

Harsh Mahaseth & Mallika A. Sondhi | June 21, 2022

The Singapore Housing Project: The Key to a Nation's Success



SOUTHEAST ASIA

SHARE Facebook Twitter LinkedIn

Singapore, known as an economic powerhouse and one of the pioneering technological nations is also known for having 1 million public apartments which currently house 80% of the nation's population. Could this housing model be the answer to help eliminate homelessness and congested cities? If yes, then what other solutions can it exemplify?

Public apartments have a reputation for being of poor quality and are usually used by the economically backward citizens of a nation. However, in Singapore, none of these stereotypes fit the gorgeous high rises and composite housing societies, that are part of the Singapore government's property portfolio. These housing societies are known as 'towns' and they have their own schools, hospitals, malls and grocery stores. The reason for this development in the housing system of the country was that, during the colonial era, Singapore was dealing with a major overcrowding crisis with most residents of the island nation living in slums which were frequently consumed by illnesses and were also overpopulated and stacked in particular areas making them even more unsanitary and the environment all the more grubby. The situation was extremely grim and the People's Action Party, which played a major role in ending British colonial rule in the country, gained power. The Party created the Housing Development Board in 1960 after having attained independence in 1959 as the housing plight of their people was just too severe to ignore.

With the people being on edge and nervous as their future was uncertain post the colonial rule, the leaders decided to use the housing system to help form the [foundation of an independent Singapore's social structure and culture](#). This was done by making sure that a 'town' was not totally made up of high looming apartment buildings but rather having a [variety of dimensions and layouts so as to make the atmosphere airier](#) and not suffocatingly indistinguishable.

Apartments on each floor were also laid out to house different room units next to each other, for example 3 room units would be next to 4 room units and 1 room units next to 2 room units. This helped create a sense of [social solidarity and community among citizens](#) from different economic backgrounds. The interaction between residents was nurtured through Resident Committees, recreational programmes and Community Centre activities. Which became the healthy environment required for neighbourly, friendly conversation. Quoting academics Teo Siew Eng and Lily Kong, "The idea is to try to create a community activity focal point in the form of a landscape square..."

Towns and apartment buildings both have a fixed quota of flats to be sold or rented out to people from the most prominent cultures prevalent in the nation, this helps prevent a single ethnicity from dominating the total population of any 'town'. People from Chinese, Indian and Malay ethnicities, all have a fixed percentage of apartments they can occupy.

With a general rule that an individual citizen cannot occupy more than one apartment at a time and can't sell it until they have occupied the same for a period of 5 years, it is also possible for foreigners to buy these flats, though it is a much harder and a more expensive process. It is highly theorised and considered that this housing system has been the reason for the high levels of social harmony among the diverse range of citizens of this tiny nation. Where previously all these races lived in segregated communities now they share the same areas and lifestyles, causing them to create acquaintanceships which subsequently lead to more extensive understanding of different practices. This helped [increase tolerance levels among the people](#) tremendously and so impactful was this assimilation and the perceptions created by it, that the last time Singapore saw violent racial conflict was in 1964 during the Singapore-Malaysia merger.

This is a great tale of how people from different cultural and social backgrounds have in such a short period of time created and celebrated their own common way of life, values and traditions. Pair this cohesion with the government's positive market policy and it's no wonder why this young nation boasts such a booming economy.

Other developing countries can take example of the successful Singapore housing project and implement something similar on their own land to improve the livelihood of their citizens. It is a measure that will help provide jobs, improve living conditions and also boost the overall well-being and health of the people. If implemented, following exactly what was done by the Singaporean government then social relations will be positively affected and the barriers between different social and economic classes will be permeated.

Countries need to rethink their urban development plans keeping in mind the Singapore model. This could possibly help countries tackle social issues like homelessness, endemics and mental health. But the Singapore case is a hard one for countries or even cities to reproduce because it was a very rare one. A project of such kind requires a diligent and efficient administration to take on and accomplish this intricate task. With one of the most prominent issues in developing countries being corruption, it will definitely hinder and sabotage any such imitation attempt made by a government.

[Photo by Mailer Diablo, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons]

Harsh Mahaseth is an Assistant Professor and Assistant Dean (Academic Affairs) at Jindal Global Law School, and the Assistant Director of the Nehginpao Kipgen Center for Southeast Asian Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University, India. Mallika A. Sondhi is a Research Assistant at the Nehginpao Kipgen Center for Southeast Asian Studies, and a law student at Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, India.

History in the Making: Rewriting Pinochet's Constitution for Chile

NIRANJAN JOSE - JUNE 23, 2022

India: Communal Violence Urges Debate on Internet Regulation

ARUN TEJA POLCUMPALLY - JUNE 22, 2022

Understanding North Korea's Existential and Diplomatic Core Illuminates Why Dialogue and Economic Sanctions Have Failed

EUNWOO LEE - JUNE 20, 2022