

Study visit report:

Community Planning and Rejuvenation: A study on Seoul and Singapore

As part of the collaborative research project between the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) and the Seoul Institute (SI) on "Community Planning and Rejuvenation", a team of SI researchers consisting of Dr Yang Jae-seob (Director), Dr Changi Yi (Research Fellow), Dr An Hyeon-chan (Associate Research Fellow) and Song Meekyong (Researcher) visited Singapore from 5 to 7 December 2016. This report details the takeaways from the discussions held during the visit.



With participation from the Housing and Development Board (HDB), Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), People's Association (PA) and Office for Citizen Engagement under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), the project aims to distil common lessons and identify best practices from both Seoul and Singapore on community involvement and engagement at various levels of urban planning and development. The project focuses on three areas: i) comprehensive town-level local plans; ii) local rejuvenation programmes for residential communities; and iii) major development projects in existing communities.

During the study visit, SI researchers visited the Rail Corridor, Our Tampines Hub, Social Linkway in Tampines and Remaking Our Heartland project in Bedok New Town. SI researchers also shared case studies from Seoul during a roundtable discussion to deepen the sharing of lessons and best practices in community planning in Seoul and Singapore. Some takeaways from the discussions during the study visit are detailed below.



The research roundtable consisted of Seoul Institute's sharing on Part 1: Community Planning Process; Part 2: Local Rejuvenation Programmes; and sharing on key takeaways from both cities. Participants include representatives from academia, NGOs and stakeholder agencies.

Balancing differences in needs and interests among the community

Balancing the interests of different user groups had consistently been the key challenge faced in the process of engagement exercises. To mitigate this, URA organised a series of community workshops in early 2016 for the Rail Corridor project to get different groups from the community to discuss about their needs with each other. URA also managed requests from the community that might be inconsistent with the proposed development plans.

For example, a group of vocal residents in the Bukit Timah area initially requested for additional carparks to be constructed at the stretch of Rail Corridor, to which URA firmly declined as the request was against the planned land use. Following a series of engagement activities, the residents had since backed down on their requests for additional carparks, and focused instead on suggestions for the types of planting they would like to have along the site, in line with the broader vision for the project as a community space.



The three locations along the Rail Corridor with distinctive characteristics demonstrated the potential of preserving heritage (Left photo: Tanjong Pagar Railway Station), providing community space and access points (Bukit Timah Rail Way Station buildings), as well as conserving biodiversity (Right photo: proposed sites for butterfly garden and protection of a rare fruit bat species under the viaduct).

Similarly, Seoul faces the challenge of mitigating diverse needs and interests in the community. However, Seoul also has difficulties increasing participation rates for community planning activities. As such, Seoul is taking a pragmatic approach to ensure that community planning can still remain inclusive by maintaining a fair representation of diverse groups among participants directly involved in the planning processes. This is in contrast to focusing on the increasing actual numbers of participants, as it is difficult to attract more people to be deeply involved in these community activities.

Encouraging sense of ownership among residents

Cultivating a sense of ownership among residents for the proposals not only ensures that the facilities created are well used, but can also reduce post-implementation maintenance issues. "Hello Neighbour!", a joint research by HDB and National University of Singapore (NUS), introduced enhancements to everyday public spaces within the neighbourhood based on residents' inputs and interest areas surfaced during the engagement process. This approach helped sustain sense of ownership for the proposals after implementation.

For instance, one of the items proposed along the "Social Linkway" was a green trellis, as there were a number of green fingers among the residents in the neighbourhood. One of the residents volunteered to take on the responsibility of watering the plants on the green trellis after implementation. In the "Neighbourhood Incubator" at Tampines Palmwalk precinct, residents also took on the responsibility of running a community café at the void deck of Block 839 Tampines Street 83.



Social Linkway (Block 831 Tampines Street 83) is a common walkway energised by adjacent new social spaces to promote community interaction.

Similarly in Seoul, to encourage development of autonomous community spaces, the Community Power Station project promotes space improvements to small-scale facilities such as neighbourhood libraries, which are operated by residents themselves. Community Initiatives includes organising sharing markets and volunteer-driven, shared childcare facilities.

Under the Community Power Station project in Seoul, initiatives include community space improvements (Top) and autonomous activities operated by the residents (Bottom).



Leveraging on existing community institutions

In the introduction of local interventions, it is important to leverage existing local community institutions, such as the Residents' Committee (RC) in Singapore public housing estates. For example, the "Hello Neighbour!" project supported the software programming initiatives organised by RCs by creating the hardware infrastructure and spaces. The "Neighbourhood Incubator" implemented under the "Hello Neighbour" project at Block 857 Tampines Street 83 included mobile furniture for residents to use for events, and was managed and maintained by the adjacent Residents' Committee in the same void deck.



Tampines Neighbourhood Incubator located at Block 857 Tampines Street 83, initiated under the "Hello Neighbour!" Community Spaces Co-Creation research project

In Seoul, dong-level¹ planning leverages on the existing structure of dong-level government. The Community Planning Committee under the dong-level community-planning programme is formed by the residents through community participation, and not by the government. Most of the key roles within the committee, e.g., head of neighbourhood planning, community manager, are taken up by residents. Public servants help support these committees by participating as “Community Officers”. These community officers help prepare for community activities and set up the engagement processes; while the community manager’s role as a key representative of the residents in the committee is to rally the residents for activities and plans by the committee. Residents are encouraged to make decisions for the dong-level community plans, and community managers as well as officers would try to resolve potential conflicts.



Involvement of technical professionals in community planning processes

Technical experts’ involvement is important to facilitate communication of planning intentions during community engagement activities. However, both cities have different approaches to involving technical professionals in the engagement process. For HDB, the preference is for in-house professionals with training in public engagement to facilitate engagement activities. These professionals are more familiar with the plans and could explain the technical constraints and answer public queries more effectively. On the other hand engaging expert facilitators would require more content preparation to equip the facilitators with technical planning and design knowledge.

In Seoul, the common practice is for representatives from urban planning NGOs or urban planning academics to lead the engagement discussions. SI researchers explained that this approach can prevent government officials from ‘pre-educating’ or influencing people, especially as Seoul sees public engagement as a process of learning about and understanding the people. Non-government facilitators also have to appear to the public as neutral. This way, the public may be more comfortable in sharing their views during the engagement process. Nevertheless, Seoul also regularly involve technical professionals from the Seoul Metropolitan Government to advise on or explain the technical aspects and constraints of a planning proposal.



The respective roles of government, residents and experts (facilitators) in collaborative planning processes in Seoul

Following the visit by SI researchers to Singapore, CLC and participating agencies (HDB, URA, PA and MCCY) will also be conducting a study visit to Seoul in February 2017 — to gain a deeper understanding of the relevant case studies and programmes, as part of the research process. The outcome will be a research publication, which will include in-depth case studies from Seoul and Singapore as well as common lessons on community planning and rejuvenation from both cities. The publication will be completed and launched by third quarter 2017.

Footnotes

1 Seoul's dong-level community plan is a neighbourhood level plan introduced to communicate and work with residents to develop and implement plans to resolve local community issues. 1 "dong" consists of 20,000 to 40,000 people. The equivalent in Singapore is the Neighborhood Renewal Programme initiated by HDB, which reaches out to 5,000 to 10,000 residents and focuses on precinct and block improvements.

Background of collaborative research project

This is CLC and SI's second collaborative research project. The first research project Walkable and Bikeable Cities was completed and launched at WCS 2016. The research publication can be found in the website:

<http://www.clc.gov.sg/Publications/books-walkable-and-bikeable-cities.htm>

About Seoul Institute (SI)

The Seoul Development Institute was established by the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) in 1992 and was renamed as the Seoul Institute on 1 August 2012. The Seoul Institute's goal is to establish a medium- to long-term vision for Seoul and propose social policies on welfare, culture, education, and industries and urban management policies on city planning, transportation, safety and the environment. SI's primary objective is to improve municipal administration through professional research, improve the quality of life in Seoul, and reinforce and sustain the competitiveness of Seoul.