

On-the-go cities that thrive



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ONE-TRACK thinking can be especially tricky if the subject is as complex as a city, said sociologist Saskia Sassen in her talk to a full house at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) on Wednesday.

Speaking at the invitation of SUTD's Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Professor Sassen exposed just how thin such thinking can be and gave examples such as:

- Globalisation has made everyone my competitor;
- Globalisation has foreigners threatening my job, my home and my very identity;
- The rich will help only themselves;
- The poor are an eyesore and a burden on everyone.

As she stressed to an audience of civil servants, academics and students: "We live in a messy world, so if the hows and wherefores of globalisation are not self-evident, what does globalisation actually homogenise?"

She added that about the only thing "homogenised" or "all looking the same" was state-of-the-art infrastructure that every global city thought it had to provide to draw big money to it. "The financial centres of Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Shenzhen do not look very different from one another," she pointed out.

So, she said, it was crucial to understand that there is room for every city to thrive on its own steam and not have to kowtow to every prospective investor to outshine competitors. Otherwise, she cautioned, fat cats will just arm-twist city administrators to, say, tear down hospitals to free up prime land for them.

"The empirical fact is they actually need to be in several cities for their business," said Prof Sassen, who had studied the top 100 specialised businesses in the world and found that all were present in at least 400 global cities.

How might a global city such as Singapore best brace itself for a brighter future, then? The first step, she said, was to find out how and where the world valued its strengths and special services, say, for its expertise in managing ports.

In this, she noted, Singapore was luckier than most because its small size enabled it to identify such "global circuits" more easily, and build on their networks quickly.

While, during her 45-minute presentation, the attentive audience was understandably keen to engage her in a deeper discussion on Singapore, she told them that thus far, she had studied only its key statistics deeply.

That said, as she considers Singapore a global city, there were many universal best



Shun one-track thinking to understand how globalisation changes the way we live, says sociologist Saskia Sassen. Every city can thrive on its own steam, she adds. PHOTO COURTESY OF SASKIA SASSEN

practices worth looking into.

To begin with, she argued, the global city is a space where people who belong to different worlds encounter one another – although there are no established rules of engagement for each encounter – and are then enabled by the open, fast and fluid atmosphere of cities to make things happen and, in the process, help the collective good.

For example, when wealthy and arrogant young working Americans began buying homes in New York's crime-infested Riverside Park in the 1980s, these largely "selfish" folk also began buying big dogs to protect themselves. The presence of such dogs deterred criminals there and made it safer. Other New Yorkers then took a leaf from their experience.

As for the poor in cities, she said many among them are newly arrived immigrants who, contrary to one-track opinions, actually proceed to weave a tapestry of enterprises to support their own community, such as selling food from home.

So, a civil servant in the audience asked, how could cities be better governed? Could cities succeed despite weak leadership?

Prof Sassen said: "Political classes these days are not political classes – they are bureaucrats. What you need to govern a city

well is the courage that comes from knowledge, not fanaticism.

"Mayors keep banging on about how much they are doing for their cities but I ask them, 'Do you know your city well? Because criminals know your city very well.'"

Prof Sassen, a New Yorker, recalling her running battles with the city's mayors, including the late Edward Koch, said Mr Koch was so intent on building "fancy hotels, restaurants and office buildings" that he forgot to provide a zone downtown in which working-class New Yorkers could work and live. "I told him he needed to consider the needs of the truckers bringing in the diva's costume so she could breathe on Broadway."

Far better, she added, to be like Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, who once tore up the tarmac of its downtown airport to build a public park that benefited a greater number of people.

All told, she added, good global city governance boils down to operating well on two principles: "What have we got to do?" and "Pay the price".

The one constant in the global city is that it will always be complex. After all, she said: "Nothing is really easy when human beings are involved."

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