

POLITICS 360

Ask yourself: Who is this city for?

Everyone can help to ensure the rich and poor, young and old have a stake

By Andrea Ong

A FEW weeks ago, my extended family held traditional rites to mark the one-year anniversary of my grandfather's death. As we gathered at the old temple with its rows of tablets bearing the names of the deceased, I couldn't help but notice that I was the youngest person there by far. Most of the people at the temple to remember the dead were grey-haired; some were so frail they needed help to walk.

I was also discomfited by how out of place I felt. As the priest chanted Hokkien prayers that I only half-understood, I aped my relatives' actions, embarrassed that I did not know what many of the elaborate rituals signified.

It was food for thought, coming just a week after the details of the Pioneer Generation Package had been unveiled in Parliament.

Amid the buzz over recognising Singapore's pioneers, it seems a pity that many places and customs familiar to those of that generation are likely to fade away with their passing and may already be unrecognisable to those of my generation.

My experience also made me wonder if there are other such spatial divides in Singapore - places where the old are relegated to and the young rarely frequent, or conversely, places where the elderly feel just as out of place as I did.

The question of displacement arose again during the recent Budget debate. Nominated MP Janice Koh referred to a paper by the United States 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 from past to present: They are safe, busy and sacred.

Singapore, he says, has done well in security and commerce but should pay more attention to the sacred, which he defines as unique institutions and places that make one feel an "irrational commitment" and sense of belonging to a place.

Prof Kotkin's paper has a thought-provoking title: "What Is A City For?"

To riff off his title, however, perhaps the other question to ask is: Who is the city for?

That sums up, for me, many of the anxieties that have emerged in Parliament and in public debate in recent weeks.

Take Singapore's seniors, who have received much well-deserved attention of late with the Pioneer Generation Package and its generous measures to look after their health-care needs.

But outside of clinics and hospitals, is Singapore a city for them? Is it a place they can access with ease and call their own?

This could be physical access, such as infrastructure, to help them navigate the city.

It could also be access in less tangible forms. This lies beneath the suggestions put forth by MPs of all political stripes during the Budget debate.

Their calls for pioneers to also be given discounted access to attractions and public transport - and for outreach to be done face-to-face in mother tongue languages and dialects - highlight the invisible barriers of cost, language and technology seniors may face.

Beyond that, it bears thinking about whether there are enough sacred spaces where they can feel connected to events and customs of the past, to give an anchor in rapidly changing times.

This could range from old landmarks to social spaces - religious institutions, void decks, kopitiam, wet markets - where they gather with friends and family.

But these spaces should not be ghettos of the old but public and inclusive of all ages.

As Ms Koh noted of the pioneers in her speech: "Will enough be done to honour their memories and their connection to this place, which are also the memories and connections of their descendants and future generations to this place called home?"

Another place-related anxiety that surfaced recently: Is this still going to be a city for the average Singaporean?

The Economist Intelligence Unit survey that named Singapore the world's costliest city got a huge reaction, even though it was targeted at companies working out pay packages for expatriates.

It tapped into the worry that as Singapore stands in the league of top global cities bringing in well-heeled talent from around the world, where does that leave the ordinary citizen?

It's a concern that played out in spatial form after the latest draft masterplan for Singapore's development was released in November last year.

The plan sketched out ambitious goals to develop two new districts on prime downtown land, Marina South and Kampong Bugis, into residential areas.

At the same time, it emphasised that these districts would be "fenceless communities" with "publicly accessible amenities".

Analysts disagreed at the time on whether it would be a good idea to mix different types of public housing among the pricey real estate - likely to spring up in these central areas - in order to prevent them from becoming gated enclaves for the rich.

The debate mapped the issue of social inequality onto the city, showing how physical space can either foster inclusiveness or draw very real lines based on income and spending power.

Who is the city for? Is it a city for the elderly? Is it a city for the most vulnerable among us?

These questions draw on the concept of spatial justice, which has gained currency in the social sciences over the last decade.

They also tie in with the three issues that current urban solutions still cannot address, according to Prof Kotkin's paper.

These are: the loss of sacred space; inequality; and the survivability of families. All three are issues that Singapore is also grappling with.

As for answering the question of "who is the city for", policymakers evidently play a big role in that. Singapore's advantage is that it is starting from a position of strength, particularly in its urban planning innovations and physical infrastructure.

This Budget alone contained several announcements to make the city more physically accessible to the elderly, such as "silver zones" to help seniors cross the road safely in accident-prone

areas and the rolling out of more three-generation (3Gen) flats to encourage multi-generational families to live together.

And Singapore's achievements in public housing and home ownership have their roots, after all, in an egalitarian ethos of giving all Singaporeans a stake in the city.

But the greater challenge lies in creating that more nebulous sense of belonging through sacred spaces and inclusiveness.

This is a task for Singapore's policymakers in particular, in recognising the importance of respecting, preserving and creating such spaces.

But it is a task for denizens of the city too. If we are to make Singapore a city for the elderly and a city for all, the young and those with greater means have to play their part to make this happen.

If I felt out of place in the temple and during the rites that gave my older relatives comfort, it is up to me to find out more and understand.

Likewise, it is up to younger generations of Singaporeans to be interested and participate in the sacred spaces and customs of those that came before.

It is up to those with means to be okay with sharing the space of the city with those with less. At the heart of it is this: Can each individual be given the assurance that the city is yours and for you?

