told the Centre for Liveable Cities.

But Mah acknowledged that the process of public engagement could have been better managed. "One of the dilemmas that we faced [was] whether there was a solution that would have satisfied both the conservation ideal as well as the traffic requirement. I don't think there was, but maybe we could have articulated that a bit better," he said.

He added: "Part of the problem was that we did not start the engagement process early. We did not realise how sensitive or emotional the Library was to so many people."

Civil society is a major resource, not a stumbling block.

It is therefore crucial to start the engagement process early. Yet, this presumes that trust and rapport are already present to enable meaningful conversations. In its absence, a terse battle of words, often in public media, could degenerate an already tense situation into an adversarial stand-off, triggering the dissipation of trust in state-society relations.

01 Today, only fragments of the old National Library building remain.

02 The conserved Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve is home to diverse flora and fauna.



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When the government was looking into plans to permit fishing and boating activities in the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, members of the Nature Society (Singapore) were upset, said the society's former President Geh Min. They were concerned that these activities would destroy the reserve and turn it akin to a theme park, and sent angry letters to the press. This led to a "tussle" between Nature Society and the National Parks Board, the government agency in charge of parks and wetlands.

Although the issue was eventually resolved, Geh noted that advocacy groups at that time had to use the newspapers as the main interface of communication with the

government before the advent of social media. Government agencies had not been inclined to share development plans with civic groups, thus rapport was low.

Trust, therefore, is the cornerstone of effective engagement. As Former President of the Singapore Heritage Society Kevin Tan puts it: "You've got to learn to trust civil society actors; and civil society actors have to trust the government. What we really abhor is being made use of, to appear to have been consulted. It cannot be that you think you always know better and summarily rubbish our ideas."

“People know their neighbourhoods best and it is crucial to invoke their ideas... to achieve more equitable planning outcomes.”

He added: “Civil society is a major resource, not a stumbling block.”

A milestone in trust building between the state and civil society was the retention of the Chek Jawa intertidal flats on Pulau Ubin, an island off mainland Singapore, in 2001. The rich biodiversity of the intertidal flats, originally announced for reclamation, would have been destroyed if plans had proceeded. The government did an unusual U-turn after considering the proposals put forth by the Nature Society, the unique circumstances of Chek Jawa and public campaigns to save the area, and deferred the reclamation for as long as possible. This episode highlighted that the state-society partnership could be complementary rather than confrontational.

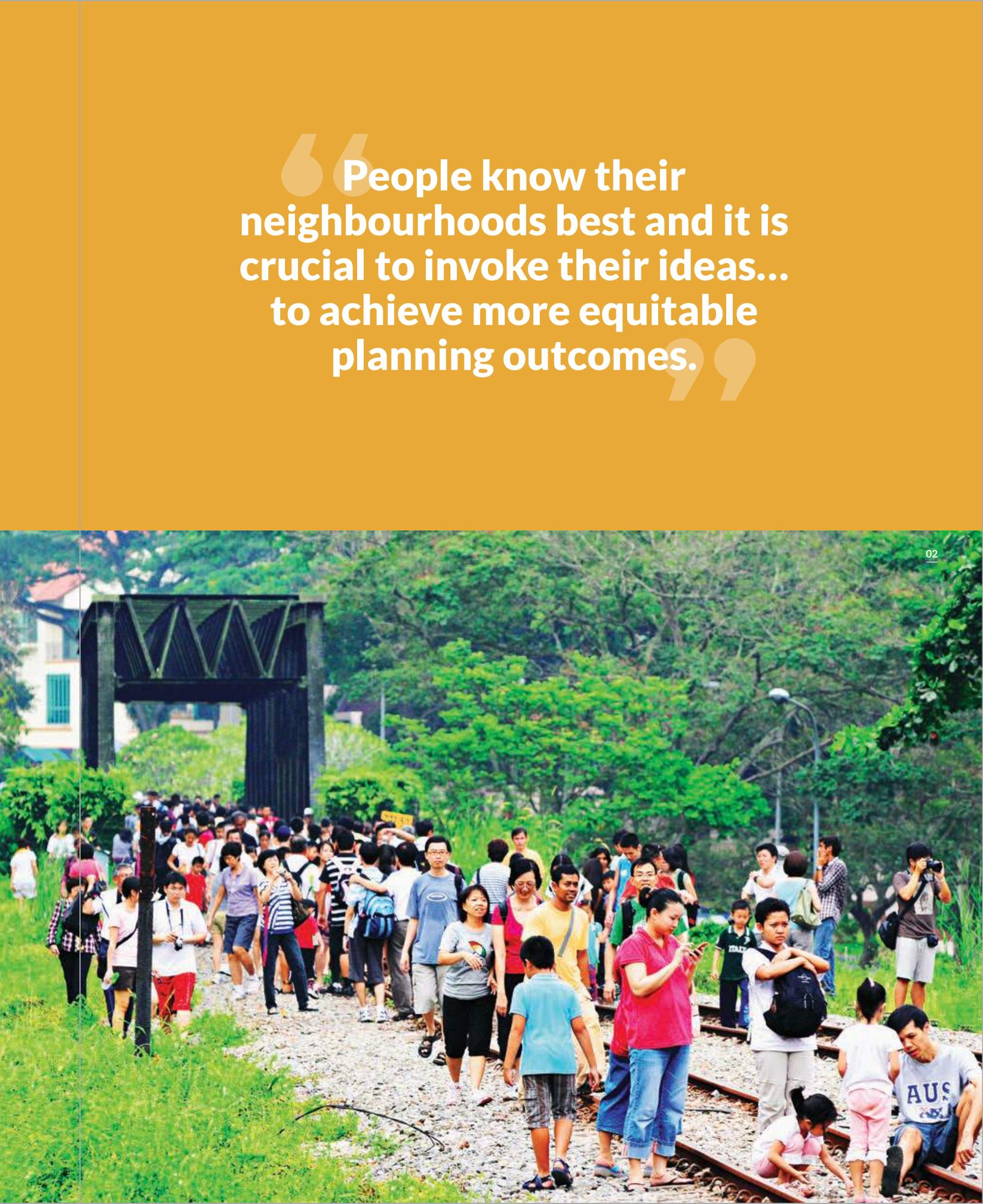
Building Capacity Towards More Effective Engagement

More recently, in 2011, the Rail Corridor project saw the URA engaging the public earlier in the planning process and ensuring the engagement reached as many people as possible. The project aims to reinvigorate the now disused railway, which used to transport goods and people between Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

The process reflected a desire to involve the community to co-create proposals from a clean slate, rather than merely engaging them to obtain buy-in for a preconceived plan. More significantly, the oft-used dogmatic agenda of “optimising land use” was set aside for more purposive community driven objectives. This signalled a change in the way government officials viewed lay knowledge—they recognised that people know their neighbourhoods best and it is crucial to invoke their ideas and passion to achieve more equitable planning outcomes.

The extensive engagement process brought on board not just professional bodies and advocacy groups, but also students, seniors and residents living in the vicinity of the rail corridor. This was a learning experience for advocacy groups as well, as it enabled them to work closer with the community to address their concerns in a holistic manner. Thus, trust and rapport were established more broadly, not just between advocacy groups and state agencies. The engagement drove changes based on public feedback, such as the improvement of safety and connectivity of two steel truss bridges near the conserved Bukit Timah Railway Station and the Rail Mall.

01 Many people visited the rail corridor after it was made open to the public in 2011.





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Where the railway line had physically divided communities, the Rail Corridor now provides the opportunity to connect neighbourhoods and link communities into an inclusive community space.

In recent years, Singapore's engagement approach to planning has also broadened to involve building a more participatory local planning culture and cultivating a stronger sense of community ownership.

As part of the Draft Master Plan 2019 review, the URA conducted engagement efforts early to provide planners with sufficient time to fine-tune their plans and policies, and manage ground expectations. For example, a series of public exhibitions were held between 2017 and 2018 to solicit views from the general public on the development of new growth areas and housing precincts, as well as ideas for the rejuvenation of mature areas. The feedback received was useful for planners in their review of the plans for these areas.

The Draft Master Plan was then exhibited from March to June 2019. Social media efforts before and after the launch helped to spread key messages and sustain public interest, while guided tours organised for key stakeholders including grassroots leaders, agency partners, developers and residents extended outreach efforts to the local community.

Conflicts as a Productive Force for Change

The case for community engagement is clear—there is value when it is effectively carried out in both good and bad situations. Although the duration of decision making could be lengthened and implementation of proposals delayed, the collective process fosters a shared ownership towards the building of city and society.

Even so, community engagement should not replace the role of leadership and urban governance. In many cities, engagement processes can become mired in gridlock and lead to stalemate when difficult decisions are left in limbo. Worse, participation could lead to unjust outcomes when community interests are parochial and reflect the Not-in-my-Backyard (NIMBY) mentality.

The government has the duty to uphold the nation's interests, and safeguard the needs of varying sectors of the community. Meaningful engagement involves all parties being genuinely interested to take into account the different perspectives and extensive knowledge brought to the table, and the varying beliefs, aspirations and values of other stakeholders.

Potential conflict is inherent in engagement situations, and the planner serves crucial roles as an effective facilitator, empathetic listener and skillful negotiator. With trust and the earnest desire to foster a deliberative partnership, even conflicts can be a creative rather than destructive force to shape a more socially resilient society. 

01 Members of the public shared suggestions for the Rail Corridor at a workshop at Bukit Timah Community Centre in 2016.

02 The Draft Master Plan 2019 exhibition gave members of the public the chance to understand and give their feedback on urban development plans.