

The merits of an unfinished city

Singapore is a global city, says the don who coined the term, but it has to resist the urge to plan everything and perhaps focus more on improving the social order to be more resilient



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FROM being most liveable to being most future-ready, Singapore has been making it into the Top Ten lists of the world's exemplary cities regularly in recent years.

"That is quite amazing in a world with so many large rich countries," says sociologist Saskia Sassen, 64, who is one of the foremost scholars of globalisation, and who famously coined the term "global city".

Singapore is right up there with London, New York and Tokyo because it has all the infrastructure that global firms and households want, from well-built environments to a respected legal system, she says in an e-mail interview ahead of her visit here tomorrow to speak at, among others, the Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) Centre for Innovative Cities.

"Crucially," she notes, "Singapore is a space with many global intersections, you never know who you might run into there."

To her, a global city is one which allows the world's capitalists - bankers, brokers or businessmen - to tap the wealth of a country for profits which they can then use to further their ambitions globally.

Many have credited Singapore's ability to become a global city in less than 50 years to city planners' attention to details.

Indeed, as former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew revealed in an interview reprinted in this newspaper last Saturday, he and his colleagues made sure that living here was as convenient, clean, incorruptible, all-inclusive and green as possible.

What matters most, according to Prof Sassen, is that Singapore is a "working state that ensures widespread prosperity" by "ensuring a large modest middle class and a large business sector of medium-sized modest profit-making firms". That approach is "the best formula" for a balanced, generally prosperous economy.

The challenge for Singapore now, ironically, is to resist the urge to continue planning its city too comprehensively, she says.

"For a city to be dynamic and exciting," she stresses, "it has to remain complex and incomplete; it cannot be fully planned."

That is because a very important cog in her idea of a global city

is that it is not only an economic engine for fat cats to make big money, but also a wide window in which all folk "can execute their life projects" by innovating constantly and exchanging ideas and opportunities with everyone from everywhere else.

For example, immigrants in a city learn to set up various enterprises to survive. Gay people feel freer in a city, as they are often persecuted in smaller communities.

Prof Sassen has visited Singapore more than four times in her career. Her first trip here was in 2006, when the Monetary Authority of Singapore invited her to speak to its staff on how Singapore could be made "a major, well-rounded city".

Then last year at a World Economic Forum pow-wow in Dubai, she met Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, who also chairs the LKY Centre For Innovative Cities, and Prof Chan said to "let her know" whenever she was in Singapore.

But while Prof Sassen has studied statistics on Singapore, she has never advised, or been consulted by, any entity.

"I never function as a consultant because it's too constraining," she says. "I do my advising, so to speak, via large public lectures - much more fun!"

All told, she says she doesn't know Singapore well enough to be prescriptive about what it can do to plan less and loosen up more.

But she does have pointers on what cities, and their respective national governments, should and should not do to be more resilient.

The smart way to be a smart city

FIRST, she says, a city should not "over-technologise" like, say, South Korea's Songdo International Business District, which is chock-a-block with such smart tools as radar-tracked cars and biosensors. "The more smart technology you pump into a building, the more that building will become obsolete quickly," she points out, adding that a hallmark of a well-built city is that it outlives kingdoms and empires.

Instead, she says, a genuinely smart city would tap advanced technologies largely, though not exclusively, so that it can function as an "open-source system", or one which enables resources to be redistributed freely for everyone's benefit. For example, a city would be really smart if those managing it could gather feedback from dwellers and then make that freely available to anyone to crunch and create apps that, say, show you the fastest ways from your

home to work during rush hour.

Nor is being "smart" solely about harnessing IT. For example, treating concrete walls with bacteria that create calcium deposits that seal off greenhouse gas emissions may well be the smartest way to purify cities and make them more resilient.

Improve social conditions

SECOND, the national governments of cities should focus squarely on improving social conditions, such as by owning and providing better public transport and schools, instead of making national security, military build-ups and political power grabs their top priorities.

In fact, she points out, obsessing about national security can actually have everyone in cities feeling insecure.

Most critically, governments need to work harder to improve social conditions to restore social order, which is being distorted by a growing number of "mass elites" who earn ever higher proportions of the national income.

For example, she notes, the 1980 Census of New York showed that the top 1 per cent of employed New Yorkers enjoyed 12 per cent of all the earnings generated by New York in 1979. By 2010, however, that top 1 per cent was enjoying 44 per cent of New York's total earnings.

"That is an unhealthy capacity for inequality," says Prof Sassen.

"The Occupy movement is contesting this type of society". This is a society where "the physicists who develop the algorithms that produce the enormous trading profits" help create a powerful but expensive city in New York, driving up prices so that ordinary working folk like firemen and teachers have a hard time living in it. "And what would happen to the city if these essential workers cannot live in it anymore?"

Perhaps the most unsettling symptom of the rise of these elites is the super-prime housing market, in which a house costs at least US\$8 million (S\$10 million) in Dubai and Shanghai and US\$18.9 million in Hong Kong, London and Monaco.

"The basic concept of this market is as old as wealth," she muses, referring to the prime luxury housing market. But in the last decade, this market has gained its own momentum, and even continued to grow, crisis or no crisis.

Selling such properties to super-rich foreigners is not "a great way of taking in foreign investment because it creates the wrong kind of pressure on housing markets in cities and, in the end, hurts the modest middle class".

So she notes that while the middle class is usually most content with the status quo, the downgrading of their quality of life by these elites now has them increasingly taking to the streets in protest. "Now that the middle



Prof Sassen believes a "global city" is not only an economic engine for the rich to make money, but also a wide window in which all "can execute their life projects" by innovating constantly and exchanging ideas. PHOTO: SASKIA SASSEN

Prof Sassen on...

How she settled on her idea of the global city

"With the emergent global economy in the 1990s, there was a sharp growth in global cities, which indicated that the global city was not simply about being at the top, but rather being a frontier where national economic cultures encounter more standardised global rules and actors."

What all major global cities have in common

"Too much admiration and a desire for foreign professionals, and too little recognition of working-class migrants."

Why it does not help to stress how competitive one's city is

"Because that only strengthens the hands of big corporations, who can then say, 'Give me tax breaks or I'm going to another city' (when actually) most big corporations need to operate in several cities."

The one component that is needed in current politics

"Less politics and greater attention to social conditions."

Why the Occupy movement is here to stay

"This is not old-style politics of demonstration, where you demonstrate for a day and it is a sort of carnival. Occupying is about making mostly social capacities."

How effective Occupy has been

"It has not worked, and it's getting worse for large sectors of young middle-class people because... they have been heard by the world, but they have not become empowered."

class is getting impoverished and the Occupy movement has taken off, it now has a reason for fighting for its claims. Let's see what happens."

Don't get caught in the city rat race

THIRD, she says a city should not get caught up in the race to outdo its competitors because all global cities have different strengths and specialities. For example, "if you are Boeing and want to enter the global knowledge economy, you do not go to New York; you go to Chicago which knows about large logistics".

This Dutch-American don knows all these differentiations only too well, having distinguished herself through her long, deep and extensive research into how globalisation is changing how all layers of society live. For instance, she took nine years to research her seminal book, *The Global City*.

She is a much-lauded academic at Columbia University and, in 2011, she was also named one of Foreign Policy magazine's Top 100 global thinkers.

While many think globalisation is about taking things out of one's country to the world, Prof Sassen says that the form of globalisation that is most affecting everyone's lives is when national governments incorporate into their national laws and policies the needs and wants of big corporations and international organisations.

She calls this process "denationalisation", or "global norms dressed in the clothing of the national". She thinks it's something to watch closely if everyone is to understand how and why her standard of living is improving or, in most cases, deteriorating.

This is the other global spread, she says, quite unlike the more apparent mass consumerism in which the same brand names are available worldwide.

She says: "This other version of globalisation is anchored in the country, instead of one that leaves it to become a global preference like a Gucci bag, that floats above it all."

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