



# *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand 30, Open*

Papers presented to the 30th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand held on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia, July 2-5, 2013.

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/conference/sahanz-2013/>

Eunice Seng, “The Podium, the Tower and the ‘People’: The Private Development of a Public Complex, c.1965-1970” in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 30, Open*, edited by Alexandra Brown and Andrew Leach (Gold Coast, Qld: SAHANZ, 2013), vol. 1, p 219-232.

ISBN-10: 0-9876055-0-X

ISBN-13: 978-0-9876055-0-4

# *The Podium, the Tower and the “People”*

The Private Development of a Public  
Complex, c.1965-1970

*Eunice Seng*

*University of Hong Kong*

*In 1967, two years after Singapore’s Independence, the Urban Redevelopment Authority launched its first Sale of Sites Program in the Central Area for private development, in conjunction with an infrastructural network expansion program. The People’s Park Complex in the heart of Chinatown was one of fourteen such sites. It replaced the old People’s Park which was a market of makeshift stalls that spread over a hectare. This paper examines the building of the People’s Park Complex from its conception as a new typology of privately-owned public space to its realization as a social and commercial center in Chinatown for the “common people.” It contends that the Complex narrated a process of nation-building where Chinese culture, in particular, was codified and typified under the rubric of multiculturalism as a direct response to Singapore’s diasporic composition. The Complex was imbricated in intersecting nascent ideologies. The monolithic multi-use building bore witness to how the various interests of the developer, the architect and the government-as-planner were aligned to project the imaginings of the Chinese diaspora onto the podium-tower typology which was already charged with the universal ideals espoused by its Euro-American proponents. The merging of infrastructure and architecture championed by the post-war avant-gardist groups such as the Team 10 and the multi-disciplinary Ekistics Society was furthered by the Asian counterparts from the 1960s, most prolifically by the Metabolist group in Japan and within the nation, by the Singapore Planning and Urban Research group (SPUR) where some of the core members were consultants to the government or officials. The five-year plan as a national initiative based on social and economic development which included the provision of new public spaces provided the challenge for the young and foreign-trained intellectual architects to reformulate and contextualize the international wave of humanism in architecture and planning for Singapore.*



The People's Park Complex occupies the site of the previous "People's Park Market"—a market and shopping center of single-storey shops and makeshift structures that was popular amongst locals and tourists. Its historical significance can be traced back to Singapore's founding in 1819, where the section of the city south of the Singapore River was allocated to the Chinese population, mostly immigrants from South China. Chinatown evolved out of such a form of colonial containment that identifies the Chinese as a diaspora, not allowing their demographic advantage to dominate the culture. Under the British, the containment created through segregation (and consequent overcrowding) had produced a historic template for a constricted mixed-use neighborhood where the domestic and commercial co-existed, in the form of large blocks of continuous rows of back-to-back shophouses.<sup>1</sup> Public space within this urban rubric was limited to the street or edge, the market, the temple, the river and residual fields and vacant lots.

"People's Park" was one of such open spaces intended for excess and leisure. From the onset, this open space was occupied by hawkers selling food, clothing and housewares. It functioned as the Chinese counterpart to the Padang – a green field designated for colony-wide celebrations, parades and recreational sports like cricket and lawn tennis— on the other side of the River. By 1950, the "People's Park Market," rampant with illegal hawkers, was already the social and economic hub of Chinatown, triggering the colonial government to advocate for the rebuilding of Chinatown to deal with "the appalling overcrowding." That government dissolved before any plan was drawn.<sup>2</sup> Following Independence, the condition of racial containment was altered, yet the specific steps taken to secularize and contain cultural identity were no less explicit. Within this were efforts at social integration and marketization that were often conflicted.

A fire that broke out on Christmas night of 1966 wiped out most of the makeshift structures and sealed the fate of the People's Park Market. The new Government, together with the developer and his architect, began a systematic process of re-allocation, reconstruction, and reinvention of People's Park as a privately owned interior public space. No longer residual, it was a project of urban design based on market principles, and co-financed, planned and managed by the State. Whereas the architects provided the modern work-live container, the State as regulator and event-programmer conditioned the types of sociability that traversed the

1. By the turn of the twentieth century, Chinatown was singled out as the most problematic and unhygienic area that urgently needed improvement. The Singapore Improvement Trust was formally established in 1927 to clean up the most crowded parts of the city's center. Back lanes were driven into densely-packed urban blocks and buildings demolished to give way to open spaces and parks.

2. "The Hawker Report," *Straits Times*, November 24, 1950, 6.

building complex and by extension, the new citizenry. Even as a privately-owned entity, the complex—from its operations and demographic to the maximization of its building footprint, its rigidly delineated sectional datum of commercial and residential to its continuous shopping interior and atrium event space—presents itself as a simulacrum of the city, a miniaturization of the State apparatus. This was especially the case during the first two decades of nation building, where its position as a hub was repeatedly emphasized by its various proponents (state, developer, architect), as it played host to many cultural celebrations and national education exhibitions.

The People's Park Complex was one of fourteen urban sites sold to private developers in the Central Area. Designed by DP architects in 1967 and opened for business in 1970, the project embodies the paradox of an urban architectural model for social integration within a developmental framework. It has been celebrated as an exemplary urban architectural model that is specific to its place and historical condition where the nationalizing moment intersected the architectural context of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Its architectural proponents share the preoccupation with architect-designed public gathering places of the CIAM, Team 10, Urban Design at the GSD, and the Japanese Metabolist Group. As Fumihiko Maki commented when he visited during the project's construction, "We theorized and you people are getting it built."<sup>4</sup> Rem Koolhaas called it "a brutal high-rise slab on a brutal podium" that is "in fact a condensed version of a Chinese downtown, a three-dimensional market based on the cellular matrix of Chinese shopping—a modern-movement Chinatown."<sup>5</sup>

The mid-1960s seemed to be a moment where the architect as urban designer was given the space to translate public policy and programmatic concepts to advocate for the realization of an urban potential in an emerging architectural design. Yet conflict, a condition common to contemporary cities, was not present in the accounts of the project by these commentators and historians. Maki, reflecting upon the first Urban Design Conference at Harvard in 1956, pointed out the value of competitions as spaces for reflection on issues of reconstruction after cities experience complete or partial destruction. "As long as, and precisely because the city is incomplete," he wrote, "emphasis on any particular direction calls forth dissent and challenges that in turn opens up new possibilities."<sup>6</sup> In the case of the enforced partial destruction of Chinatown for urban renewal, that contested space for reflec-

3. See for example, Tan Kok Meng, "After Tabula Rasa: Nodal City Singapore," *Lotus International* 108 (2001): 21-29. Also, Wong Yunn Chii, *Singapore 1:1 City: A Gallery of Architecture & Urban Design* (Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2005). Norman Edwards and Peter Keys, *Singapore: A Guide to Buildings, Streets, Places* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1996). Prior to these, Rem Koolhaas situated this project as avant-gardist in his essay "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa." Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1008-89.

4. William Lim, *Cities for People* (Singapore: Select Books, 1990), 8.

5. Koolhaas and Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1067.

6. Fumihiko Maki, "Fragmentation and Friction as Urban Threats: The Post-1956 City," *Harvard Design Magazine* "The Origins and Evolution of Urban Design" (Spring/Summer 2006): 46.



tion and debate was not created. The architecture of the People's Park Complex was complicit to the State project of rebranding identity, incubating the consumer-citizen and symbolizing the embrace of the vernacular within the national.

## Rebranding Chinatown

Chinatown remained a prominent site under the Government's inaugural urban renewal program, following the recommendation made by the team of United Nations Experts comprising Otto Koenigsberger, land and legal advisor Charles Abrams and traffic economist Susumo Kobe who conducted a survey of Singapore in 1963.<sup>7</sup> Their report on "Growth and Urban Renewal in Singapore" served as the basis for the Urban Renewal Plan of 1964.<sup>8</sup> In February 1964, architect-planner Alan Choe, a graduate of Melbourne University and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), was tasked to head the Urban Renewal team, a subsidiary of the Building Department in the Housing Development Board (HDB), to execute the Plan. The objective was to rejuvenate the old core of the city by making better economic use of the 1,700 acres of land. It proposed to rebuild the city completely in stages, and to build multi-storey blocks of apartment houses, commercial houses, restaurants, hotels, theaters, shopping centers, markets, schools, multi-storey carparks, etc. Provision was made for a traffic circulatory system and mass transport system to accommodate four million people and half a million vehicles by the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> The implementation of the Plan would be a joint venture with private enterprise, "for such a gigantic task as envisaged... maximum co-operation between the private and public sector is sine qua non."<sup>10</sup>

The Plan was delayed due to the uncertainties of Singapore's political situation. During the interim, from April 4 to August 7, 1965, the HDB sent Choe on a four-month study tour of Europe and America, including a week-long trip to Tokyo en-route Europe. Two days after his return, Singapore became an independent nation. The HDB celebrated the success of its Five-Year Building Programme with "Housing Board Week" which consisted of a series of events and a housing exhibition at the site of a prison that was to be a major urban renewal project under the second Five-Year Programme. By this time, more than a third of the population of 1 million was already housed in public housing estates. At the end of 1965, the Urban Renewal team had grown from three to 76. It prepared a plan that divided the Central area into 17 precincts, nine in the north and eight south of the Singa-

7. The three-man team was preceded by E.E. Lorange, an expert sent after the Government approached the U.N. for help. He presented a report after a 6-month long survey of the island on 1962.

8. Charles Abrams, Susumu Kobe, and Otto Koenigsberger. *Growth and Urban Renewal in Singapore: Report prepared for the Government of Singapore (U.N. Programme of Technical Assistance Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1963).*

9. "UN Experts go ahead for big city face-lift," *Starights Times*, August 13, 1963, 4.

10. Housing and Development Board, HDB Annual Report 1963 (Singapore: Government Printer, 1963), 2.

11. By the end of 1966, 90% of land in Precinct S.1 had been acquired and planning and preparation for the sites had begun. Housing and Development Board, *HDB Annual Report 1965* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1965), 51.

12. Housing and Development Board, *HDB Annual Report 1966* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1966), 62-64.

13. "\$90m plan for a new look Singapore," *Starights Times*, April 9, 1966, 6.

pore River. A scheduled programme of action was drawn up for action in each of the precincts based on priority. Redevelopment of two precincts, one in the North and one in the South began simultaneously. The strategy was "a two prong centrifugal action of redevelopment moving from North and south towards the City Centre."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the Building Department conducted information talks and activities to educate the people on the merits of urban renewal and to garner public support for the Government's "earnest intentions" in anticipation of the acquisition of public open space by private enterprise.<sup>12</sup>

The modernization of Chinatown via the People's Park Complex began in 1967 with the setting up of the Urban Renewal Department (URD), headed by Choe, as a separate entity from the HDB. The previous program of clearance and reallocation was expanded to a two-prong approach from the points of view of finance, resource and enterprise. On 16 June, the Minister of Law and National Development E.W. Barker announced a \$90m plan for 14 urban redevelopment projects that the Government would carry out with private enterprise. This was to be the first program of its kind in the world in which private participation on such a scale was promoted by a government. He extended the invitation to investors both in Singapore and abroad, highlighting their roles as investors of the new nation. "Urban renewal, in fact, thrives on private participation," he stated.<sup>13</sup> The Government provided incentives in the form of installment payment for land purchase (20% down payment and the balance of 80% to be spread over ten years without interest) and property tax exemption for six months, plus one month per storey of the building to be constructed. Developers could choose to carry out the sketch plans provided by the URD, or amend them, or reject the Government's and submit their own. Successful tenders were based on the premium offered, the capital investment, the employment generated and the revenue potential, as well as the architectural merits.

The URD's explicit call for contemporary building types that manifest its ideals in urban development was met with many responses, mostly from developers who had not built such large-scale mixed-use buildings before. Each came paired with a local architectural firm led by young ambitious foreign-trained architects. Twenty-five year old Singapore developer Ho Kok Cheong and DP Architects led by Koh Seow Chuan, William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon, won the tender to develop their 30-storey



People's Park Complex which covered an area of 2.5 acres in late 1967. The complex was Ho's first development project in Singapore as was DP Architects' first urban project upon the office's founding in 1967. Ho explained the importance of keeping the name of People's Park as it was a name that had become "legendary in the hearts and mind of the citizens of Singapore a place of gaiety, life and activity." "When completed," he stated, "People's Park will recapture and recreate the atmosphere on a larger and more sophisticated scale. It will also thrive and remain lit at night in keeping with its existing character."<sup>14</sup> This new space of consumption would be housed in a modern air-conditioned building.

14. "People's Park Complex: Singapore's tallest building-to-be," *Straights Times*, December 1, 1967, 8.

### **Incubating the Consumer-citizen: private space of shopping and public space of the nation**

Implicit in Ho's statement was his desire to replace the old tenants with new ones who would be appropriate to occupy the new People's Park Complex. The URD was in the process of reallocating the shop owners and hawkers affected by the Christmas Day fire, first to an open space down the street and then into a shopping complex adjacent to the People's Park site on Park Road and to another block of flats in Outram Road, a 15-minute walk southwest. From the announcement of the project to the opening of the shopping and parking podium in 1970, the People's Park Complex garnered so much public attention that it overshadowed the other People's Park building – a 9-storey Park Road Redevelopment project completed by the HDB in late 1967. Located on the site adjacent to the Complex, the \$2.3 million other shopping-cum-residential building comprised three floors of 290 shops, 74 eating stalls, a crèche and a kindergarten, and six floors of two- and three-room flats. Its tenants witnessed the demolition of the old People's Park Market in 1968 and then the rise of the 31-storey \$17 million People's Park Complex out of 2.5 acres of rubble. In place of the 1-storey stalls and restaurants, rose the biggest and tallest shopping-cum-residential complex ever to be built in Singapore then. It contained 56 offices, 233 departmental stores and emporiums and 44 kiosks in the 5-storey shopping podium; and 98 one-room flats, 144-three-room flats and 18 four-room flats in the 26-storey residential slab block. In an ironic anticipatory statement to mark the demolition, the developer Ho said: "We want to maintain the image of a people's park."<sup>15</sup>

15. "Old Landmark goes," *Straights Times*, June 18, 1968, 6.

16. "Choe: Slums in city centre block progress," *Straits Times*, April 18, 1967, 6.

17. HDB, *HDB Annual Report 1967*. (Singapore: Government Printer, 1967), 80-81; HDB Annual Report 1968 (Singapore: Government Printer, 1968), 79-80.

18. "Council plans pedestrian safety campaign," *Straits Times*, February 4, 1973, 6. "Disasters that strike in the home," *Straits Times*, 26 Mar. 1973. 17. "Dental Health Week opens today," *Straits Times*, October 4, 1974, 9.

19. "New departmental store opens at People's Park Complex," *Straits Times*, December 12, 1970, 12.

20. "Building career loses out to social prejudice," *Straits Times*, December 2, 1973, 4.

21. "Society has big responsibility to keep up rapid pace of building industry," *Straits Times*, December 13, 1971, 9.

22. "Houses, shops on site of abattoir," *ST*, 9 March 1971, 7. Henry Chang, "Work starts on largest 'shop-under-one-roof' centre in Malaysia," *Straits Times*, October 20, 1971, 14.

That image is at once a projection and construction. The URD worked in parallel with the developer to disperse the lower income "people" from the People's Park. Choe estimated that six new low-cost dwellings nearby must be provided for every slum structure demolished.<sup>16</sup> He saw the redevelopment project of shopping podium and residential block as the most appropriate type to accommodate Singapore's projected density. Moreover, the complex embodied the ideals of a more physically and economically mobile citizenry. The three-storey podium of the HDB's "People's Park" was naturally ventilated with a large central open-air courtyard. On the third floor was an open play deck adjacent to the crèche, serving as a buffer zone between the bustling commercial activities below and the residences above.<sup>17</sup> It was the first State-provided crèche and play deck in the city center designed in response to the rapidly rising trend of working mothers as Singapore's expanding industries turned to women labor. Choe extended this notion of buffer zones to open space and parks as transitional zones "for pedestrians to move from one precinct to another." He maintained that urban renewal was the only response to the city's growth and the shopping-cum-residential complex was the architectural type complicit with the social and economic development of the city.

The developer and the tenants association celebrated the modernized version of Chinatown with organized activities marking major Chinese events, such as a pugilistic show and lion dance in conjunction with a "giant sale" to mark the Lunar New Year. The space was also frequently loaned to the Government for national education exhibitions – on pedestrian safety and traffic consciousness, on home safety, on dental hygiene, etc.<sup>18</sup> He demonstrated the idea of a "larger and more sophisticated" update of the old People's Park by inviting businesses like the Czech's Bata Shoe Company to set up their largest flagship store and Eastern United Trading to set up a departmental store selling home furnishings.<sup>19</sup> Ho openly concurred with the government's vision on urban renewal and policies on housing and development.<sup>20</sup> As a patron of the Building and Estate Management Society (BEMS) he urged members to recognize their "tremendous responsibility" in maintaining all that had been planned and built, and to actively contribute to the growth of the city into a center of modern office towers and commercial complexes.<sup>21</sup> Filled with throngs of shoppers from the day of its opening, the Complex was proffered as the model for other development in Singapore and Malaysia which began to be referred as "similar to the People's Park Complex."<sup>22</sup>





## Symbolizing Network: Local and National

In mid-1967, Choe had presented a proposed sketch design at an estimated cost of \$10million to demonstrate the URD's objective of developing a shopping center with flats to minimize traffic and parking problems by bringing the residents close to their place of work.<sup>23</sup> He referred to this new architectural type as one that houses an entire township and his description of the core of dense human and vehicular traffic departed from the ideas summarized at the Eighth CIAM Congress in Hoddesdon, England: "[T]hat cars should arrive and park on the periphery of the Core, but not cross it."<sup>24</sup> The sketch model he presented showed three 18-storey blocks of flats sitting atop a large 3-storey podium of shops. Parking was not incorporated in the complex. The architects' elaborated upon Choe's vision for the core with "an urban architectural prototype" that would not only house workplace, home and leisure within but would be part of a network of layered traffic in the area. However, they rejected the URD's sketch plan and took advantage of the tax incentives by consolidating the three blocks into one massive 26-storey block and increasing the shopping podium to five storeys to accommodate 700 car parking spaces.<sup>25</sup> The roof of the shopping complex was an expansive "garden" for the dwellers of the slab block of flats above.

Where the private space of shopping and the public space of the nation coincides lies in the architectural expression of continuous mobility. The first two floors are served by three escalators and a covered overhead bridge connects the building to Chinatown across the street, echoing the CIAM 8's focus on a city for the pedestrian and the Team 10's notion of urban reintegration—a continuous space and surface connects one's house through shops and onto the rest of the city (more shops). The covered bridge was the first of its kind in Singapore and a gift from the developer to the government. Programmatically, the project saw a parallel in Louis Kahn's cylindrical structures for downtown Philadelphia where inhabitants and their cars cohabit within the same architecture. Whereas Kahn generated his cylindrical forms from the car, the architects produced a big box of a continuous shopping interior.

The shopping complex was conceived as a continuous space that culminated in the multi-tiered atrium that the architects named the "city room." Shops and stalls occupied the ground floor, evoking the previous market of makeshift stalls. The "city room"

23. "New People's Park," *Straits Times*, June 22, 1967, 7.

24. J. Tyrwhitt, J.L. Sert, E.N. Rogers (eds.). *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanization of Urban Life* (London: Lund Humphries, 1952), 164.

25. Lim suggested that Choe had disagreed with them on this point and so they brought the matter up to the then Permanent Secretary, William Lim, email response to author, May 3, 2013.

was an arrangement of scales (of spaces), levels and movement designed to invite the people in and to accommodate them at a variety of ways and speeds. Lim and his partners educated the Government and of the people through the space of public access—this continuous public space is connected throughout the entire People’s Park site. The tiered triple-storey atrium with a sunken plaza for flash sales and bazaar events was accessible from each of the four sides of the complex, with all shops visible at one glance.

The implication of interiorizing the street into an atrium is two-fold. On the one hand, it suggests a kind of transparent, democratic space in which the “safe” and “neutral” activity of shopping would take place. Yet it is also precisely this formal architectural act that produces a socially engineered public space whereby the users belong to a self-selected class of shoppers. The other publics, when invited in for other events, invariably partook in the same consumption logic inscribed in the interior architecture. In contrast to the HDB’s open-air shopping space, the People’s Park Complex responded to the tropicality with an air-conditioned podium. It filled in the rest of the original site, leaving a wide strip of paved landscape connecting the main thoroughfare Eu Tong Sen Street and HDB’s other “People’s Park” building.<sup>26</sup> To the extent that the “city room” with multiple access doors from all directions is clearly contradictory to the maintenance of an air-conditioned interior was not raised, the idea of an urban continuum remains elusive.

During the project’s construction, Choe outlined the Government’s vision for rebuilding the city center that echoed the humanist ideas outlined in the CIAM’s *The Heart of the City* (1952) and expounded on Victor Gruen’s book *Heart of the Cities* (1964). He painted a vision for a city center of one-stop complexes to ensure that there will be night activities, and would contain all available amenities that cater to the needs of not only the tenants, but to the people of the locality and possibly the whole island. A continuous network of raised pedestrian walkways would ensure continuous mobility and urban integration between multi-level structures and shopping-cum-residential complexes and traffic infrastructure.<sup>27</sup> In a national television programme months before its opening, Choe highlighted the People’s Park Complex to illustrate multi-level connections between buildings and precincts. He pointed out that not only did it exemplify urban continuity it also became an instant tourist attraction, an important aspect in

26. The building was later known as the People’s Park Food and Shopping Centre.

27. See Chia Poteik, “New People’s Park,” *Straits Times*, June 22, 1971, 7. “People’s Park Complex: Singapore’s tallest building-to-be,” *Straits Times*, December 1, 1967, 8; “A peep at the exciting city of the future,” *Straits Times*, May 26, 1969, 5.



the revitalization of the central area.<sup>28</sup> Ho affirmed this, stating his intention to create “a new and modern Chinatown that will not only attract the local population but tourists as well.”<sup>29</sup>

28. “A peep at the exciting city of the future...,” *Straits Times*, May 26, 1969, 5.

29. “Coming up fast, grandest complex in Asia,” *Straits Times*, September 30, 1969, 5. “Hey big spender, happiness is a many splendoured shopping centre,” *Straits Times*, July 26, 1970, 12.

### Re-centering Chinatown: Modern architecture for the Public

That architecture was called out as one of the key criteria in the selection of an urban redevelopment project affirmed the Government’s recognition of the integral relationship between architecture and nation building. Post-colonial India and Nehru’s modern city of Chandigarh was a reference study site for Malayan architects in the Public Works Department (PWD) and the HDB. Choe had also visited many of these architects’ urban projects and was familiar with CIAM’s modern planning schemes and ideals. In addition, he was familiar with the joint exhibition of visionary architecture and housing held at the National Library of Singapore in March 1963, a few months before the arrival of the UN team. The former were exhibits on loan from the Museum of Modern Art New York, and consisted of 74 large photo panels and explanatory texts showing 45 un-built architectural projects by 30 architects that date back to 1916 up to the 1960s, including the Metabolist group. The latter showed models and photographs of housing estates completed by the HDB in its first five-year program. The public exhibition contributed to the zeitgeist of the time, where the State looks to private enterprise and the creative energies of its professionals to collaborate in the nation-building endeavor. This was best expressed in the opening address of S. Rajaratnam, the Minister of Culture:

Singapore ten years ago was not a real city ... In these photographs and models you see a vision that has become a reality for something like 17 per cent of the population ... An artist’s dream, combined with the skill of architects, planners and builders, provides homes for nearly 300,000 people.<sup>30</sup>

30. “Housing ‘a dream come true’ – Raja,” *Straits Times*, March 19, 1963, 4.

Maki’s subsequent pronouncement “we theorized and you people are getting it built” was an uncanny response to Rajaratnam’s description. DP Architects’ urban architectural design of a shopping-cum-residential complex was the result of a feasibility report produced by the young team. In 1957, immediately upon his return from Harvard on a Fulbright scholarship at the Department of City and Regional Planning, William Lim was partner of the architectural firm Malayan Architects Co-Partnership. He

then co-founded DP Architects with local graduate Tay and Melbourne graduate Koh in 1967. The People's Park Complex was his and Ho's first major collaboration. They had previously worked on some smaller projects together. Lim attributed the project's influence to "the Modernist movement spearheaded by Le Corbusier and subsequently the Team 10 members," many of whom he got to know quite well.<sup>31</sup> As a student at the Architectural Association (AA) in the early 1950s, he was influenced by "brutalist architects" John Killick (1924-71), William Howell (1922-74) and Peter Smithson (Team 10) as well as the architect-planner Otto Koenigsberger who founded the Department of Development and Tropical Studies at the AA in 1953.<sup>32</sup> As an observer at the last CIAM meeting chaired by Team 10 members, he witnessed the debates concerning the ideological shift towards a systems-based network approach to cities—a mode of discourse that would have a lasting impact on his own mode of intellectual production.

Lim attributed his theoretical knowledge on economic development to individuals like Greek architect-planner Constantinos Doxiadis and Fumihiko Maki during his year at Harvard under the deanship of Josep Lluís Sert.<sup>33</sup> It was also there that he met Jaqueline Tyrwhitt who recommended him to take many courses in planning law, development economics and public administration.<sup>34</sup> He developed an intellectual leaning towards social equity and justice, and first learnt of the urban ideas of Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch.<sup>35</sup> He explained that the feasibility report was the result of knowledge gained from his time at Harvard and that it was his partners and he who convinced the developer to pre-sell the units before the completion of the Complex to fund the project. He also revealed that although the commission of the project was through a URD open bid, not many others tendered for the project possibly because the lot was very big.<sup>36</sup> Together with Tay and Koh—all three were aware of Victor Gruen's mall projects in the U.S.—they approached the project with the attitude of looking "for our own solution."<sup>37</sup>

Lim and Tay, together with a group of like-minded academics and practitioners, had formed the Singapore Urban Planning Research (SPUR) group in 1965 during the most intense months of the country's independence. In a series of intensive workshops and research activity that spanned over six years, SPUR produced two publications—SPUR 65-67 and SPUR 68-71—which presented the core members' collective ideas on

31. William Lim, email response to author, May 3, 2013.

32. It became the Development Planning Unit of the University College London where he moved to until his retirement in 1978. Lim took William Howell's design studio at the AA and learnt of the latter's concern with integrating building programs with social needs. Both Killick and Howell was part of the team of architects in the London County Council Housing Department responsible for the design of Alton West estate at Roehampton. J.M. Richards, rev. Catherine Gordon, "Howell, William Gough [Bill] (1922–1974)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. See, John R. Gold, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954-1972* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007). Cf. Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 238-65.

33. See Richard Marshall, "Josep Lluís Sert's urban Design Legacy," in *Eric Mumford* (eds.), *Josep Lluís Sert: The Architect of Urban Design, 1953-1969* ed. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 130-43. Koolhaas emphasized the influence of Maki and the Japanese Metabolist Group in making a case for the project being demonstrative of the emergence of a "non-white avant-garde" in the 1960s. Koolhaas and Mau, S,M,L,XL, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1054, 1067.

34. Lim, email response to author, May 30, 2013.

35. Lim, email response to author, May 30, 2013.

36. Lim, email response to author, January 30, 2013.

37. Lim, email response to author, January 30, 2013.



Singapore's urbanism as well as papers by international affiliates such as Koichi Nagashima and Tyrwhitt.<sup>38</sup> The group aimed for academics and professional bodies to be involved in the city's urban development through collaborative and multi-disciplinary research; and made frequent suggestions and urban proposals to the Government. The group referenced the Ekistics Group formed in the late 1950s by Doxiadis and Tyrwhitt. Lim championed efforts in environmental planning, arguing for a more humanistic multi-perspective approach towards development. In 1971, he outlined a 13-point criteria for urban development, where he cautioned the haste in demolition including large areas unaffected by major roads and the single approach of removal towards slums. In terms of private development, "compensation would be adequately given to the urban poor," he wrote. "The demolition of these buildings do not and cannot solve the problems of the slum dwellers."<sup>39</sup>

Implicit in Lim's statement is a self-critique of the process of the People's Park Complex, that despite the avant-gardist stance, the architects did not participate in any conversations regarding URD's renewal and reallocation process. Architectural and urban design was sequential rather than reciprocal as desired by the advocates in SPUR. And despite the outwardly ideological alignment between the State and the architects, at a certain economic level, SPUR's model for social integration differs from the development model of the nation state in that it aims to accommodate various types of legalities (even illegalities), complexity, and irrationality.<sup>40</sup> Lim, quoting Victor Gruen, argued for "a city of compactness, intensity of public life, and a small-grained pattern in which all types of human activities are intermingled in close proximity."<sup>41</sup> In that regard, it aligns more with the complex multi-disciplinary systems model of Doxiadis and the inclusive open-ended model of the Metabolists. In the People's Park Complex, these ideas translate to an interior urbanism of small stores over the big department store of supermarket model, the provision for admixture of public and private domain to accommodate greater numbers; and within the big space are intimate spaces and places of nooks and crannies.<sup>42</sup>

As the first privately-owned public space in Singapore, not only did the Complex cater to its own residents and tenants—a sizeable population equivalent to a small estate—it was the shopping centre for the "local publics" of Chinatown and to the rest of the rapidly industrializing population in the new nation eager

38. Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, "Town Planning Notions – Some Rethinking." Talk to SPUR members, January 1971, SPUR 68-71 (Singapore: Eurasia, 1971), 66-68.

39. William Lim, "The City Core – Heart of the Metropolis," SPUR 68-71 (Singapore: Eurasia, 1971), 37-40.

40. See for example, "Pirate Taxis in Singapore" which gives an idea of SPUR's position towards the existing elements of the city. Rather than complete removal by regulation which was the Government's tendency, they recommended a multi-perspective approach to framing the problem and a multi-prong solution instead of simply getting rid of them. This attitude is consistently maintained as evidenced in subsequent position papers by Lim. For example, his paper presented to the Southeast Asian Study Group for Architecture and Urbanism in Singapore. Lim, "A Plea for Complexity and Irrationality in Architecture," *Cities for People: Reflections of a Southeast Asian Architect* (Singapore: Select Books, 1990), 30-38.

41. Lim, "The City Core," 41

42. Lim, "The City Core," 37-40.

43. "Sarawak team tours two Housing Estates," *Straits Times*, June 9, 1971, 9. "Hey big spender, happiness is a many splendoured shopping centre," *Straits Times*, July 26, 1970, 12.

to exercise their newly found economic freedom.<sup>43</sup> With more and more men and women employed in the new factories and companies that were being set up under the national initiative of economic growth and efficiency, most weekend itineraries include shopping at People's Park. Tyrwhitt, during a visit to Singapore in 1970, remarked that what impressed her most about the city's architecture was the "commercialism with a human face"; and cited the People's Park Complex as an exemplary urban model of a "strongly commercialized but very human business centre."<sup>44</sup>

44. "Town expert sees S'pore as centre for expertise," *Straights Times*, December 21, 1970, 7.

The success of People's Park's mixed-use formula triggered the government's issuance of a directive for major commercial projects to provide at least three floors of residential space. Developers had the option of either converting at least three storeys of existing office buildings for residential accommodation or, for those still on the drawing table, to add at least three storeys more to the buildings.<sup>45</sup> Such an overarching schema to populate the commercial core was met with skepticism by many architects. The general sentiment amongst them was that the People's Park Complex was a unique case where its location ensured the daily presence of crowds of shoppers, whereas this was not necessarily so at many other sites. Chinatown was the first of three sites developed to highlight the "Instant Asia" theme. As part of the nation's multi-racial agenda, each had an ethnic focus—Chinese, Malay, and Indian.

45. "Homes in the new office buildings in city," *Straights Times*, April 3, 1971, 4.

The People's Park Complex became the urban prototype for housing the new citizenry. From the impetus for the demolition of the old People's Park to its public tender, design, building, reoccupation and use, each step of the process embodied the ideologies of the new nation. It exemplifies a moment of large-scale modernist visions where public and private enterprise equate urban development as necessary massive removal of entire neighborhoods and rebuilding of instant "cities." The "instant city" of the People's Park Complex is a model of a shopping center based on a merger of commercial and humanist interests that has yet been refuted. Together with URD's People's Park, DP's People's Park was meant to provide public spaces for the residents in Chinatown – many of them crowded the complex to "escape" their rented homes of cramped bed-spaces—and for the population that had relocated or relocating into suburban housing estates. With all the shops and emporia under one roof in an air-conditioned space, the Complex became the instant nexus of Chinatown. But the vision of urban integration in the



form of a networked city of pedestrians on continuous overhead bridges with vehicular traffic speeding below was not quite realized within this mode of State-incentivized urban design.

Nothing of the previous People's Park remained, but the people of Singapore accepted their "park" which they were repeatedly reminded was a "gift" from the State and the developer.<sup>46</sup> People's Park "succeeded" and "the people like their new park, the Straits Times reported in 1970."<sup>47</sup> But there is no such thing as a free gift. The central question: "at what expense?" raised by Lim in his 1971 essay "The City Core—Heart of the Metropolis" in the local press was not pursued. By 1974, a new \$40 million People's Park Center opened across the street. Consisting of a shopping podium larger than Ho's Complex and three towers housing mostly legal offices and flats, the government nor the owner no longer needed to explain why "the people" of Chinatown were systematically replaced en masse. Lee Kuan Yew, in his autobiography, reiterated Choe's 1968 statement that renewal was imperative: "when we live in high-rises 10 to 20 stories high, incompatible traditional practices had to stop."<sup>48</sup> Conceived and constructed in a period where the Government decried "Chinese chauvinism," the People's Park Complex and its two cousins stood as evidence of the remaking of a nation with an ethnic base but not a "China base" whereby race was purged of political affiliations to the country of origin (China) and all that is culturally symbolic and non-threatening were encouraged.<sup>49</sup> Like the megastructures of the 1960s, the much-celebrated prototype was first and foremost symbolic.

46. Comparatively, the architects received insignificant media attention.

47. "The people like their new Park," *Straits Times*, February 3, 1970, 6.

48. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 182.

49. Lyn Pan, *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 215-16.