

# History, Culture and the Making of a Successful City

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In this essay, I wish to share some thoughts on the role that history and culture play in the making of a successful city. These reflections are based upon the experience of Singapore in the last fifty years. I had the privilege of serving as the first Chairman of Singapore's National Arts Council and the second Chairman of the National Heritage Board, which has jurisdiction over our museums, Heritage Institutions, national monuments and historic sites.<sup>1</sup> I have also had the benefit of living more than twenty years abroad, in Cambridge, England, and in Boston, Buffalo (New York state), Washington DC and Palo Alto in the United States. My work has also taken me to many other cities around the world.

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## A successful city: size does not matter

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Let me begin by clarifying what I mean when I use the term, "a successful city". My first point is that size does not matter. A successful city can be a big city, such as New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, Seoul, Bangkok, Surabaya and Sydney. A successful city can also be a small city, such as, Penang and Malacca in Malaysia; Ubud, Bali, in Indonesia; Bagan in Myanmar; Luang Prabang in Laos; Thimphu in Bhutan; Perth in Australia; Queenstown in New Zealand; Bruges in Belgium; Vilnius in Lithuania; Tallinn in Estonia; and Riga in Latvia.

A successful city can, of course, also be a mid-size city, such as Copenhagen in Denmark; Stockholm in Sweden; Helsinki in Finland; Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand; Kyoto in Japan; Hong Kong, Xi'an and Suzhou in China; Chiang Mai in Thailand; Bandung in Indonesia; Barcelona in Spain; and Hamburg, Berlin and Munich in Germany. I apologise if I have not referred to your city. This is

a rather random list of successful cities which I have visited and which I like.

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## Criteria for a successful city

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My second point is that a successful city is one which provides adequately for its citizens' basic needs. These basic needs include housing, jobs, an efficient transport system, affordable healthcare, good schools and a healthy environment. A city with many homeless people and people living in slums or on the street is not a successful city. A city with many unemployed citizens, especially among the young, is not a successful city.

A city in which the citizens live in fear for their safety is not a successful city. A city in which the tap water is not safe to drink, where people defecate in the open, where the air is too polluted to breathe and where the soil, rivers, lakes and groundwater have become contaminated, is not a successful city. In my definition, a successful city is one which provides for the basic needs of its citizens – not just some citizens, but all its citizens. In my definition, a successful city must be inclusive and must provide a good quality of life to all its citizens.

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## Some cities are more equal than others

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My third point is that not all successful cities are equal. Some cities are more equal than others. Some cities have a stronger identity and spirit than others. Some cities are better designed, better planned and better organised than others. Some cities are more

welcoming than others. Some cities are more joyful than others. Some cities have the “x” factor which makes them deserving of being called “great” cities.

I think I am on safe ground when I say that New York, London and Paris are great cities. One manifestation of their “greatness” was the exemplary manner in which their citizens behaved when their cities were attacked by terrorists. The New Yorkers, Londoners and Parisians were not intimidated. They did not cower in fear. Instead, they showed courage and defiance. They did not turn on their Muslim minorities. Instead, they sought to protect their minorities and reaffirmed their faith in diversity. The great sociologist, Robert Ezra Park (1864-1944), was right when he said that the city is “a state of mind”<sup>2</sup> The citizens share a body of customs, attitudes and sentiments. My conclusion is that these great cities have strong cultures, values and mindsets.

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## Singapore’s state of mind

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What is Singapore’s state of mind? I think it consists of three core values: multiculturalism, meritocracy with compassion, and integrity and no corruption. Multiculturalism has become part of our DNA. We celebrate our diversity of race, language and religion. It is rare in our troubled world to find a place where people of so many different races and religions live harmoniously as brothers and sisters.

In Singapore, we are proud of the fact that a person is judged on the basis of his or her merit and not on any other basis. In Singapore, the son of a taxi driver can rise to become the Head of the Civil Service. We are very proud of our record as one of the least corrupt countries in the world. Honesty and integrity are our public and private virtues.

Singapore will be put to the test when it is hit by a terrorist attack. When that happens, will Singapore stay united or will it fracture along its racial or religious fault lines? I am quite confident in saying that Singaporeans will pass the test as the New Yorkers, Londoners and Parisians did. We will stay united and not be intimidated. We will not turn against our Muslim minority because we have no quarrel with Islam. Our quarrel is with a group of extremists who have hijacked Islam and use it to achieve their political objectives.

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## History and culture: lessons from Bilbao

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The next point I want to make is that history and culture can play an important role in the rejuvenation of cities and in transforming ordinary cities into great cities.

Some years ago, I was the founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation, which was established in 1997 to promote greater mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges. A Swedish colleague and I had co-convoked a conference in Stockholm to create a network of Asian and European museums and to discuss the role of culture in the fortunes of cities. In preparation for the conference, I went to visit Bilbao to see for myself how this city has succeeded in rejuvenating itself.

Bilbao is a mid-size city located in the Basque region of Spain. Like many industrial cities in Europe, it had suffered decades of decline. However, unlike other cities, the leaders of Bilbao decided to embark upon a 25-year journey to revive the fortunes of their city. Their plan had several legs.

One leg was to clean up the physical environment of the city. Another leg was to restore the city's infrastructure. A third leg was to restore the city's historic areas. A fourth leg was to transform the city through internationalisation and good design. Finally, the city decided to build the iconic Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum.

The Guggenheim Museum, which showcases masterpieces of modern and contemporary art, was meant to bring about a symbolic transformation of Bilbao, with the objective of bringing international arts and culture to its citizens, with tourism as a by-product. Since it opened in 1997, the Museum has attracted one million visitors a year. It has brought prosperity to the hospitality industry and to the city.

Bilbao won the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize in 2010. What lessons can we learn from its success? First, we can learn that a city can be successfully regenerated through the use of culture, internationalisation and design excellence. Second, we can learn that a city should not only focus on economic growth but also on the social issues and the quality of life.

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## European Capital of Culture

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One of the European Union's most successful projects is the European Capital of Culture. It all began in 1985, when the Minister for Culture of Greece, the talented actress Melina Mercouri (1920-1994), and the French Culture Minister, Jack Lang (b. 1939), proposed that the EU should designate a Capital of Culture every year. Their rationale was that the project would bring Europeans closer together by highlighting the richness and diversity of European cultures

and raising awareness of their common history and values.

To date, more than fifty cities across the European Union have been designated as European Capitals of Culture. The list includes two British cities, Glasgow (1990) and Liverpool (2008). How has such recognition benefitted the cities? It has done so in the following five ways:

- It has led to economic growth and the regeneration of cities;
- It has raised the international profile of the cities;
- It has enhanced the image of the cities in the eyes of their own citizens;
- It has breathed new life into the cities' cultures;
- It has boosted tourism.

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## Harnessing the power of history, culture and the arts in Singapore

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During the past 50 years, Singapore has gone through a major transformation. In the first 25 years of nation-building, the priority was on growing the economy, renewing the city physically and building a world class infrastructure. In the second 25 years, Singapore has added three more ambitions to our agenda. These are to improve the city's liveability and quality of life; to harness the power of culture and the arts; and to make Singapore a global city of distinction.

The conservation movement came to Singapore too late to save some of our historic buildings from destruction. However, it came in time for us to realise the importance of conserving our built heritage and the anchors of our individual and collective

memories. To date, we have conserved over 7,000 buildings. We have protected, by law, more than seventy national monuments. Two of our historic landmarks, the City Hall and the old Supreme Court, have been successfully transformed into our new National Gallery, which attracted a million visitors in its first year. The Asian Civilisations Museum is housed in a historic colonial-era office building. The Singapore Art Museum and the Peranakan Museum are both located in old and historic school buildings. I am happy to report that the conservation movement has broad public support and that Singaporeans, including the young, are increasingly interested in their past and in protecting their heritage. It is a sign of our growing cultural maturity.

I am also happy to report that, after many years of investment and effort, we have overcome the old perception that Singapore was a cultural desert. Today, Singapore is a cultural oasis in the heart of Southeast Asia. The arts have blossomed. In Singapore, we have been careful to ensure that culture and the arts are not just for the elite but for all Singaporeans.

Our island-city now offers a busy arts calendar that includes the Singapore International Festival of Arts, the Singapore Night Festival and the Singapore Biennale. The annual Singapore Heritage Festival, organised by the National Heritage Board with the

support of many community partners celebrates our heritage, including our cultural traditions, diverse communities, historic districts, and food. Singaporeans live to eat and not eat to live. We love all kinds of food but especially our local hawker food. The opening of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, a performing arts centre that locals have nicknamed the “Durian” for its spiky roof, in 2001, was an important milestone in our cultural journey. The opening of the National Gallery, in 2015, was another milestone. The journey continues. In the years ahead, we will have to focus on developing the soft aspects of our cultural assets, namely, our talent pool, our cultural capital and our acceptance of diversity. We are heading in the right direction and I am very optimistic about our future. Our ambition is to make Singaporeans a culture-loving people.

I shall conclude by quoting the following wise words written by an old friend, Joel Kotkin (b. 1952), in his 2006 book *The City: A Global History*. Kotkin wrote:

“For 5,000 years or more, the human attachment to cities has served as the primary forum for political and material progress. It is in the city, this ancient confluence of the secret, safe and busy, where humanity’s future will be shaped for centuries to come”.<sup>3</sup> □

*This essay was adapted from a keynote address delivered on 12 July 2016 at “Culture – Should Cities Care?”, a Thematic Forum at the World Cities Summit held in Singapore from 10-14 July 2016.*

Notes:

1. Professor Koh, who was Chairman of the National Heritage Board (NHB) from 2002-2011, has also shared his thoughts on the importance of heritage in Singapore in *BeMuse*, a publication of the NHB. See “A very happy journey: MUSETalk with Professor Tommy Koh” in *BeMuse* July-September 2011, pp. 46-53.
2. Robert Ezra Park, Ernest W Burgess & Roderick D McKenzie. *The City*. Chicago, 1925.
3. Joel Kotkin. *The City: A Global History*. New York, 2006.