

Hotel Singapore or the Sacred Place?

In Parliament recently, Nominated MP Janice Koh referred to a paper by American urban geographer Joel Kotkin while arguing for the need to restore a sense of place and home to Singapore. In his paper, written for the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Prof Kotkin identifies three great characteristics of cities: safe, busy and sacred. We reproduce an excerpt here.

By Joel Kotkin

TO QUESTIONS of low fertility and declining social cohesion, we have to add the question of values. From their origins, cities have relied on three great characteristics - what I call the sacred, the safe and the busy. We still understand the importance of the last two, security and commerce.

No city has succeeded in this way more than Singapore. Yet, still something is not working well. After all, in recent polls from Gallup, Singaporeans - despite all their many accomplishments - rank among the most pessimistic on Earth, along with Greece, Italy and Japan.

Perhaps, then we should look at the third aspect of urban success - the sacred. Discussion of this has all but disappeared from urbanist thought since at least Lewis Mumford. If you read the accounts of travellers to cities throughout time - in Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Africa and here, in Asia - religion was a supreme value.

As Mumford put it: Behind the wall of the city life rested on a common foundation, set as deep as the universe itself: the city was nothing less than the home of a powerful god. The architectural and sculptural symbols that made this fact visible lifted the city far above the village or country town... To be a resident of the city was to have a place in man's true home, the great cosmos itself.

Mumford was onto something here in positing how great temples and such distinguished the city as unique. They were like time capsules, tying the past to the present.

They tied people specifically to the past. Such sacred values have underpinned familialism from ancient times. These sentiments are in decline in most advanced countries and particularly, in urban centres, and with serious consequences for the future.

One clear impact has been on birth rates. The decline of fertility and urban familialism is most marked in those countries - notably, in East Asia and Europe - where religious sentiment has been in decline. In East Asia, the percentage of people who think religion is important is a mere 19 per cent, this is the lowest in the world, just ahead (or behind, depending on your point of view) of Europe. Half of Britons aged 18 to 34 consider themselves non-religious compared to 20 per cent of those above 55. Similar patterns have developed in the United States - the one high-income country with a strong religious presence - particularly among the new generation. As one writer put it, in the hyper-secular Czech Republic, more people believe in UFOs than in God.

It seems clear that the reduction in religiosity is directly related to low fertility rates; the very areas, in America and elsewhere, where faith is fading are also those where childlessness is most advanced. Wendell Cox suggests that, in American cities, there is a 36 per cent variation in birth rates related to the degree of spirituality. Cities with higher levels of belief - say, Salt Lake City, Houston, Dallas and Atlanta - have relatively high degrees of family formation while those with the lowest, such as San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and Boston, have far lower rates.

Urban thinkers today barely reflect on religion. Indeed, some such as Richard Florida have argued that higher degrees of secularism imply a more advanced society. And it is true that societies that are denser, with fewer children, are often richer in terms of per capita income, at least before calculating the cost of living. But is this, to use an overused phrase, "sustainable" not only demographically but also as a society?

I would extend this notion of sacred place to a whole set of unique institutions and places, those that make one feel an

irrational commitment to a place. As urban theorist Aaron Renn suggests, this includes places like Times Square in New York, or the War Memorial in Indianapolis; it could be the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Trafalgar Square in London or the ring of mountains surrounding the great cities of the American West - Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland.

This notion of the sacred, and the unique, is very relevant here in Singapore. Years ago, the Ministry of National Development ran a seminar on Singapore as a city of memories. Few places have as unique a heritage as this city, born as a global city but still distinct as an urban area on Earth - a tropical melting pot whose heritage is rich but which is under constant pressure to conform to a global pattern that obliterates differences, and all those things that adhere people, and families, to a place.

I would define this conflict as one between the interchangeable and the irreplaceable; the sacred and the identical, if you will. As one writer put it to me, Singapore has two paths before it. One is to search and nurture its Singaporean-ness, or to become what she referred to as "Hotel Singapore", that is, a place of transit for a nomadic global population - from the highest end of specialists to the day labourers - moving from place to place. Rather than live in tents, it is hotels, service apartments or rented bungalows.

To be sure, such nomads are necessary, particularly in a global hub. But it is one thing to accommodate this class; it is another to allow this kind of person to dominate the urban landscape.

Like cities around the world - particularly, global ones like Singapore - there is incessant pressure to conform to a universal model to appeal to this nomadic class. The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas speaks of "a larger and seemingly universal style". He compares the end of urban distinctiveness to "the disappearance of a spoken language".

You can now see the same basic Frank Gehry structure in my-riad cities around the world. The malls that dot Orchard Road are crowded with precisely the same shops as those in Los Angeles, Dubai, London or Mexico City. As a visitor, the search for something that reflects Singapore's intrinsic value increasingly takes more time, and greater precision. If it were not for my Singaporean friends, I would never encounter them.

This extends beyond the predictable architectural structures, malls and global brands. In America, the prophets of urbanism often speak of authenticity but the places that are blessed by the priesthood of hipness.

In the process, placeness is slowly eroding, and with it, the sentimental ties and sacred space that tie people, and families, to a specific place, a neighbourhood and a city. In the drive to achieve acceptability from the followers of urban fashion, a city can lose its soul, and, over time, its very reason to exist.

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