

Maidan to Padang: Reinventions of Urban Fields in Malaysia and Singapore

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The *padang* is a regulated open green space found in the cities of Singapore and Malaysia. A legacy of British colonial urbanism, its continued maintenance has created tenuous and contrasting relationships with their evolving metropolitan cityscapes. As a representation of government power and control, the *padang* originated with the fifteenth-century Maidan-i-Naqsh-i-Jahan in Isfahan, commissioned by Shah Abbas I of Persia. Around this space were organized functions of state power, religion, commerce, education, recreation and commemoration. Between its appearance in Isfahan and colonial Malaya, the British in India manipulated its practical and representative functions to create an exemplary space for surveillance, military drill, display, and governance — as well as less belligerent activities such as sports and commemorative exhibitions. The epistemic transmittance of this open space to cities in Malaya and Singapore was instrumental and calculated; but it was also evolutionary, based on the application of what had been learned in India to newer colonial cities. This article examines the transformation of *maidan* to *padang* in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as the nature of the architectural formations that surrounded these spaces. The *padang* form was also mimicked by local groups to establish their own urban open spaces, and through the years its meanings and uses were maintained, altered, subverted and reinvented. The article further argues that the *padang* as a “spatial tradition” has continued in post-independence and contemporary Singapore and Malaysia, in recollected or subverted formats.

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Examining Indian cities in 1976, Anthony King proposed that the development of colonial cities produced “colonial third cultures” in which selected elements of metropolitan society were incorporated with local, indigenous elements to form a different, third urban

culture.¹ This concept was useful insofar as it allowed the resultant forms to be construed as new, altered configurations. However, it was not generally applicable to other cities within the British network, especially those colonized much later, or onto which multiple citations, adaptations or hybridizations were applied. In such cities, urban development might better be seen as creating an exponential, rather than a third, culture. In his later writings, King thus expanded the scope of his analysis from the “modes of production” model of the 1970s and the “pluralist political economy” model of the 1980s, to consider the colonial city as “a very broad category” that needed to account for “a variety of historical situations where settlements are transplanted by a colonial power.”² More importantly, research has shifted to examine circumstances arising from the sites of colonial cities themselves, rather than tracing their development telescopically or teleologically from their respective metropolises.

In Southeast Asia, cities colonized by Western countries were typically left with the legacy of metropolitan planning violence long after their colonial periods came to a close. Indigenous street patterns that existed prior to Western colonization were largely replaced by colonial schemas by the turn of the twentieth century.³ From the moment of the colonial arrival, European spatial configurations were superimposed onto local landscapes to enhance colonial governance and economic structures. Distinctive examples include the canal system engraved by the Dutch onto the plan of Batavia (modern-day Jakarta, Indonesia) and the boulevard system imposed by the French on the major cities of Cambodia and Vietnam.⁴ This article examines British colonial planning through the fate and transformation of urban open spaces in Malaysia and Singapore.

As Robert Home has educed, the public square was one of eight components of the standardized “Grand Model” of British colonial settlement developed after the seventeenth century.⁵ The geometric grid layout and the incorporation of an open square represented “the ultimate symbol of the imposition of human order on the wilderness.” Such extensive manipulation of physical space was apparent in the earliest colonial experiments. The installation amid plantations of regulated towns, such as Savannah and Charleston in the U.S. and Adelaide in the dominion of Australia, altered land, flora, fauna and human life irrevocably. Unsurprisingly, the precursor of the Colonial Office in London was the Board of Plantations, which was charged with settling “planters in townships with civil concerns and security . . . against the insults and incursions of enemies.”

The various colonies and dominions in the British Empire, however, evinced such spatial planning ideas unequally, both because of different conditions of colonization and different physical circumstances. In this regard, the British imperial world may be better conceived as a network of spaces linked by uneven hegemonic relations to the metropole — and to each other. India was the jewel of the empire,

but elsewhere in Asia the British dominions of Ceylon, Burma, Malaya and Singapore would often be inscribed or registered collectively as “Further India.” Significantly, several of these possessions flanked the Malacca Straits, which separated French interests in Indochina and Dutch ones in the “East Indies” from Europe. Here, Penang, Malacca and Singapore on the Malay Peninsula were governed from Calcutta as a sector in a secondary colonial hegemonic network.

The creation of the *maidan* in Calcutta as a type of artificial lawn and “third culture space” may be construed as the result of town planning and plantation experiments elsewhere in the British Empire, as well as the adaptation of preexisting spaces in India, such as in Ahmedabad.⁶ After British troops recaptured Calcutta from the Nawab of Bengal in 1757, Fort William was resecured and the residences and other structures around it were cleared away to form an esplanade, or *maidan*.⁷ Being visually and defensively open for two miles by a mile, the space provided a free-fire zone around the fort. It also allowed the fast-growing colonial town to be surveyed as a sign of British order and progress not only from the fort or field but from the adjacent Hooghly River.⁸ As many scholars have observed, important public buildings were located near the edges of the Calcutta *maidan*, and artists and writers alike used it as a formal device to generate or frame panoramic views that defined the life of the colonial city.

Despite its adoption by the British authorities, the term “*maidan*” or “*maydan*” was of Persian provenance. It was also widely used in Islamic cities as early as the ninth century to denote the setting of a formal square. Nezar AlSayyad has written, for example, that such a *maydan* existed in the center of the Fatimid royal precinct of medieval Cairo. An army of 10,000 could reportedly assemble in the space, which was known as Bayn al-Qasrayn, situated between the city’s two palaces. Over subsequent centuries this space was rearranged, filled in, and built up, but it continued to connote the city’s importance as a center of power under a succession of ruling dynasties.⁹

In Persia the *maidan* was also conceived as part of the royal compound within a city. Arguably, Shah Abbas I, in Isfahan, was the ruler who best articulated its form as a way of showcasing his central role in designing urban space and convening events that marked urban time. Until his reign, the nucleus of the city had been at another location, the Maidan-i Harun Vilayat. But this changed when Abbas ordered the new space built on the other side of the city, and the center of the first Shi’ite dynasty in Iran was born. Constructed from 1597 to 1629, the 440-by-160-yard Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan spatially organized and clearly expressed the functions of state power, religion, commerce, education, recreation and commemoration, and became a new model in its time.¹⁰

Abbas’s *maidan* was distinctive, among other reasons, because it was surrounded by a brick canal six feet wide, with trees planted within a twenty-foot-wide grassy space between this watercourse and the *maidan* perimeter. The trees shad-

ed rows of two-story shops and a dozen major gates and openings into the main open space, which was used for caravanserais and other daily functions. The palace grounds, the bazaar, mosques, gardens, madrasas, and other public buildings and commemorative elements were also arranged around the perimeter, and collectively articulated with great physical clarity the shah's reign and his genius as the purveyor of political, economic and civic life. As Stephen Blake has described it, the *maidan* was the site for the enactment of daily and seasonal imperial spectacles: polo, horse racing, military parades, fireworks displays, mock battles, receptions of ambassadors, courtly audiences, and religious festivals. A system of roads also connected the *maidan* to a six-kilometer, tree-lined, and fountained avenue known as the Chahar-Bagh, which led south to the Zayandeh River.

In name and form, the Calcutta *maidan* thus combined various features and purposes of public space culled from British colonial experiments elsewhere with those prevailing in Islamic cities of the region to create a "colonial third culture." As a hybrid planning device, the *maidan* was subsequently adapted by British colonial authorities and formalized for instrumental administration in other Indian cities, such as Bombay and Madras. Its primary feature was an artificial lawn with buildings around its periphery, but the addition of a walled fort differentiated it from its Islamic predecessors. On the Malay Peninsula, this typology was first articulated on the island of Penang, after it was annexed by British traders in 1786. Here, Fort Cornwallis was located at a strategic cape location, and the Penang Cricket Club and government buildings sandwiched an intervening area of cleared ground.¹¹ Following its transfer to British Malaya, the hybrid space became locally known as the *padang* (field).

THE PADANG IN SINGAPORE AND KUALA LUMPUR

The British occupiers of Singapore altered the coastal landscape to incorporate such a cleared area soon after their arrival in 1819 (FIG. 1). Thomas S. Raffles, the acknowledged founder of colonial Singapore, recognized the defensive advantages of a hill overlooking the colonial settlement and anchorage, and commissioned a hilltop fort there for surveillance purposes.¹² By 1822, planning of the area adjacent to the Singapore River, as recorded in Philip Jackson's map, showed a contiguous strip of artificial landscape extending from the seashore to the closest inland hill. This comprised an open, manicured square protected by a battery wall and Fort Fullerton, with the botanical and experimental gardens in between, and later, Fort Canning on Bukit Larangan (FIG. 2). The three manmade elements conspicuously demonstrated to indigenous settlers how nature itself could be subdued and manipulated to form a flattened field (the Padang), an area of regimented trees and shrubs (the botanic gardens), and defensive arrangements on a hill.¹³ The eventual addition of other structures within this zone was selective and particular: a church, a courthouse, and government offices between the square and gardens, and Raffles's residence on the hill.

In 1867 jurisdiction and control of Singapore, Malacca and Penang were transferred from Calcutta to the Colonial Office in London, and the trio collectively became known as the Straits Settlements. In Singapore, an enlarged rectilinear esplanade (from the Latin *explānāre*, "to make level"), which replaced the original square, soon became the primary interface between British colonial and native residents. Used for military assembly and drills, this green space also became an all-purpose games field — the site of cricket, football and



FIGURE 1. Aerial view of the Padang area in Singapore, 1969. Postcard in author's collection.



FIGURE 2. *Troops marching from Fort Canning into the Padang.* Postcard in author's collection.

rugby matches as well as other colonial occasions requiring pomp and ceremony. Through military, recreational and ceremonial uses, the space instilled in and socialized settler groups to the concepts of colonial discipline and abidance. As such, it displayed the different sides of the white men: regimental and belligerent on occasion, but on others able to let their guard down, recreate and relax. The governed groups, too, were invited to share the field when sports tournaments were staged.

Around the Padang in Singapore the construction of Neoclassical administrative and commercial buildings formed a further bulwark signifying colonial legitimacy and difference from local or immigrant peoples. As in Penang, the British East India Company worked closely with in-country traders, and they soon prevailed upon the appointed Resident to also let them occupy land around the Padang. Among these were the Boustead family, whose land was used to build the Hotel de'la Europe, and the Sarkie brothers, who constructed the nearby Raffles Hotel.¹⁴ Such developments went against the mandate of Raffles, who had previously specified that the northern bank of the Singapore River would be reserved for government use. But with John Crawfurd as the new Resident of Singapore, he modified this plan and instead began to lease land to the traders. Structures belonging to Robert Scott, James Scott Clark, Edward Boustead, and William Montgomerie were originally built around the Padang as residences and hotels until they could be replaced by the Town Hall, Supreme Court and City Hall, reclaiming the area for government use.¹⁵

The process of creating a unified Neoclassical facade around the Padang was thus gradual. The sequence comprised construction of the Parliament House (1826–27, originally planned as a private residence), Saint Andrew's Cathedral (1835–37, then 1856–61), the Cricket Club (1852), Victoria Memorial Hall (Town Hall 1856–62, 1902–1909), City Hall (1926–29), and the Supreme Court (1937–39). The

Supreme Court, in fact, was designed in Neoclassical style even after the forms of Art Deco style and the Modern Movement had begun to influence architectural design across Southeast Asia. Instead of employing marble as its main material, its facade was composed of granolithic elements over a steel frame. To mark the contributions of its founder and the establishment of the free port that contributed to its growth, the local community also erected a statue of Stamford Raffles at the Padang's center in 1887 (FIG. 3).¹⁶

As a composition, the Padang and the architecture on its periphery thus deliberately evoked colonial power and discipline. Indeed, the sociologist Chua Beng Huat envisioned how the regulated elements of its Neoclassical architecture suggested visions of "an entourage of colonial administrators flanking the Governor, all dressed in uniforms laden with medals, seated at the top of the podium or on the balcony above it, reviewing the colonised, gathered at the Padang, from high above."¹⁷

The Padang's edge with the seafront, meanwhile, developed as a tree-lined promenade for use by the general public. As a visitor in the 1850s described it, "(t)he scene is enlivened twice during the week by the regimental band, on which occasions the old women gather together to talk scandal, and their daughters to indulge in a little innocent flirtation."¹⁸ The commemorative nature of this area was enhanced by the construction of the Cenotaph and a memorial to philanthropist Tan Kim Seng. After World War II, another war memorial was constructed there. From 1953 onward, the Esplanade became known as Queen Elizabeth Walk, but it continued as an important seafront promenade.

Elsewhere in the region, British building in Kuala Lumpur, the colonial capital of Malaya and later Malaysia's national capital, presented a variation from the cantonment patterns of seafronted cities like Penang and Singapore. In those cases the open field for military assembly and recreation was rear-guarded by a fort or hilltop vantage point from



FIGURE 3. *The Raffles statue installed at the center of the Padang.* Postcard in author's collection.

embrace of European customs, attire and education over their “parent” cultures and habits. More importantly, they served as social and commercial intermediaries between the colonial officials/European communities and other indigenous settler groups, and were regarded as “enlightened” British subjects during the period.

One local Straits Chinese, Cheang Hong Lim, donated three thousand dollars to convert land adjacent to the Central Police Station and the Police Court Building into a public garden in 1876, as well as to hire two gardeners to maintain it.²⁰ The location of the existing open space was by no means accidental, as both buildings had been strategically placed between the wharves and godowns at the Singapore River and the subethnic “Chinese” shophouse enclaves to the southwest in order to observe economic transactions and check on the communities of laborers supporting them. Both buildings — in particular, the four-story Police Court Building, which was visible from within the various surrounding districts — were in a Neoclassical style and imposed themselves on axis with the new lawn, an arrangement that accentuated the formidable presence of colonial authority. The periphery of the area occupied by the colonial buildings and lawn was lined with shophouse blocks and roads, creating an enclosed urban perimeter that further reinforced its formal geometry.

This manicured space eventually came to be known as Hong Lim Green after its benefactor, and in 1887 an octagonal pavilion built for the Straits Chinese Recreation Club was opened in the middle of it, aligned on axis with the police buildings (FIG. 6). The club professed to use the grounds for lawn tennis, cricket, and practicing “English athletic sports.” It thus became the second mestizo group — after the Singapore Recreation Club (SRC), which featured a mainly Eurasian membership — to place its club premises on a public lawn. The arrangement explicitly recalled the SRC’s position on the main Padang as one in alignment with British social life and power.²¹

In Kuala Lumpur, a similar corollary *padang* emerged from efforts to convince more of the Malay population to become town dwellers. It was a source of concern to administrators that the early town census recorded more “Chinese” settlers and Europeans than “indigenous Malays.” Thus, in 1900 an area of 224 acres within the town boundaries, between the Klang River and Batu Road, was reserved for a land experiment known as the “Malay Agricultural Settlement.” Located about a mile north of the confluence of the city’s rivers, partly on high and partly on swampy ground, the space was obtained by evicting Chinese squatters. As stipulated in the Land Enactment Act of 1887, the intention was to “keep the Settlement entirely Malay and to encourage agriculture and useful arts and handicrafts, as well as provide a place for working Malays near the actual town and their daily work, at cheap cost.” As reported by William Treacher, the settlement was also intended to encourage Malays to “adopt a better class of dwelling house, better sanitary surroundings, and a higher class of domestic comfort” associated with proximity to towns. Until then, most indigenous Malays had resided in riverine or coastal settlements known as *kampungs*, comprised mainly of stilted timber houses and other structures amidst cultivated areas or natural vegetation.

The settlement of this experimental Kampung Baru (New Village) commenced with the construction of two small Malay houses, one large boarding house for Malays attending a local English school, two brick wells, and the employment of two gardeners and a foreman (FIG. 7).²² The rest of the settlement was divided into 196 holdings, of which 26 were larger areas of swampland intended for rice planting, and the remainder were half-acre lots leased permanently for residence at no expense to the owners. These rectangular plots were arranged so that houses could be built centrally within the lots and be served by a grid of roads. The arrangement, as board member A. Hale explained, was environmentally “healthy,” and at the same time it followed “the traditions of



FIGURE 6. Hong Lim Park in the 1970s in Singapore. Postcard in author’s collection.



FIGURE 7. Plan of the padang in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur, in 1957. Old map in author's collection.

Malay kampung life, but on an improved system" — even if it blatantly disrupted them.²³

Social and public amenities were added to the settlement center along Hale Road (now Jalan Raja Abdullah) around a recreational field, known colloquially as the "Malay *padang*." The aforementioned boarding house, a boys and a girls school, as well as the Sultan Sulaiman Club were constructed around the *padang*'s periphery (FIG. 8). The community mosque was eventually built a street away, adjacent to the site of a Sunday market (Pekan Ahad) and subsequently a cemetery. The field and the arrangement of the civic structures around it in effect reproduced at a smaller scale the layout of the colonial Padang at the confluence of Kuala Lumpur's rivers. In particular, the location of a recreational club and educational buildings resulted in a secondary *padang* mimick-

ing that at the city center. It was an abject lesson in spatial "enlightenment," invoking Malay acceptance and assimilation of urban simulacra taken to represent the proper conditions of urban living. But eventually its objectives — enabling the conditioned accommodation of Malays to the colonial government, providing space for Malays to live near the city, offering technical education, and setting aside an area for urban rice planting — did not enjoy much success.

TRANSPPOSITIONS OF "NATIONAL" MEANINGS

In Southeast Asia, the immediate post-World War II period, lasting until the 1970s, may be construed as a time when the postcolonial governments of the region attempted to define



FIGURE 8. The Sultan Sulaiman Club at the "Malay padang," Kampung Baru. Photo by author.

and connote the meanings of the word “nation.” During this time, the modification or replacement of colonial structures with new, national ones became a major preoccupation. After independence, new constructions would become spectacles to physically and visually manifest change and development — designed both for internal consumption by citizens and as an embodiment of their aspirations and to project a “national” image to the rest of the world. After World War II, the spatial roles of the colonial Padangs in Singapore and Malaya would be transposed, in particular, onto new stadiums similar in form and structure to the erstwhile fields.

Within the space of these new stadia, ordered seating on terraces disciplined bodies to view staged spectacles and to be simultaneously transformed into citizens. In such a setting, power relations between state representatives and ordinary citizens could also be clearly displayed through hierarchical seat allocation. As John Bale has argued, the stadium form broadens Michel Foucault’s idea of social or biological power as a spatial process: in its case, disciplinary control must be maintained both for participants in a regulated sport or mass display on an enclosed field, and for the spectators themselves.²⁴ The use of such stadia in the post-independence period to create affect in a mass audience was also manifold. In commemorative events, they could galvanize sentiments through collective gazing upon events at the center. The convening of sporting events or competitions, especially those involving teams, were occasions to engender national fervor by uniting, differentiating or dividing social or political groups chronotopically.²⁵

In Kuala Lumpur, the construction of the Merdeka (Independence) Stadium created a space in which to witness the transfer of power from the British to an indigenous gov-

ernment on August 31, 1957 (FIG. 9). The reinforced-concrete structure had a seating capacity of 20,000, and it subsequently replaced the artificial green lawn of the colonial Padang as a setting to hold independence and other ancillary celebrations. Malaysia was the earliest nation to stage its independence celebration within a stadium. Later, Jamaica in 1962, Zambia in 1964, and Namibia in 1990 would also employ stadiums as sites in which to stage independence celebrations.²⁶

The transfer of the meanings of spatial governance from the Padang to a national stadium took longer in Singapore. A year after Singapore’s independence in 1965, it was decided that a commemorative event known as the National Day Parade would be held every August 9 at the Padang. However, the construction of the 60,000-seat National Stadium in 1972 created an alternative congregation space for national spectatorship.

As Ananda Rajah has discussed, the National Parade in Singapore is the country’s prime signification of itself as an imagined, national political community. The early staging of the event at the Padang provided a subversion of colonial associations at their most symbolically potent site (FIG. 10). However, the representational effects of the occasion were not limited to gathering the nation’s citizens and leaders at this particular site. At a broader level, the event was intended to display the state’s administrative capacity and sheer proficiency to plan and coordinate.²⁷ The parade’s hybridity and innovation — its nature, content, focus, and even location — could thus be altered to maintain its relevance and contribute to the event’s success in periodically and ritually embodying the national citizenry. In its early days, it was important to hold the parade at the Padang and feature military vehicles and hardware to demonstrate self-reliance in the



FIGURE 9. The stadiums in Kuala Lumpur. Postcard in author’s collection.



FIGURE 10. National Day Parade, Singapore, 1967. Postcard in author's collection.

post-World War II world. But subsequently, its theme diversified, and its venue became more flexible.²⁸ In all, the parade was convened eighteen times at the Padang and eighteen times at the National Stadium (the first coming in 1976) before being moved to an even newer venue, the Marina Bay development, in 2007.²⁹

Singapore's National Stadium emerged from plans in the 1960s to redevelop a vacated airfield at Kallang, a site reclaimed from tidal swamps in the 1930s. The firm of the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange was engaged to design the Olympic-sized facility, which took a Brutalist concrete form regarded by many as in the same league as Tange's own design for a stadium in Tokyo (1958) and the stadium designed by Behnisch and Otto in Munich (1972).³⁰ Egalitarian concern for sporting bodies and global connections was first tested by the country's hosting of the seventh Southeast Asian Peninsular Games there in 1973.³¹

POST-NATIONAL SPECTACLES

After the oil crises of the 1970s, both Malaysia and Singapore renewed their efforts to create geographical and developmental projects to bind citizens to official new visions in their respective nation-states. In Malaysia, in January 1997, the fourth prime minister, Mahathir Bin Mohamad, officially presented plans for a massive 15-by-50-kilometer linear development extending south from Kuala Lumpur, known as the Multimedia Super Corridor. This was intended to reconfigure national space by embodying local and international imaginings of emergent knowledge-based and networked global economies. Three of its four components were to be built outside the boundaries of the old capital city: Putrajaya, a 4,500-hectare new federal capital complex, created by clearing oil palm estates; Cyberjaya, a 7,000-hectare

site to its west, which was to be "the Silicon Valley of the East"; and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), at the southern end of the corridor, which was to replace an earlier international airport built in 1965. Within Kuala Lumpur, the fourth component, the area known as Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), was created from an old race course to accommodate 22 mixed-use projects.

It was in Putrajaya that the *maidan* form was most obviously reimagined, reproducing putative connections between Malaysia, Isfahan, and the Islamic Middle East. Precinct 1, the first element of this plan to be conceived and built, features a 4.3-kilometer-long axial boulevard as its major spine, with the main government complex at one end and a conference center at the other.³² Near the government complex, the boulevard terminates at the Dataran Putra (Putra "Square"), a circular tiled area 300 meters in diameter, which organizes other nearby structures — the Prime Minister's Office Complex, the Putra Mosque, and a "souk" overlooking an artificial lake (FIGS. 11, 12). On its northeastern fringe, a linear avenue, acclaimed as a reimagined Chahar-Bagh, lies adjacent to the Prime Minister's Office. According to official accounts, it ties the area to the rest of the precinct, providing a "carefully-arranged interplay of paths, water channels, flower beds and trees."³³

As in Isfahan, the architecture and ornamentation around the Dataran Putra is designed to mark "national" time. Its radial tile patterns incorporate three overlapping, multipointed stars that (converging toward the center) have eleven points, then thirteen, then fourteen. This is a graphic retrospective of the nation's development, which commenced with eleven states as Malaya in 1957, grew to thirteen [sic] in 1963 as "Malaysia," and subsequently added the "Federal Territory."³⁴

Besides the spatial connection between the *maidan* and *dataran*, the association with the Middle East is extended to the eclectic architectural treatment of the Prime Minister's

FIGURE 11 (TOP). *Dataran Putra, Putrajaya, with the Prime Minister's Office in the background. Photo by author.*

FIGURE 12. (BOTTOM) *The souk and promenade beneath the Dataran Putra, Putrajaya. Photo by author.*



Office Complex, which overlooks it. According to promotional material, this was designed “. . . with strong Malay and Islamic features resulting in a building that is Malaysian in character and international in appearance. . . . This is topped by the traditional Malay pitched roof for the wings and the Islamic dome for the Main Block. . . .”³⁵ It was as if a disparate selection of elements from Isfahan’s Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan were refigured in a new setting for Malaysia in its post-national phase.

The most spectacular post-national project in Singapore, meanwhile, has been the creation of Marina Bay. This massive development may be seen as the latest physical reimagining of the island state to reflect its ongoing engagement

with the flows of global capitalism. Conceived and built over a period of three decades on reclaimed land, the Marina Bay project surrounds a new reservoir off the coast of what used to be Singapore’s historic colonial waterfront. The three principal reclaimed areas that sculpt this new waterbody (Marina Center, Marina South, and Marina East) have allowed the planning and construction of an array of highly significant and important projects. They are well supported by an extensive road and rail network, including three Mass Rapid Transit stations. To date, the project has been backed by state spending in excess of S\$4.5 billion.³⁶

From the outset, the designers of Marina Bay were conscious of the extensive colonial efforts to transform

Singapore's limited land and water resources. Its "foundations" were thus construed as projections and extensions of older engineering feats.³⁷ Indeed, the colonial inscriptions became standards or benchmarks that the present-day effort set out to exceed.

Altogether, about 15 percent of Singapore's present land area has been reclaimed from rivers, swamps and the sea over the past three decades.³⁸ Historically, the Padang itself was enlarged by land reclamation in 1843 and 1890. The commercial waterfront, too, was significantly altered in 1858, with new extensions made in the early 1880s, 1910, and in the 1930s.³⁹ After the war, the colonial government proposed further efforts to reclaim land along the Telok Ayer harborfront, Beach Road, and extensions to the eastern coast.⁴⁰ With indigenous self-governance in 1959 and eventual independence in 1965, new transformations were needed to create an industrial area out of mangrove swamps on the southwestern coast (Jurong) in the 1960s and an airport complex on the northeastern shore (Changi) in the late 1970s.

Another continuing problem in Singapore has been water supply, which since independence in 1965 has been construed as a matter of national importance. Municipal provision of fresh water for the colonial city began in 1867. But, as a result of rapid population increase, the original system needed to be supplemented by manmade catchment reservoirs to the north of the city in the 1890s. In 1932 an additional source of water was obtained through an agreement with the Sultan of Johore and the construction of a pipeline across the Johore Straits Causeway.⁴¹ A total of 250 million gallons of fresh water a day are still supplied to the island from this southernmost Malaysian state.⁴² This reliance on extra-national supply has continued despite major infrastructural work to maintain and expand the island's catchment areas and reservoirs, campaigns to educate the public on saving water, and efforts to devise other ways of harvesting water.

A new effort to increase local supply was launched in February 1977 by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who challenged the Ministry of the Environment to clean up water from both the Singapore River and the Kallang Basin, which together amount to 30 percent of the island's total catchment area. In response to this challenge, a Clean Rivers master plan subsequently resettled 42,000 squatters from the Kallang Basin and 4,000 from along the Singapore River, and relocated or phased out 610 pig farms, 500 duck farms, and 2,800 other trades and industries.⁴³ While the river systems were dredged of their accumulated sediments, 4,926 street-food hawkers were re-sited to consolidated structures known as food centers, and boat-building and other industries deemed to be polluting were relocated or terminated.⁴⁴ Low-lying areas of the Kallang Basin were then filled using earth cut from the rolling hills of Toa Payoh, a nearby area long slated for development as a satellite public housing estate. With one operation, the project thus created two *tabula rasa* sites for housing and industrial use (FIG. 13).⁴⁵

When the goals of the Clean Rivers program were achieved after a decade-long effort in 1987, the prime minister projected the construction of a new reservoir collecting the runoff from these river systems. Such a project would have many benefits: it would increase national supplies, guard against emergencies, assist with flood control, and create new recreation opportunities.⁴⁶

In succeeding years, water initiatives remained a high priority for state agencies. "NEWater" (water recycled from previous uses) was introduced for industrial use in 2002, and desalination facilities were officially commissioned in 2005. But the greatest accomplishment was the creation of the 240-hectare Marina Reservoir by damming the apex of the V-shaped Marina Channel, which added a fifteenth reservoir to the island's catchment system.⁴⁷ These steps have also led to official formulation of a "Four National Taps Strategy" intended to meet the future water needs of Singapore and reduce reliance on imported water from Malaysia.⁴⁸ This includes water provided by local catchment, importations from Johore, the NEWater program, and desalination efforts.

Concurrent with these attempts to augment water sources, land reclamation proceeded from the 1970s to 1985 to create the areas of Marina Centre and Marina South.⁴⁹ From 1985 to 1997, a series of concept plans and planning reports detailed the future use of these areas right down to their component plots, phased development, and land sales.⁵⁰ By the 1990s, 372 hectares of land had been reclaimed, 90 of



FIGURE 13. Plan for the Marina Bay area, 1980s. Poster in author's collection.



FIGURE 14. (LEFT) *The Padang and Marina Bay plan. Drawing by author.*

FIGURE 15. (ABOVE) *The Marina Bay Downtown Development Guide Plan of August 1996. Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority.*

which were set aside for the extension of the Central Business District, zoned as “Central.” However, in 1989, an analysis of the original bay shape in the draft master plan concluded that the curved profile of the northwestern edge of Marina South was too wide, and additional reclamation was needed to reshape it. By 1995, the more rectilinear plan that resulted uncannily mirrored, in a parallel alignment, the shape of the old Padang, now located along one of its edges (FIGS. 14, 15).⁵¹

To support the slogan of it being “a great place to live, work and play,” the development around this new “liquid *padang*” now includes high-end apartment blocks, the Esplanade-Theatres by the Bay, the Golden Sands Integrated Resort (a casino), various museums, as well as a new botanic garden — the Gardens by the Bay.⁵² The long historic edge of the waterfront has also been altered: Collyer Quay, which had been a major site of diasporic Chinese immigration has been reallocated to commercial use, and the Fullerton Building converted into a hotel. On one promontory, a major tourism symbol, the Merlion, had to be relocated 120 meters in 2002 to maintain its unobstructed “view” of the bay. And on the main edge of Marina Centre, a floating platform with raked seating on shore was added to create a designated area for spectators. Since 2007, this has become the main stage and audience area for the National Day Parade.⁵³

Two other major elements complete this new site of national spectatorship. The Gardens by the Bay straddles the three reclaimed areas, with its largest component, the 54-hectare Gardens at Marina South, flaring out toward the northeast. Running parallel to the bay (and the Padang), its

controlled natural environment echoes the Botanic Gardens set up alongside the early colonial Padang. These natural edges, lined with trees and vegetation rather than buildings, contrast with Marina Bay’s hard edges.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Singapore Flyer, a 165-meter-high scenic ride, citing the precedent of the Ferris wheel at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair and the more recent London Eye, became the tallest ride of its type in the world when it opened in 2008. Its strategic placement at the tip of Marina Central permits views over the Kallang Basin as its capsules ascend, and into the city and Marina Bay as they descend.⁵⁵

Such views of the altered land- and waterscapes of the city provide a tangible record of urban achievement in relation to other countries of the region. But what is being gazed upon is also the state’s ability to will forms into place to serve desired, defined objectives. This has been accomplished through the regulation of all development by what is known as the Concept Plan, which was first introduced in 1971 and has been updated and reviewed every decade since. This planning effort has been supervised and activated by the Ministry of National Development and the Urban Redevelopment Authority, with all other agencies, including those of defense, finance and trade, following its directives and guidelines.

As the Clean Rivers master plan and the development of Marina Bay demonstrate, such an extensive effort to reshape national space requires a combination of political will, interagency coordination at all levels, and consent between public and private sectors — as well as the regulatory and legal bodies to enforce, maintain and manage the necessary directives. The

development of Marina Bay, with its various functional components has also been progressive, changing in terms of overall form and constituent elements based on global circumstances and internal need. At its core, however, has been a centralized structure whose lines of power, finance, communication, activation and dissemination have allowed the successful transformation of a massive and symbolically important area.³⁶

TRANSFORMATION OF PRECEDENTS

The spatial imaginings of colonies in Southeast Asia by metropolitan European powers were subject to what Benedict Anderson has called “the spectre of comparisons,” which telescopically and concomitantly connected spaces of the metropole to those of the colonies, albeit through transposed scales of hegemony.³⁷ In Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, colonial urban forms, such as their formal Padangs, still exist alongside new ones that have been invented or reinvented. Such projects may be interpreted as embodying a gradual distancing from prior colonial forms, or their instrumental subversion, in order to construe a postwar national identity — or in time, a new “post-national” one.

Throughout this process, the transfer of aspirations onto new “*padangs*,” as a state-driven formulation, can still be connected to the creation of Shah Abbas’s *maidan* in Isfahan. Abbas’s decision to build a new state-sanctioned space obviated the role of the earlier, longstanding space, the Maidan-i Harun-i Vilayat. As a consequence, merchants and artisans had to migrate to the new space to align with imperial interests.³⁸ The dismantling of functions around original colonial Padangs in both Malaysia and Singapore — governmental,

judicial, economic, and recreational — and their rearrangement into different aggregations (through the use of stadia, government complexes, and a liquid *padang* in Singapore) may be perceived as revisitations of an enduring practice.

In Kuala Lumpur, the demand for spectatorship at the birth of the nation was fulfilled by the artificial lawn in the newly constructed national stadium in 1957. This could be read as an inversion of the uses of the colonial Padang. But this arrangement has now been transferred to a reconstituted *maidan* in Putrajaya. The arrangement of buildings and space there discloses a continued reliance on architecture and urban form to display the state and its manifestations — albeit through attempts to magnify the space of the state beyond the original capital city.

In Singapore, the original colonial Padang was left untouched, duly maintained as the site of National Day ceremonies. A stadium venue for these activities would only be developed in 1972, after national concern for industrialization and housing provision had been stabilized. Thereafter, the hosting of the National Day ceremonies shifted back and forth from the Padang to the National Stadium. However, the site for spectating the state, its peoples, and the city itself has now been transferred to the Marina Bay redevelopment.³⁹ In the creation of post-national spaces, the government of Malaysia seems to have returned to cull symbolic references from the historical *maidan* form, while the Singapore government has pursued a scalar transformation of its “inherited” *padang* space.

To extend Anderson’s term, Marina Bay in Singapore is a site for multiple spectres of comparative spectatorship (FIGS. 16–18). Here the space of the original Padang is maintained against the backdrop of, and overshadowed by,



FIGURE 16. Marina Bay adjacent to the Padang. Courtesy of Doris Lai.

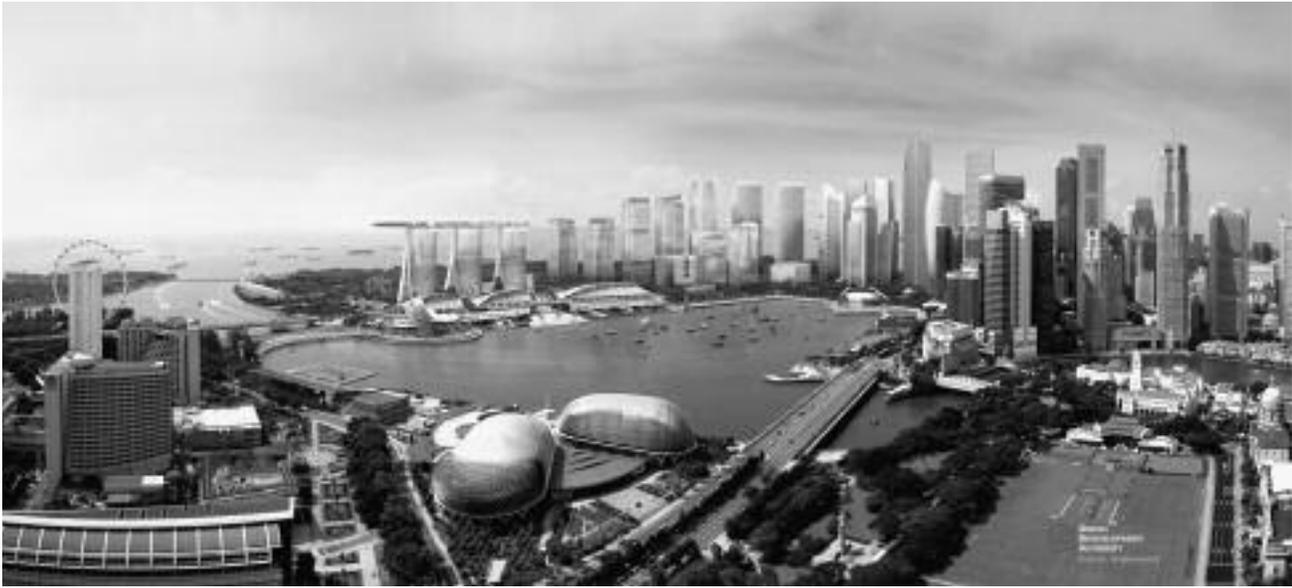


FIGURE 17. (ABOVE) Artist's impression of Marina Bay with the Padang at bottom right. Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

FIGURE 18. (RIGHT) The Marina Barrage. Photo by author.



new highrise buildings and spatial forms at its immediate periphery and beyond. These at once invoke old telescopic colonial connections, but also proclaim the new city that has emerged despite such pasts. With both in clear view, the new liquid *padang* at Marina Bay obviates the old Padang's location as an important waterfront space and empties it of its functions, meanings and hegemonies. The state, need not inhabit the quotidian space of the liquid *padang*, because it has already accomplished this by virtue of demonstrating its creation. In fact, it only needs to claim it once annually during the orchestrated spectacle of National Day.

In September 2008, a Formula One night motor race was inaugurated in Singapore, using roads and highways adjacent to both *padangs*. The route commenced at Marina Central near the Singapore Flyer, crossed part of the Kallang River and then cut through the axis of Marina Central before racing down all sides of the old Padang and Esplanade, crossing the Singapore River, and then zig-zagging along the edge of Marina Bay through its floating platform terraces. Televised around the world, the camera flitted incessantly between the two artificial *padangs* and their supporting cast of buildings, highlighting for its audience the city that now claims and contains both these forms.

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33. From the official Putrajaya website: <http://www.ppp.gov.my>
34. The multipointed star also appears on Malaysia’s flag. The tile patterns simulate the changing points depicted on it. There were eleven in 1957, but this was changed to fourteen in 1963 with the merger of the three states of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. When Singapore left Malaysia in 1965, the final point was allocated to the Federal Territory. The multipointed star was considered for many of the first set of national monuments. For a discussion, see Lai, *Building Merdeka*.
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54. For a discussion, see C.K. Lai, “Singapore: Towards Another Botanical Age,” *Dialogue*, No.129 (2008), pp.104–13.
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