

### Episode 3 - Sustainable Cities

This is Radio Australia. Hello, I am Barry Clarke and welcome to another program in our series, 'Sustainable Cities' - Challenges for the Asia Pacific.

**SIEW LING FAN:** Everything is in a way very compactly planned. So for example we have Singapore River, we have the civic district, we have the downtown, we have Orchard Road, we have the Bras Basah and Bugis area, not to mention the historic areas in the city such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. We are a small island but I think it really packs a big punch.

**CLARKE:** Singapore, with a population of around 4 million on an island that is about half the size of Manhattan.

We focus on Singapore in this program in our series on Cities.

**NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS TELECAST:** Glad to have you join us as we celebrate Singapore's day of independence, a progressive...

**CLARKE:** National Day celebrations and on the 9th August, 1965 Singapore gains its independence from Malaysia peacefully. What was a city is now a city-state.

**CHUA BENG HUAT:** It is interesting because I think that Singapore is probably the first constitutional multi-racial society, partly because the composition of the society is predominantly three races, 75 per cent approximately Chinese, about 17 per cent or so Malays and seven or eight per cent Indians. The government formally treats each race equally.

**CLARKE:** Chua Beng Huat is Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

**CHUA BENG HUAT:** I think that if one was to measure racial harmony in terms of absence of violence, then I think Singapore is extremely successful. But if one were to measure racial harmony in terms of deep understanding of each other across racial divisions, then I think we still have a very long way to go. Partly because I think that you are dealing with, if not through English, three very different languages, and there are very few people that I know who are fluently trilingual across Indian, Mandarin and Malay.

**CLARKE:** Multilingual, multi-religious and multi-racial. And that is reflected in the ethnic quarters of the city - there's Chinatown, Little India, Arab Street and the Malay quarter, Geylang Serai.

**CHUA BENG HUAT:** All those four locations were colonial legacies because Singapore was a planned city since 1824, because [Sir Stamford] Raffles, who was credited as being the founder of modern Singapore actually had planned the city along the waterfront by ethnic groups. But the interesting thing about all these areas is that in terms of residential population they are unavoidably, predominantly Chinese. It is just that they remain the locations in which ethnic businesses are located. So, if you are from India and you want to buy Indian gold or Indian products you just go to Little India. So, they are now destinations of concentrations of ethnic trade, rather than signifying ethnic concentration in terms of residency of population.

**CLARKE:** When you think of Singapore, you think of food, and when you think of food, you think of hawkers markets. And I am standing in a spot that in the 1960s and 70s was an enormously popular place with locals and tourists alike. It is called Gluttons Square, and it is right on Orchard Road.

**CLARKE:** K.F. Seetoh is a well-known food critic, gourmand and bon vivant in Singapore, and it was his idea to recreate Gluttons Square. Seetoh, why?

**K.F. SEETOH:** Food to us is a religion, we love it, we adore it and I thought we lost something to Orchard Road, and I said we have got to bring it back, we have got to bring it back. My intent was to bring back the kind of food that any Singaporeans who walked past just smell your way to your food, you do not have to look; you do not have to read, just point, order, pay and eat.

**CLARKE:** Well, of course, there is a range of food, as you would expect, there is Chinese, there is Malay, there is Indian.

**K.F. SEETOH:** Yes, it is not just politically right, it is culinarily right.

**CLARKE:** I just wonder if you can give us some history of how hawkers markets developed?

**K.F. SEETOH:** In 1966, when this plot of land right here in Orchard Road was a car park, there was this whole group of itinerant hawkers all over the place, and they were selling beautiful street food, stuff which today are Singapore culinary icons. So, you know, for want of a better place to re-site them, the government relocated the better ones to this huge square right in the heart of Orchard Road. And overnight the nickname came up, Gluttons Square. It was an Orchard Road car park essentially that closed at five, so then the hawkers could push their carts and sell their food until they are sold out or into the wee hours of the morning. So that was the reputation it had, it was ferocious, it was an icon.

**CLARKE:** Well, we might take a walk down and just have a look at some of the food that is on offer here at Gluttons Square.

**K.F. SEETOH:** It is a pity you cannot smell what we are smelling, you cannot see what we are seeing. But if you come to Singapore, remember the best way to celebrate Singaporeanness with us is to eat the way we do. And we are starting off with satay, how about that? What is so special about this satay? Simple, their satay is made from get this, minced meat, marinated, soft, grilled minced meat, very sweet, very spicy, especially when you jam them into this lovely smooth peanut sauce.

**CLARKE:** So what is so special about this stall here that has such a large queue do you think?

**K.F. SEETOH:** Yes, this queue goes forever as you can see. They are selling oyster omelette. Now let me describe, it is essentially sweet potato batter that is mixed with secret recipe stock and some herbs, and they fry this batter on a flat pan with beaten eggs, so they get this crispy on the outside and soft on the inside, egg batter mixture. And just as when the texture is perfect, Mr Lao drops in a whole cup of fresh oysters. It is not to cook them, it is just to roll them in the heat of the wok. And just before it cooks, he tops it onto the eggs, serves it on a plate and he adds lemon to his sauce. So it has got that zingy taste, which just balances a heavy meal.

**CLARKE:** Early in its independence, Singapore recognised the need for an efficient public transport network. And they have been successful. Getting around is easy. The Land Transport Authority or LTA is the body charged with managing the city's traffic and Mohinder Singh is Manager of Transport Planning with the authority.

**MOHINDER SINGH:** Right from the early days we recognised the importance of transport in the future economic development of Singapore. Looking at the experience in other cities, we realised that we could not allow unbridled growth in private transport. We needed to have policies to manage private transport, and what we did in the early days was to control growth of car population. And also, Singapore was one of the first countries to introduce [a] road-pricing system.

**PAUL BARTER:** People think that London is the first to impose congestion charging, but actually Singapore was the first in the early 1970s.

**CLARKE:** Paul Barter is with the Public Policy Program at the National University of Singapore.

**PAUL BARTER:** In the late 1990s, it was replaced with electronic road pricing, which made the system much more efficient and easier to fine tune. It is a congestion pricing; you only pay when you pass locations or go into a zone that is congested. And so, the purpose of these fees is to encourage people to choose alternatives. Transport economists have been saying we should do this for decades; Singapore was the first to really take it seriously and to do what the transport economists recommend.

**CLARKE:** And does that work?

**MOHINDER SINGH:** It works very well. In fact, the city was actually grid locked before we implemented that. And once we started the system, traffic dropped considerably. So it is a finely balanced tool to help us really manage our traffic, and we have been pretty happy with how it has been operating.

**PAUL BARTER:** One of the neat things about Singapore's electronic road pricing is that the prices are set according to the speeds of the roads. So, if the speeds on a road increase and traffic is flowing very, very well, there is a mechanism to make the prices drop. We do not need to charge people so much if that road does not have a problem. If a problem emerges on a particular road and your speeds drop below a certain target, the LTA sets these targets, then the prices will rise. And this helps with the politics of it, of course, because charging people is never popular, and even Singaporeans do complain about this. But when there is an objective kind of triggering mechanism for these prices, people can understand why the prices are going up or down according to supply and demand.

**CLARKE:** Driving a car is expensive. Taxes on vehicle ownership put the price of a small car around 70–80,000 Singapore dollars. On top of this, there are the taxes of running a car, such as the Electronic Road Pricing. But as Paul Barter explains, the government has always used a carrot and stick approach to managing transport.

**PAUL BARTER:** In the early 1970s, they raised various kinds of vehicle taxes and petrol taxes a little bit, and at the same time, they took some very strong steps to improve the bus system. And then throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they continued that same strategy of step by step making cars more expensive to both own and use, and step by step improving the public transport. And of course, because much of the middle class could not afford cars, they were still using buses, the number of customers for the buses stayed high, and in fact increased because as people get richer, they want to move around more, and so the public transport was a financial success in that context. One of the interesting differences between Singapore and its neighbouring countries, between Singapore, say, and Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur, is that using public transport here does not have a stigma. You can be a middle class person dressed for the office and you feel quite comfortable using public transport, whereas in many countries public transport is considered to be only for the poor.

**PAUL BARTER:** We are now on Singapore's MRT, which is this Mass Rapid Transit railway system. It is a very successful system and it is very well integrated with the land uses here in Singapore, so that most of the destinations and most of the dense housing areas have MRT. Other Asians, people say from Bangkok where they are desperate for a better transport system often ask, what is Singapore's secret?

The reason we have such good public transport in Singapore today is because we were strict with

cars here in the early days, and step by step improved public transport and made it more expensive to drive. And the final result is this wonderful system we see here.

**CLARKE:** You're listening to 'Sustainable Cities' on Radio Australia.

**FEMALE TALENT:** As a Singaporean, I guess there are two pet obsessions that we have, one is food, the other is shopping. Now as a Singaporean, I do not deny that I love shopping, and I guess it helps as well in the sense that Singapore is so full of shopping centres. You have one underground, you have one above, no, you have tons above ground - everywhere you turn there is a shopping mall, either in the heartland, which is where the public housing estates are, or you have them in town areas, wherever. So I guess in a way shopping has become part of life for Singaporeans.

**CLARKE:** So what do you really enjoy about shopping though?

**FEMALE TALENT:** I don't know. I mean, some of us I guess see it as a de-stress mechanism. I mean, you work hard, nine to five, and you know you have time free on the weekends, for example, to catch up with friends, or even after work where you just shop, you do not actually have to spend money. It is just the pleasure of seeing things on sale or being on the racks. I do not know, I do not know whether I can call it a girl thing, but I guess it is the same with my male colleagues as well. So I guess it is just the pleasure of walking around and seeing the goods on display.

**CLARKE:** And as I talk to you of course, we are in one of the underground shopping malls, and we have been walking for quite some distance too, so it goes on and on and on?

**FEMALE TALENT:** That's right. Now, this city link mall is called the Underground City Link Mall. It is one of Singapore's premier, pioneer shopping malls, which are housed underground and are linked to an MRT station. So, obviously there are different shops here, and you can actually have the comfort of travelling to and fro without the heat, and at the same time, have time to browse. So this is what I mean you see, it is encouraging us to actually spend money or to go shopping. So I guess it is part of the culture here as well.

**CLARKE:** Going underground is one of the ways to overcome a shortage of space in land scarce Singapore... another is by land reclamation. Large-scale land reclamation has been undertaken in different parts of Singapore since the 1960s. It has been necessary because of the small size of the country and the rising demand for more land as the population increases. By the year 2030, it is estimated that Singapore will have reclaimed more than 150 square kilometres.

**GURJIT SINGH:** We are now standing at Siloso beach and, as you can hear, the waves lapping at the shore. What we have here is I think slightly more than an idyllic beaches, we have interspersed it with some good food, entertainment, music and fun.

**CLARKE:** And these beaches of course are really on reclaimed land?

**GURJIT SINGH:** That is correct. A lot of Sentosa's coastline was basically swamp land, and we found that the southern beach structures had great potential. So, we decided to carry out a lot of sensitive studies, reclaimed the beach stretches on the southern coast of Sentosa, and today we have 3.2 kilometres of fine beach sand.

**CLARKE:** Gurjit Singh from the group who manages Sentosa Island, often referred to as the lungs of Singapore.

**HOWARD SHAW:** It is still a concrete jungle but a very well planted one. It is a very green city.

**CLARKE:** Howard Shaw is the Executive Director of the Singapore Environment Council, an NGO established in 1995 to raise community awareness about environmental issues. I suggested to Howard that as a visitor, Singapore looks very clean and green, and I asked him if that is the reality.

**HOWARD SHAW:** I think a lot of Singapore's image as a very clean and green city is attributed to its very strict enforcement of the law. I mean we have always been named a fine city, and fine in the sense [of] fines for littering, for spitting, for all these things, and it is enforced, it is actively enforced. So, the government has done a fantastic job since day one keeping Singapore as clean as possible, making sure that our rubbish is always removed on time. In Singapore you put your rubbish out it is gone even before you wake up. So in that sense yes we are very clean. But how environmentally responsible the people are, I mean, that is another issue. In a way because we have always had our needs catered to in terms of like rubbish removed and all that. A lot of Singaporeans aren't actually aware of how much rubbish they produce; per capita we are among the highest in the world. I do not know exactly what level, but definitely within the top ten.

**CLARKE:** According to Howard Shaw, Singapore faces huge challenges in managing its waste.

**HOWARD SHAW:** We actually incinerate about 98 per cent of our domestic waste. We have no more landfill space on Singapore island itself. We have offshore landfill, which was formed by joining two islands together and pumping out the water in-between. That offshore landfill, it is called Pulau Semakau, is only good for another 30 to 35 years. So there is a huge challenge for us to reduce our waste, either reduce at the source or to recover it, recycle it, or reuse it as much as possible. And it boils down to the mindsets of the society as a whole.

**CLARKE:** He says that while recycling programs have been introduced, people are yet to fully embrace the idea.

**SIEW LING FAN:** I am Siew Ling Fan from the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore. We are just entering the mouth of Singapore River. Singapore River has always been a very important part of the landscape of Singapore, and is the centre of the economic activities of the city. Over the years Singapore River has transformed quite a lot. In the late 70s, the river was actually very, very polluted, and our prime minister then, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, threw us a challenge to clean up the river in ten years. And we have successfully done that. There are three parts of Singapore River, if I may describe it that way. We have the Boat Quay area right at the mouth of the Singapore River, and then we have a Clarke Quay, and then Robertson Quay. So, each of them has been planned to be slightly different in character. The whole area used to be warehouses and boats would bring in goods from the ships that come to call at the port of Singapore, and trading activities took place here. But over time all the warehouses have become derelict. But after the master plan was drawn up and the river was cleaned up, redevelopment has taken place along Singapore River, as well as conservation of our built heritage. Singapore River now is a place where people can come here and live, work and play. We have planned it as a mixed-use district. You can see pubs, you can see offices, hotels as well as modern residential developments.

**CLARKE:** As we go along a little further too, there are more of what we call old Singapore, I suppose. The shop houses, as you call them, that have been refurbished and look quite charming don't they against the backdrop of the high-rise buildings that we know of Singapore too?

**SIEW LING FAN:** Conservation is a very important part of our master plan in transforming the Singapore River. So we manage to conserve some warehouses here on the Clarke Quay area, and sold to a private developer and he has transformed the whole place, restored the building, introduced new activities and it has become a family destination. We also drew up urban design guidelines to guide new developments that are going to come up in this area. So, traditionally the river has always been like two or three storeys, shop houses or warehouses. And so, for the new developments we

guided them to have four storeys fronting the river, and then further back from the river then they can step up to ten storeys. So this is to ensure that the traditional scale, which is a very nice comfortable and human scale, is kept for the Singapore River. And another requirement was to keep the pitched roof as a typology for the new developments as well. And so you can see today it is an interesting blend of old and new, and yet you see a special unique flavour, I think that you can attribute it to the Singapore River flavour.

**CLARKE:** So clean is the river that it looks as though you could swim in it?

**FEMALE TALENT:** Yes and I would dare you to do it now, please?

**CLARKE:** An invitation I declined. Many people said to me that Singapore was able to achieve so much in its 40 odd years of independence because it had a strong government. I put that as a question to Sociology Professor Chua Beng Huat.

**PROFESSOR CHUA BENG HUAT:** I think that it is a fairly strong state by which I think there is a kind of ambivalence in the strength. On the one hand it is strong in the sense of its commitment to the society. It is an interesting government in a sense. It is willing to serve and willing to govern, which means that it is willing to work hard in terms of the welfare of the people, and it is willing to be authoritarian if it has to. That is where the ambivalence lies in the sense that it is highly appreciative of the efforts and the economic development over the last 40 years, but also fairly aware of the, particularly in the past, a certain heavy-handedness in politics. So it is strong in both senses, but both senses pull in different directions, so that there is an ambivalence. When the economy is very well run, politics is very boring for most people. But I think in a country like Singapore, people who are so called liberal minded will always have some discomfort about living in a place like this. But in the long term, I am not sure that they will really give up on a place like this.

**CLARKE:** There is no doubt Singapore presents a more liberal face these days. With a growing arts culture and the recently opened Esplanade theatres complex at the mouth of the river, the city is positioning itself as an arts hub for the region.

**PROFESSOR CHUA BENG HUAT:** Singapore has reached a level of economic development that upper middle class parents are now willing to let their children pursue interests that are not the straight and narrow of a profession. So for example, more and more students are taking fine arts degrees or going to do dance studies or film studies. I mean, this is like probably unheard of about 10 years ago, but now I think that is happening. So there is actually going to be a much greater degree of personal freedom in spite of the politics, but because of the economic stability and because of the parents being relatively free of economic insecurity. So going forward I am actually a lot more happy about the prospect than thinking about challenges of worrying about loss of nationalism or Singaporeans deciding to migrate out and so on. I mean those are the kind of issues that are constantly getting mentioned, but ironically if you look around in the global migration game, Singapore is a net gainer of migrants, because currently there are four million people on this island. One in four is a foreigner. So, we are a net gainer in this migration thing. So, the prospect is actually fairly good, I think, and I think the people in their 20s should be quite happy about their prospects.

**CLARKE:** Well, what do young people think about their city, their country? I caught up with a group of students at Nanyang Technical University.

**FEMALE STUDENT:** Life in Singapore, I have to say, it is good because I grew up here. On the whole it is a good place to have entertainment, we are up to date with the movies, music, everything

is very modernised. The only disadvantage is we do not have a lot of land, so our sports is not very well developed. We tend to concentrate a lot on economical gains, but not on sports and other areas of life.

**MALE STUDENT:** Life in Singapore is pretty fast paced. As a student in a local varsity academically wise, it is very hectic and very competitive because we have students coming from other countries - China, India. It is great they are here to achieve, which is why they study very hard, and being locals we are also competing with them and have to study hard too as well. If not, we will fail.

**FEMALE STUDENT:** Basically, I think it is good. I feel that the security here is very good. I can go out and not worry about getting robbed or kidnapped or raped, and I enjoy actually living here because I can do what I want to do. But, of course, in a way Singapore is famous for its pressure on Singaporeans to study hard. We rely a lot on human resources, so therefore we tend to be very competitive because they tend to concentrate a lot on grooming us so that we will be able to contribute to society.

**MALE STUDENT:** It is a good time to be living in Singapore, I mean, despite the image that we get. Some people paint us as a police state, we get the reputation of living in a very controlled society. But I guess these things are all trade-offs.

**MALE STUDENT:** I am very content with what I have here, happy with how things are, the level of security, the racial harmony that we have. I believe that the government is doing a good job controlling what we have and I appreciate that.

**SUE SLAMEN:** Our thanks to colleagues at Mediacorp in Singapore for their help in compiling this program. This series is produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke, from Radio Australia.

