DESIGN FOR A CITY STATE: EXPERIENCE FROM SINGAPORE

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Peer M Sathikh

Industry Engagement and Cross-collaboration, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

E-mail: peersathikh@ntu.edu.sg
ORCID: 0000-0001-7194-3856

Abstract

Singapore emerged as an independent nation in 1965 after being expelled from Malaysia by a treaty between the two states. A small island state, smaller than some of the metropolises such as New York or London, Singapore faced an uphill task to survive right from the start. The political leadership of that time had to build a strategy and a road map to take the country to progress and prosperity. While the priorities of progression were initially centered around economic and industrial development, the need for social and educational development led to the need for the involvement of design to bring about the directions required to build a society and a country that has paved its own path and place in the world community. This paper discusses how design and design education has played out in this journey of Singapore.

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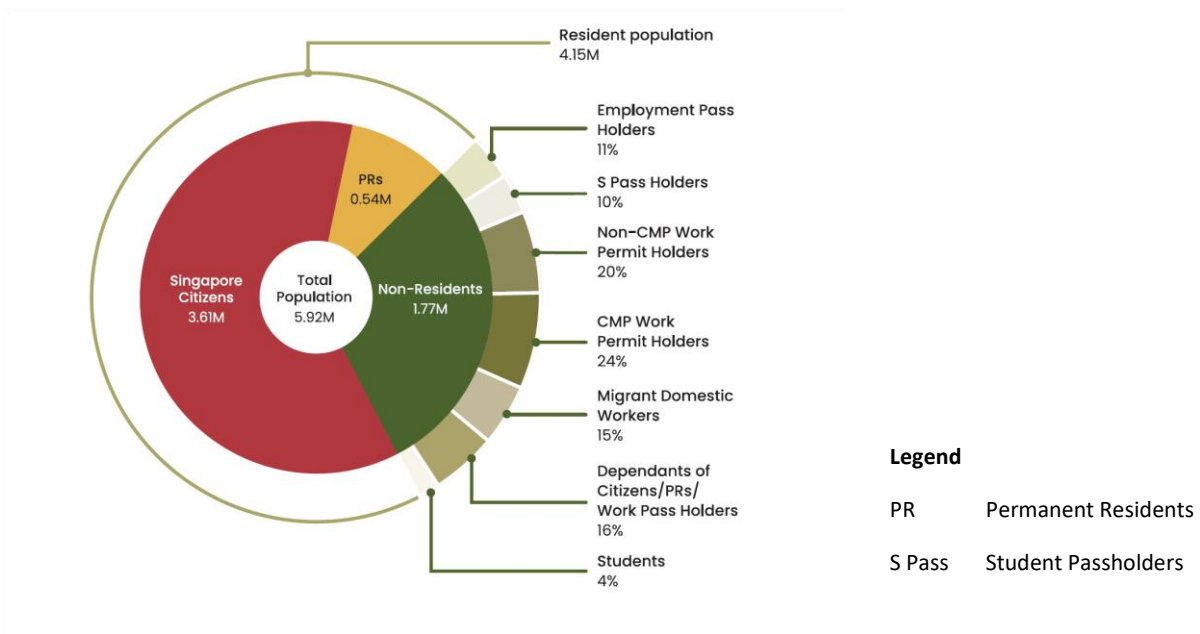
1. **Introduction**

Singapore, located at the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula ~~is~~ on the important sea-faring Straits of Malacca, is a multi-cultural city-state with a population of 5.92 million consisting of 74% Chinese, 13.5% Malay, 9% Indian and 3.5% others [1]. The multiethnic mix of Singapore population, while posing challenges, has also been an advantage over the period with China and India becoming economic powerhouse in Asia. What is important to note here is that, of the 5.92 million population, only 3.16 million are citizens of Singapore. Figure 1 shows an interesting spread of the population showing the dispersal of the rest of the population in Singapore.

From Figure 1, the total resident population is 4.15 million while rest of population are in the country contingent on visas and permits for short or limited period of stay in Singapore. From where did Singapore start to be where it is today and how did design get involved will be the rest of this paper.

Fig.1. Population Distribution of Singapore

Starting point

In 1965, Singapore looked like any other city in Southeast Asia and South Asia as can been see in Figure 2. There had to be good reason for the rapid progress of this small republic then.

Fig.2. Street scene in Singapore 1965 [2].

Seting Development Goals

The foundation of development of Singapore had to do with the leadership itself. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore made it clear in one of his oft quoted speeches:
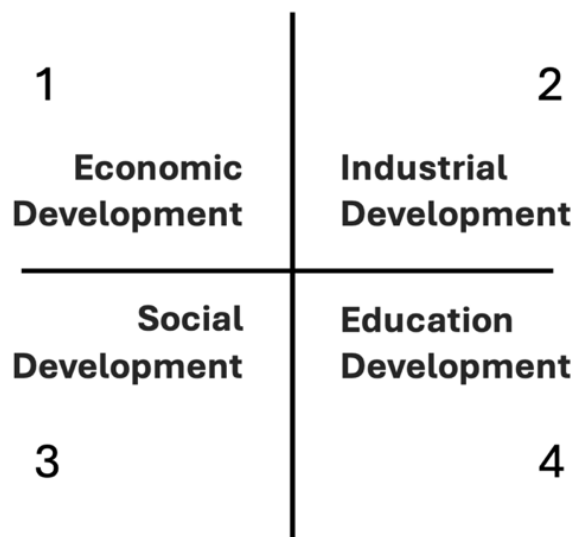
We must have qualities of leadership at the top and qualities of cohesion on the ground. This pyramidal structure of top leaders, good executives, well-disciplined civic-conscious broad mass can only be produced by our education".

Lee Kuan Yew (1965)

However, within a year, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew realised that here must be a concerted effort and strategy to bring in social cohesion as well:

"...produce a community that feels together...The reflexes of group thinking must be built to ensure the survival of the community...this means a reorientation of emphasis and a reshuffling of values ". Lee Kuan Yew (1966)

Looking at the situation of that period as an academic, one is able to see how the leadership and government put together four important areas for development as shown in Figure 3.

Fig 3. Development Goals of Singapore

Results of the Development Goals

The **economic development** of Singapore is closely linked with the **industrial development** of the island state. As early as 1957**,** the regional government of Singapore set up the Singapore Industrial Promotion Board (SIPB) which was converted to a larger organisation called the **Economic Development Board** (EDB) in 1961 (much before Singapore became an independent republic in 1965). Under the watch of the EDB, with its well-planned investment strategies from the developed countries, Singapore Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita rose 176 times from US dollars 517 in 1965 to US dollars 91, 100 in 2023 [3]. Figure 4 shows the economic development and the progress of the industry development along the timeline from 1965 to 2023.

Fig 4. Economic and Industrial Development of Singapore

From the beginning the Government of Singapore was interested in developing a world class education. While it was prompt in starting up education at the kindergarten to pre-university level (K to 12), it took a while to develop the post-secondary 3-year diploma and post pre-university tertiary education. This involved setting up polytechnics and the universities. This tertiary **education development** is depicted along the same timeline of economic development as shown in Figure 5.

Economy	1965	1985	2005	2023
GDP per capita in USD	517	7.002	29,961	91,100

Tertiary Education				
	Polytechnic level	Graduate level and PhD		Liberal Arts level (Yale-NUS)
	Basic technical education	Degree level	Specialised professional level (Design)	

Fig.5. Tertiary Education Development

Singapore has achieved much on the **social development** front since 1965. Starting from housing when it established the Housing Development Board (HDB) to build and lease flats right from studio apartments till two floor maisonettes built across the island providing affordable housing to most of the Singaporeans. Urban development, transportation, parks and entertainments, health care and medical facilities and more contribute to the social development of Singapore which is represented in Figure 6.

Economy	1965	1985	2005	2023
GDP per capita in USD	517	7.002	29,961	91,100
		Social Development		

Fig.6. Representation of Social Development in Singapore

Developing Design Education

A foundation for future art and design education in Singapore was laid as early as 1938 when the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) was established with 14 students [4]. The first step towards a vocational level education in design was taken with the founding of Baharuddin Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB) in June 1965 (just before Singapore became a republic) as, "...first tertiary school dedicated to manual and applied arts in Singapore" [5]. The VITB was transferred as the School of Design of Temasek Polytechnic in 1990. An initiative by a Catholic priest, Brother McNally around 1985-86 saw the starting of LaSalle-College of the Arts, a private institute. Singapore concentrated on diploma programmes in polytechnics till a 4-year bachelor programme in industrial design was started at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2001. This was followed by a bachelor's programme at the School of Art, Design and Media of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in 2005. Recently, LaSalle- college of the arts and NAFA have been combined to form the University of the Arts (UAS) in 2023. This development of design education in Singapore is depicted in Figure 7.
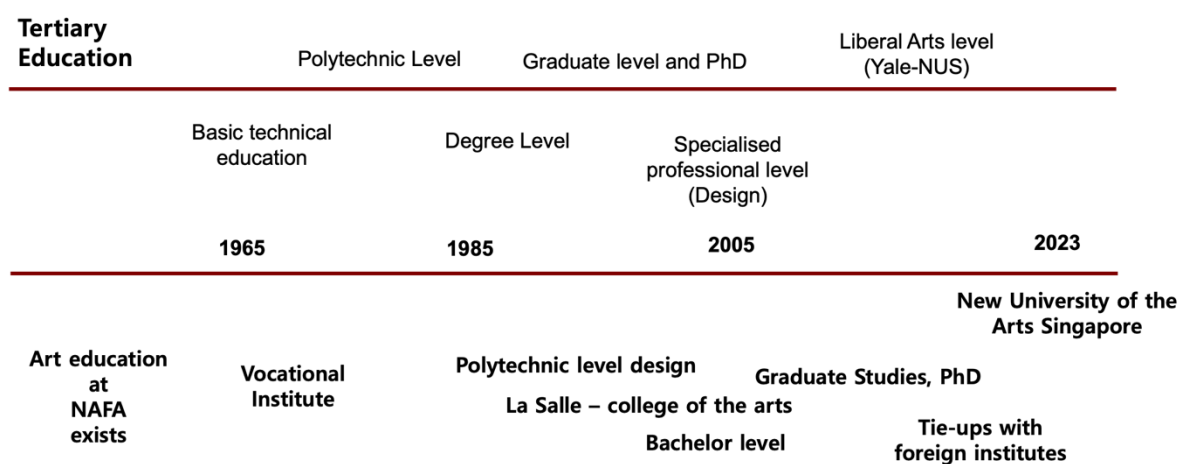

Fig.7. Design Education Development in Singapore

Design Promotion – the early years

The then Singapore Trade Development Board (TDB), renamed as Enterprise Singapore, established **The Design Centre** in 1990 located at a central part of the city on North Bridge Road in Singapore. The Design Centre which was headed by a pioneering industrial designer Sani Abdul initiated many of the enduring design promotion efforts such as the Biennial International Design Forum together with an international exhibition, Singapore Design Awards, Young Design Awards and scholarship schemes for Singaporeans to study at design schools abroad. The Design Centre and its activities were wound down by the end of the 1990s to the surprise of designers in Singapore and abroad.

Changes to the design landscapes around the world brought a new level of thinking and the **Singapore Design Council** was formed together with DesignSingapore (centre) in the early
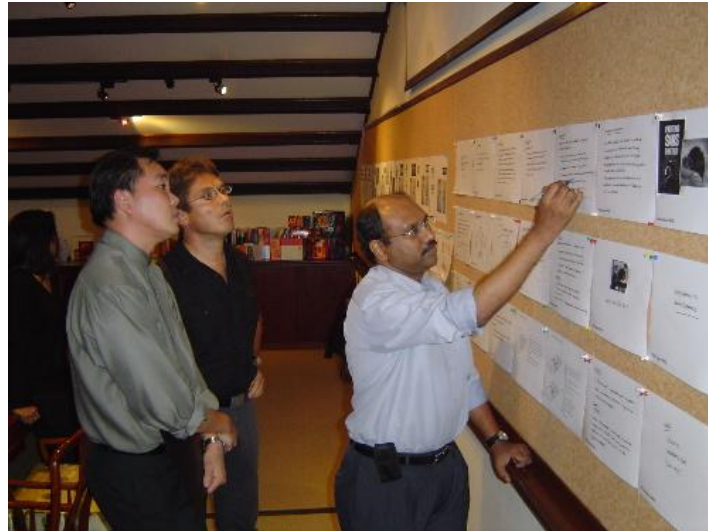
2000s by the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA, which has been re-banded into other ministries eventually). Headed by a mercurial Dr. Milton Tan, DesignSingapore took on wider roles besides promoting design. Through Dr. Milton Tan's vision, important initiatives were rolled out such as the President's Design Award, DSg Scholarships for postgraduate study abroad, Singapore Design Week, Design Futures to encourage upstream design research and development, anchoring of international design organisations into Singapore, hosting the 2009 ICSID Design Congress (ICSID is renamed as World Design Congress presently) and others. A look at DesignSingapore's website [6] gives more updated information on its activities. In 2023, DesignSingapore celebrated its 20th Anniversary (Figure 8).

Fig.8. 20 Years of DesignSingapore [6].

Design Business Chamber Singapore

Design Business Chamber Singapore (DBCS) is the reformed professional organisation from Designers Association Singapore (DAS) which was established in 1985 to be a professional meeting and action point for the fast-growing design community in Singapore. The author was the President of the then DAS from 2003 and 2007. Under the author's leadership DAS rose to the occasion in forming a committee called 'Design Against SARS' when the SARS outbreak ransacked Singapore and the region in 2003 (Figure 9). DAS was then awarded a special certificate of appreciation by the President of Singapore for this effort.
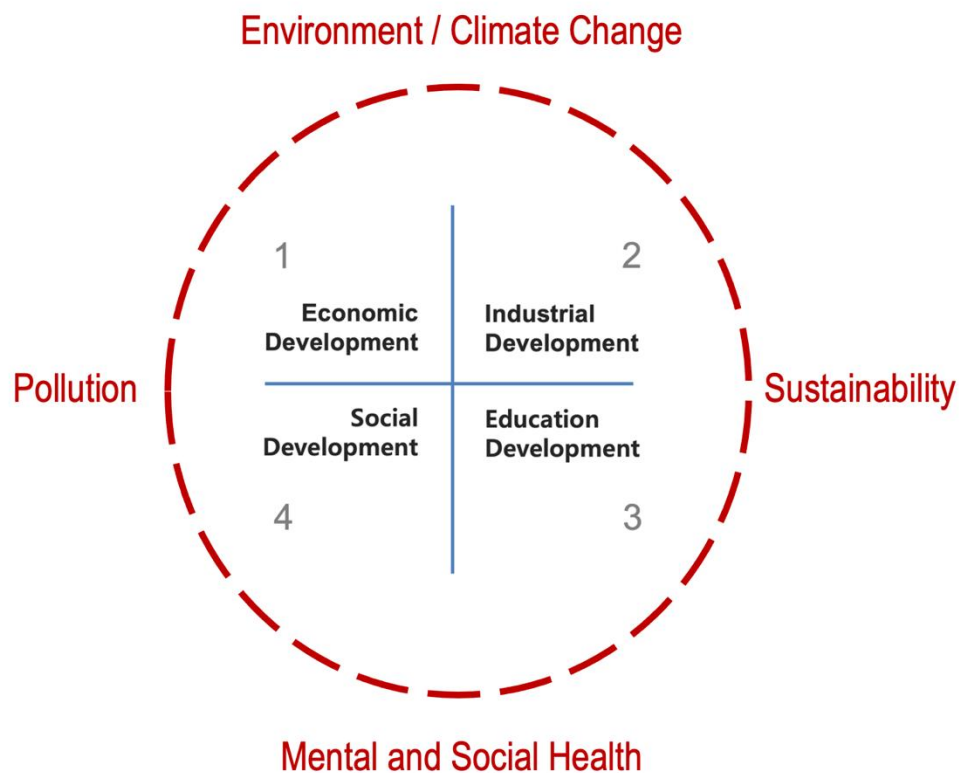
Fig.9. DAS working on the 'Design Against SARS' in 2003 (Source: Author)

The Design Business Chamber Singapore, besides being a professional body has many initiatives such as Singapore Design Awards, Singapore Good Design, Design Crawl and Design for Good together with the many events such as portfolio review night for students and other social events.

Need to Reset the Development Goals

The development goals of Figure 3, which helped Singapore propel to its present position as a world leader needs a real look if Singapore need to retain its edge in the ever-changing world and environment. The original development goals of Figure 3 need to consider the newer challenges that are facing the country and the world as depicted by Figure 10.

Fig.10 New Challenges

The time has come for Singapore to take a detailed look at these challenges to modify and/or finetune the four development goals, namely economic development, industrial development, educational development and social development. In other words, a new 'blueprints for the unknown'[7] need to be developed by the relevant government bodies and experts to further the progress and prosperity of Singapore. In this regard, the author believes, design and designers of Singapore could contribute in a constructive manner in Singapore's quest for continued progress.

Conclusion

This article has chronicled and described the challenges of Singapore which faced the challenges of becoming a republic overnight in 1965 and the strategic thinking and foresight of the leadership, government and key personnel in identifying the development goals for Singapore and he results of implementing these goals through planned action. Parallelly, the development of design education and the creation of a design ecosystem has also been presented. Finally, this article also highlights the challenges that are facing Singapore and the world and ponders the need for new blueprints for progress that need to be urgently derived around the four development goals set out by the founding fathers of Singapore.

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