



**LUNDS**  
UNIVERSITET

Department of Sociology  
Division of Social Anthropology

# Where am I? Where will I be?

*What Singapore can teach anthropology about global place  
imaginaries*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of a  
Master of Social Science  
In Social Anthropology

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## Abstract

In an era defined by finite resources and increasing global interconnectivity, the strategic management of place is crucial for sustaining human life and ensuring a viable future. This paper explores the critical role of global imaginaries (collective understandings shaped by global networks) in shaping the identity and function of place in Singapore. Placemaking, the process by which spaces are transformed into culturally and socially meaningful places, has gained traction in contemporary anthropological research. However, the strategic dimensions of placemaking – the ways in which placemaking can be leveraged to obtain global power and influence – warrants further exploration. This study examines the intersection of city and wilderness imaginaries, highlighting their influence on strategic placemaking practices in Singapore and investigating how the city navigates the tension between urban development and environmental conservation. Through semi-structured interviews with local and international inhabitants, this research provides insights into how strategic placemaking can mediate the boundaries between urban and natural spaces. The findings suggest that successfully integrating wilderness and city imaginaries is essential for creating sustainable and inclusive future environments.

## Keywords

*Singapore, Global City, Global imaginaries, Wilderness, Placemaking, Social Anthropology*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The world, its people and its future – understanding place

In a world with finite resources, the possibility of a global future which adequately supports human life hinges directly on the strategic and intentional management of natural resource reserves, urban centres and wilderness areas. Each plays a distinct and essential role in the creation and sustainment of a viable human future; underpinning global strategies to support high-quality human lifestyles, accessible and equal societies, and biodiverse natural environments (Ejdus, 2017, p.24). The importance of these places is well established academically, politically and socially (Giddens 1984; Massey 2013). Less established is the significance of the role which contemporary global *imaginaries*, collective conceptualisations or understandings shared through global networks, play in creating place and future (Steger & James, 2013, p.17). In shaping the function and identity of such places as landscape categories and individual locations, global imaginaries are essential both to the way societies interact with space, and in creating pathways to the future. By nature, global place imaginaries can be hard to isolate, identify and compare – a reason perhaps that the body of literature addressing global imaginaries has been slower to emerge than its practical global counterparts (loc. cit). Nevertheless, understanding the unique power and role of global imaginaries is pivotal in understanding and shaping the future of place in a globalised world.

Global imaginaries are enacted on places and futures through *placemaking* (Degen & Ward, 2022, p.110). Placemaking is the process of human interaction through which spaces are transformed into places. If place is space articulated in human context – space with a story – then placemaking is the telling of that story. Some of the oldest examples we have of placemaking are in Australian indigenous Dreaming stories: tales of how mythic creatures shaped the land into places we still know by their traditional names. Uluru, for example, is believed by the Anangu people to be a sacred site of travel for ‘Tjukurpa’ (dreamtime) beings (Shackley, 2004, p.67). However, from as early as these dreamtime stories, the making of place has always been politically charged. The politics of naming and making place have been brought to a head through the colonial and post-colonial eras. To stay with our Australian example: Uluru was given the English name “Ayers Rock” after it was ‘discovered’ by the white-Australian surveyor William Gosse (Barnes, 2005, p.82; Hueneker & Baker, 2009, p.477). In the postcolonial era, the traditional Aboriginal name for the landmark has been re-adopted by the Australian state along with a partial ‘handback’ of the national park and locality to its indigenous people – both actions motivated by an effort to promote an indigenous Australian culture (Hueneker & Baker, 2009, p. 478; Lynch, 2024, 199). This pattern of naming and renaming: or making and unmaking, has been repeated all over the

world, through all of human history. In essence, possession of place is a possession of power, and the making of place offers a very real avenue to the creation and containment of power.

## 1.2. Strategic placemaking

While the examples of placemaking so far discussed have been far from apolitical, they have spoken primarily to the ‘organic’ or informal creation of place. Place which has occurred as a by-product of

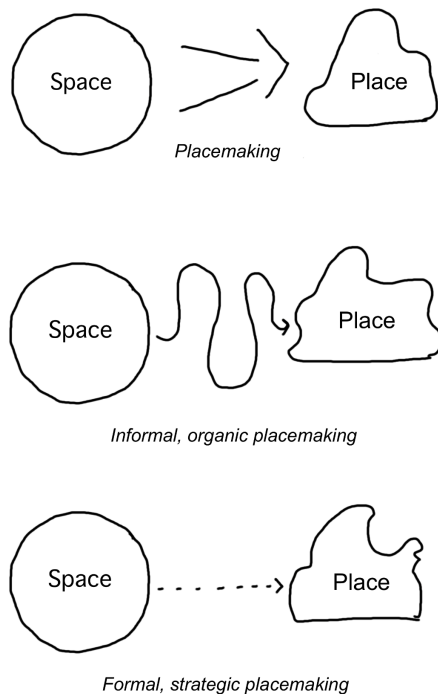


Figure 1. Visualising the placemaking concept

human activity. However, this kind of placemaking also has a formal counterpart: *strategic* placemaking, whereby state or non-state actors seek to make place with a direct and specific aim (see fig 1). Returning again to our Australian example, the naming of Ayers rock may not have been an act of strategic placemaking, since it was not enacted with the object goal of creating a *kind* of place. However, subsequent strategies and actions by the Northern Territory’s Tourism Board to advocate and advertise Ayers Rock and its symbolic significance as an Australian tourist destination certainly was, since it was an act of deliberately attaching culturally and socially significant attributes to geographical space (Barnes, 2005, p.77).

This formal, strategic placemaking has particular significance in the contemporary global landscape. In an increasingly

bodies have contested these formal state relations as the sole arbitrators of power (Sassen, 2005, p.27). In order to achieve the uniqueness and recognition required to remain relevant, and therefore influential, in global networks, cities engage in strategic placemaking in order to popularise certain globally-appealing qualities or attributes of their local contexts (Yeung, 2000, p. 3; Sassen, 2016, p.8). Failure to implement a locally-led strategic placemaking in global networks can have serious consequences, such as the subsumption of local culture and practice by artificial, international reproductions (Friedman, 1991, p.159-160). To protect local and *authentic* place against this mimicry then, local actors must strategically implement global imaginaries to their local advantage – they must endeavour to control the narrative – in order to ensure their contemporary and future role in the world.

### 1.3. City imaginaries, wilderness imaginaries

As dense centres for urban habitation, city imaginaries are the site of deeply influential strategic placemaking (Bridge & Watson, 2000, p.7). How the global city is imagined, in a contemporary setting, is pivotal in realising potential future cities which have minimal environmental impact, maximal accessibility and offer a high quality of life to their inhabitants. Likewise, as perhaps the antithesis of the global city, global wilderness imaginaries are critical in informing the conservation of natural environments worldwide (de Bont, 2022, p.48-49). Global wilderness imaginaries, often located far away from participants' lived experiences, are envisaged as a destination just barely within reach: a place of pristine nature, as yet unimpacted by human behaviour (Glicksman and Coggins 1998; Milton 2002; Hobbs 2011; DeLancey 2012; Barr & Kliskey 2014; Saarinen 2020). This is true for wilderness imaginaries even more so than it is for Nature imaginaries more broadly; precisely because nature imaginaries are often used as a stand-in for certain elements of aspects of the natural world, rather than a whole place imaginary in itself (Neimanis, Åsberg & Hayes, 2015, p.482). All places on earth could be imagined on a spectrum between the city and wilderness. However, as increasingly precarious futures loom, this research suggests that strategic placemaking may offer pathways to global imaginaries of nature and the Anthropocene which are more nuanced and inclusive and which, by consequence, do not require a perfect delineation between nature and urban places.

The theories of strategic placemaking are equally valuable to considerations of global wilderness places and the way these places are imagined (and consumed) globally. At the most basic level, the continued existence of wilderness is a condition of human survival (Harris, 2020, p.13). This premise is true not only in regards to the ecological necessity of wilderness, in places such as the Amazon basin or the boreal



forest Canada (Cameron, 2006, p.29), but also in the increasingly evidenced need for wilderness to engender human wellbeing (Summers et. al. 2012; Barton et. al. 2016; Milligan et. al. 2021). Yet increasingly, as areas of wilderness have globally been depleted, there has been a polarisation of the rhetoric which describes and protects natural places. Building on the Hegelian distinction of nature from culture, global imaginaries of the ‘wilderness’ – ever more romantic as the once-threatening boundaries of the wild recede further and further from human settlements – are set in stark opposition to global imaginaries of the ‘city’, which are viewed as hubs of power and influence in the global networks of connection (Talen & Brody, 2005, p.684). In order to protect wilderness from the rapid expansion of urban development worldwide, global strategies for wilderness are essential (McAfee, 1999, p.152). However, for these global imaginaries and ideologies to be effective they must also be integrated with local knowledge and site-specific needs (loc.cit.). Strategic placemaking then, holds the key to creating environments in which local actors can lead the governance and conservation of wilderness areas, as well as distinguishing the boundaries of nature in spaces and places not traditionally considered worthy of wilderness protections.

#### 1.4. Singapore as a case study

This research approaches the area of study presented by strategic placemaking through the case study of Singapore as a global city. Like many global cities, Singapore engages in several placemaking strategies to engender future prosperity and success. Singapore, which has historically fallen under the rule of a number of different empires, gained significance as a trading hub under colonial British rule (Naruse & Gui, 2016, p.474). In its independence from Malaysia in 1965 and under the oversight of its first Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, Singapore transformed itself into a contemporary global city: a trading hub and global business centre, with a highly lauded reputation for education and its consequent status as a source of high quality human capital (Maitra, 2016, p.426). The soft-authoritarian political model through which the Singaporean state functions has been highly effective in the planning and development of Singapore as a city, and continues to be influential in the formation of its contemporary identity as a global city (Mohamed & Turner, 2015, p.340; Jung, 2022, p.878). As a global city (Sassen, 2013, p.128-129), Singapore markets itself on its ability to offer global powers access to its local and regional neighbours, and vice versa. This access, coupled with production of a specific, locality-based sense of self, allows Singapore to promote itself as a global city, offering consumable services to the world not only in the present but into the future (Freeman & Newman, 2012, p.158-159). As a part of building this identity,

Singapore has marketed itself as ‘The Garden City’, a moniker which reveals the great significance of greenery and nature to the city’s international identification (Song, 2011, p.42). In addition, as a postcolonial city, Singapore (which positions itself simultaneously as a leading Western and Asian city) offers a key insight into the ways in which global power flows are negotiated by different actors in the global context (Yeoh, 2001, p.464). As such, Singapore also offers an interesting approach to examining global wilderness imaginaries from a post-colonial perspective, especially given its proximity to globally significant wilderness areas in Indonesia and Malaysia (Gen & Sharp, 2008, p.193,200).

In an increasingly globalised world, the tension between city and wilderness imaginaries remains deeply pronounced: a challenge for global futures in which the spaces designated as wilderness areas have shrunk further and further away from the onset of human development. Understanding the ways in which cities such as Singapore operate in order to mitigate the ecological disasters of global city status offer particular insight into future strategic placemaking-practice. This research targets the Singapore example to explore how local, strategic placemaking practices may affect the sharp boundaries between city and wilderness imaginaries.

## 1.5. Research questions

How does Singapore produce, participate in, or alter global imaginaries of the city and the wilderness?

How do key actors in Singapore placemake (articulate the city’s identity) in the context of an increasingly globalised world?

## 2. Theoretical Concepts

### 2.1. Emplacing anthropology: long-term consequences of the spatial turn

*To be at all— to exist in any way —is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. - Edward Casey*

Since the so-called “spatial turn” of the late 1970’s, there has been an increasing focus in the social sciences on the ways in which culture and local identities are shaped by their spatial environments (Sheller, 2017, p.625). Spear-headed by theorists such as John Urry, Doreen Massey and Henri Lefebvre (loc. cit.), the spatial turn introduced the idea of social relations as intrinsically shaped by their context: society *emplaced*. Lefebvre, for example, introduced the idea that space was inherently coded by power, and insisted that although imperfect, a tripartite science of space could be established. In this model, space, simultaneously, is representative of the political use of knowledge, is used to ideologically conceal that knowledge, and simulates the future, or the possible, in the framework of the real (Lefebvre, 1991, p.9; Leckie & Given, 2010, p.224). John Urry explored the same ideas within the context of tourism, offering key insights into how globalisation influences placemaking globally (Urry, 1990, 1995). His work was instrumental in establishing consumption and visual/aesthetic observations as critical frameworks for examining place (ibid; Ratić & Chambers, 2012, p.1612). Crucially in the spatial turn, place came to be recognised not as a fixed and discrete location but as a fluid and porous network of social relations, and exploration was made into the ways in which place could be hegemonically normative or radically resistive (Massey, 2013, p.121). In conjunction with these pivotal changes to the academic conceptualisation of place, more recent study of ‘mobilities’ – the transnational, global flows of people and power (Appadurai, 1996, p.37) – as well as the ‘collapsing’ of geography through digital connectivity – have continued to bring questions of emplacement and locality to the fore of anthropological research (Warf & Arias, 2009, p.1; Withers, 2009, p.637). That place is a question of philosophy, religion and experience inasmuch as it is a question of geography and location is now widely accepted in the field. However, a concrete definition of place is still highly contested (Loewen 2014; Drenthen 2016; Janz 2017). Significant contemporary contributions to the spatial turn have begun to analyse the emplacement of more abstract manifestations of global sensibilities such as intersectionality, or postcolonialism (Sircar, 2022, p.904, 906).

The examination and distinction of space from place is a topic which has been afforded much consideration in geographic, literary and anthropological theory. Among the various discourses surrounding the two, there is an underlying agreement that space is a raw, unqualified resource, whereas place is space with character, space qualified, space in relation to the human. This is true both for categories of place – such as the city, or the wilderness, or the local, or the global – as well as specific sites, such as Yosemite National Park, or London. However, disagreement arrives in the identification of how, or by what process, place is produced from space: of how place is *made*. For Michel de Certeau, famously, “space is place practised” (de Certeau 1988): a useful differentiation in illuminating the very concrete ways in which space is transformed to place, yet one which offers no avenue for examining the

imaginary and narrative aspects of placemaking. Certainly, the imaginary does need consideration in any valuable examination of place in the globalised world: a person in the global world can conceptualise the 'arctic' even if they live on a tropical island on the equator, and have never experienced a day below 25°C. To this end then, scholars such as Jonathan Friedman and even Arjun Appadurai suggest that the production of place is in some ways a byproduct of consumption (Appadurai, 1988, p.309; Friedman, 1991, p.161): that local identities emerge from the consumption of place, for example through tourism, or media.

Placemaking can be thought of as the area of study which examines the social processes of creating place from space. Friedman's work on placemaking as consumption is not exhaustive. Indeed, placemaking should not exclusively be considered in consumerist terms. While consumption makes sense as a theoretical model in a capitalist global network, experiential, embodied models for understanding place are equally, if not more, valuable in discerning the nuanced ways in which place shapes contemporary global society (Crouch, 2002, p.207; Ratić & Chambers, 2012, p.1613). Put simply, places and localities are essential in underpinning ontological security; both for individuals, and for society more broadly (Giddens, 1984, p.118). To this end then, placemaking offers a framework of exploring place anthropologically, particularly in reference to experiential models (Crouch, 2002, p.207). Doreen Massey has described the enlivened and endowed contextualisation of space through human practice (Massey, 1994; Crouch, 2002, p.207); a kind of precursor to contemporary definitions of place such as Cresswell's place as "locations imbued with meaning that are sites of everyday practice" (2014, p.9). More importantly, the study of space also allows for marginalised communities to better identify and counteract the ways in which space and place may be bound up in physical and social injustice (Low, 2014, p.35).

Cresswell's definition of place is particularly useful in the consideration of place at both the local and global scale. The notion of the local – particularities which define one place from another – is often articulated through the everyday: through the ordinary habits and behaviours which can be taken for granted by those who practise, and those who master them (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82). In critically reflecting on earlier anthropological approaches to place, ethnographer Harri Englund notes that in the contexts of migrants especially, 'the local', as a place, "appears as an achievement that they carve out of the cultural materials that the fact of their movement provides" (2002, p.267). This approach to understanding is problematic in the same way as many early approaches to ethnography. As Gillian Rose explains, when researchers investigate social and physical space, their claims to anthropological understanding rest "on a notion of space as completely transparent, unmediated and therefore utterly knowable" (2012, p.71). In other words, there is an "illusion of transparency" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.27), which disguises dominant, hegemonic norms of analysis and restricts the agency of minority groups in claiming their own

interpretations of space and power. To counter this effect and increase transparency around the influence of place, both global and local, in ethnographic research, scholars such as Feld and Pink have advocated for sensory approaches to research which recognise the multi-sensory experiences which make place specific (Feld, 2021, p.179). Others have suggested that place can even be read as a kind of text; made readable at the intersection of the concept and experience (Drenthen 2016; Janz, 2017). These approaches are particularly beneficial for research projects such as the one proposed in this thesis, which seek to examine not only the spatial and phenomenological facets of place, but also the future and the imagined.

## 2.2. Global imaginaries

*No longer mere fantasy, no longer simple escape, no longer elite pastime, and no longer mere contemplation, the imagination has become an organised field of social practices... The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. -Arjun Appadurai*

Globalisation has further problematised the spatialisation of culture. A comprehensive body of literature has sought to examine the many intricate and far-reaching consequences of globalisation, from economics and politics to ethics, education, art and culture (Kearney 1995, p. 538; Agnew, 1999, 499; Dreher, Gaston & Martens, 2008, p.1; Reuter, 2015, p.21; Sansi, 2016, p.204). Indeed, the extensive work which has been done to explore the consequences of globalisation can at times give the impression that globalisation is a kind of natural order (Featherstone, 2012, p.170). The deterministic certainty of globalisation, however, should not be assumed (loc. cit). Globalisation, and especially a globalisation which recognises and realises a diverse pluralist network of local cultures, is far from a fait accompli (loc. cit), and despite the critical discourses which often target globalisation, the net effect of globalisation on the overall quality of human life appears to still largely be positive (Potrafke, 2015, p.531). Until recently, the evolution of globalisation to its current form was far from assured – being countered by alternative hegemonic ontologies such as colonialism or Americanisation (Featherstone, 2012, p.170). In part, this normative approach comes from the imbalance in critical perspectives researching globalisation: while there exists a vast body of literature dedicated to the observation and analysis of the objective patterns of globalisation (Dreher, Gaston & Martens, 2008, p.1; Steger & James, 2013, p.17-18), relatively little work has been done in examining its subjective dimensions (loc. cit.).

In response to this lacuna, Steger and James suggest that the subjective dimensions of globalisation can be engaged with according to three distinct fields: ideologies, imaginaries and ontologies (loc. cit.). Accordingly, global imaginaries can be defined summarily as “patterned convocations of the social whole... deep-seated modes of understanding provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence—expressed, for example, in conceptions of ‘the global,’ ‘the national,’ ‘the moral order of our time’ (ibid, p.23). On a base level, imaginaries ‘provide a shared sense of meaning, coherence and orientation around highly complex issues’ (Levy & Spicer, 2013, p.660). Global imaginaries differ from ideologies in that they are not normatively imbued, do not carry claims to social truth, and while they can be politicised, are not designed as “conceptual maps to help people navigate the complexity of their political universe” (Steger & James, 2013, p.17). Similarly, global imaginaries differ from global ontologies in that they are not patterned ways of being in the world- they are not lived and experienced as “*the grounding conditions of the social*” (loc. cit., emphasis my own). Put simply, where ideologies are shared political beliefs, and ontologies shared social practices, for Steger and James, global imaginaries are collective convocations of society, beyond the borders of the nation state. Global imaginaries are identified and implemented variously by anthropological fieldwork, even if they are not always distinctly articulated as such (see, for example, Weißenfels, 2023, p.72), and increasingly, research in the social sciences is beginning to address the topic of global imaginaries directly (see, for example, Funk 2022).

Although considerations of the future are hardly new to the field of social anthropology, an expanding body of social-science literature is beginning to directly address the future and its implications in the present (Wallman, 2003, p.1-2). The future can also be seen as a kind of global imaginary (Fujimura, 2003, p.193; Goswami, 2012, p.1462), in which locales participate in order to grant themselves some form of ontological security: that is, security of the self (Bilgic & Pilcher, 2023, p.4). As Sandra Wallman writes in her introduction to her volume on Contemporary Futures, for social anthropologists, the question is not whether we can know the future, nor the basis by which we know it, but rather to interpret the way that we and others envisage the future, and the implications of these imaginings (2009, p.2). There have been criticisms that social anthropologists have been uniquely reluctant (as a discipline) to think about or address the future (Riner, 1991, p.2). However, as a number of key anthropologists have acknowledged, understanding of the role of futures - and especially the role they play in shaping everyday life - is integral to ethnographic research, as well as anthropology more broadly (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p.192). A number of scholars have even begun to address the role of futures in formulating everyday, quotidian practice, and to call for direct engagement with the future concept (loc. cit.; Pink & Salazar, 2020, p.13). The emplacement of anthropology in spatial contexts, then, or ‘engaged anthropology’, as Setha Low

terms it (2014, p.35), offers particularly fruitful grounds for futures research, in that is intimately connected to ideas of the future and the possible; through city-planning, construction, architecture, art and even the literary (Leckie & Given, 2010, p.224).

Indeed, the overt, and very pragmatic, relationship between futures research and place-based imaginaries has been acknowledged in the literature. Paul Dobraszczyk summarises this relationship neatly in the introduction to his book on future cities, writing, “The fundamental way in which we make sense of the future is through the imagination; to think of the future is, by necessity, to imagine it.”(2019, p.7). Global imaginaries, as they are embodied in place, are the ‘fantasy’ referenced by Lacanian perspectives of ontological security (Vulović & Ejduš, 2024, p.123). In essence, global imaginaries are intimately connected to futures research, because they are a primary vehicle through which contemporary societies identify themselves in the face of an uncertain, and often precarious, future.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Imagining Singapore, the global city and global wilderness

The city, as a place, can be seen as the culmination of what it means to live in a contemporary global world (Chambers, 2012, p.188). For scholars such as Ian Chambers, the city, as both a “real” and “imaginary” place offers “elaborate evidence of global tendencies and local distinctions” in its “everyday details, its mixed histories,” and in its “languages and cultures” (loc. cit.). Cities are key nodes in global power flows (Appadurai, 1996, p.37), especially as the nation-state politics of the modern period have become superseded by translocal relationships (Agnew, 1999, 499). Cities attempt to gain power and status in global networks through sophisticated marketing strategies (Friedman, 2010, p.150), and the marketing of these cities also typifies these characteristics according to a variety of different monikers – “smart cities” (Harrison et. al. 2010; Batty et. al. 2012; Albino et. al. 2015; Halegoua 2020), “green cities” (Kahn 2007; Campbell 2018), “future cities” (Riffat, Powell & Aydin, 2016; Batty 2018; Dobraszczyk 2019) – each purporting to demonstrate a particular defining characteristic of the place in question (Wu, 2016, p.102-103). This research relies particularly on Saskia Sassen’s concept of the “global city” as one which has superseded traditional nation state borders through its contribution of unique services or attributes to a broader transnational network (Sassen, 2004, p.30). Global cities are internationally recognised, cosmopolitan and often offer specialist skills to the markets in which they operate (loc. cit.).

The keystone of Singapore's development into a global city, for example, has been its economic growth (Naruse & Gui, 2016, p. 474-475). In a global system dominated by capitalist ideology, Singapore's ability to make itself amenable to the needs of international business has been what allowed it to evolve quickly to its contemporary status as a global city (Sassen, 2004, p.30).

Within the context of global cities, the application of other city titles may also apply; each one contributing to the city's claims at uniqueness and appeal. This review notes in particular the kinds of city which Singapore has staked claims to being. The smart city, for example, which is instrumented, interconnected and intelligent (Harrison et. al. 2010, p.1): it is the city which incorporates digital technologies and data-surveillance software in order to organise and simplify the life of its inhabitants (Yin et. al., 2015, p.2). Research into Singapore as a smart city has critically assessed by which parameters the city may or may not be considered a smart city, and examined the ways in which the city-state distinction may make Singapore as a case unique (Calder, 2016, p.2; Cavada, Tight & Rogers, 2019, p.296). The future city, by contrast, is not only digitally efficient but also provides broader ontological securities for its inhabitants (Riffat, Power & Aydin, 2016, p.20; Batty, 2018, p.12-14). In the literature, several cities have been earmarked as future, or at least futuristic, global cities – Dubai, Hong Kong and Shanghai, to name a few (Jameson, 2003, p.65; Dobrazczyk, 2019, p.7). However, the precise formation of such cities, or attempts to locate them in the world today, is not as significant as the ways in which contemporary cities stake claims to their future. In Singapore, claims to 'future-city' status are staked through meticulous state planning, and especially through an anticipation of the future (Oswin, 2019, p.22; Fuji & Ray, 2021, p.144, 184). Simultaneously, Singapore uses this meticulous planning and emancipation to stake claims of itself as a green or 'garden' city: a city which is environmentally proactive (Beatley & Beatley, 2016, p.52; Han, 2017, p.3). Cities are increasingly becoming an important battleground for climate activism (Janković, 2015, 332). Matthew Kahn itemises the imagined attributes of the green city:

*“Green cities have clean air and water and pleasant streets and parks. Green cities are resilient in the face of natural disasters and the risk of major infectious disease outbreaks in such cities is low. Green cities also encourage green behaviours, such as the use of public transit, and their ecological impact is relatively small.”* (2007, p.4)

Singapore's claims at being green are then perhaps nuanced toward a more achievable and contemporary goal than that of a truly 'green' city: staking claims at being a city 'in a garden' rather than a city in the wilderness (Beatley & Beatley, 2016, p.52). This distinction underscores Singapore's strategic focus on creating a harmonious, cultivated environment that aligns with its broader urban and technological



ambitions, rather than pursuing the more radical vision of integrating untamed nature into the urban fabric.

This research builds on the definition of global imaginaries provided by Steger and James (2013, p.17-18) to formulate “wilderness imaginaries” as the collective, global expectations of nature-places not obviously affected by human interference (Barr & Kliskey 2014; Saarinen 2020). Analogous to urban imaginaries, it is possible to see wilderness imaginaries as constructed through collective visual idolisation: through social media depictions, or nature documentaries such as BBC’s Planet Earth (de Bont, 2020, p.47-48; Nielson, 2020, p.225-226; Zemanek, 2022, p.139). They are also constructed through literary and artistic means – for example in the English romantic period, through authors and poets like Wordsworth or Byron, or with the American Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Whitman (Talbot, 1998, p.327; Leckie & Given, 2010, p.224). Increasingly, digital tools and platforms have become vehicles for the collective imagining of future places (Degen & Ward, 2022, p.118). Such is the case in Singapore, where the ‘master plan’ of the city is shared digitally with its constituents in order to homogenise locally imagined futures of the city (Johanssen, 2012, p.3611). Thus, the perception of wilderness, or wild-ness, is just as important as formal, political designations. In other words, it is important that the global wilderness, like the global city, is considered a site which is produced through local and global consumption.

The wilderness is referred to quite differently across various bodies of social science and geographical literature. For some groups the wilderness is considered a ‘natural landscape’, while for others, as scholars such as Watson et. al. argue, it is more appropriate to consider it a cultural one (Watson et. al. 2011, p.5). In the context of anthropology, however, some would argue that the distinction is largely meaningless: as all landscapes, to an anthropologist, may be considered cultural (Rössler, 2009, p.298). Nevertheless, wilderness imaginaries have a long global history. As Cocks et.al. write “ways of conceptualising nature have until relatively recently been dominated by Western understandings and interpretations” (2020. p.3). Contemporary global wilderness are certainly still the most prevalent, with the wilderness being perceived as the last ‘real’ place of nature, untouched by human development, systems or societies (Glicksman and Coggins 1998; Hobbs 2011; DeLancey 2012; Barr & Kliskey 2014; Saarinen 2020). It is important to differentiate between nature and the wilderness. Although the two ideas are linked, and are sometimes used synonymously, it would be erroneous to conflate the two. Wilderness can be considered at one end of a spectrum of place: as pure or remote nature, the antithesis of the city or nature without human interaction (Milton, 2002, p.112). If Cocks et. al., for example, consider “nature to exist at various scales throughout public and private spaces in towns and cities” (2020, p.5), wilderness cannot. Even taking into account the various indigenous paradigms which do distinguish between natural

and human environments (Cocks et. al., 2000), in the global imaginary, deeply influenced by its colonial history, many scholars argue that it is more productive to continue to distinguish a wilderness imaginary, in order to create a point of comparison against which to hold contemporary urban development (Pohl & Helbrecht, 2022, p.3).

Historically, Western scholarship has differentiated between pre and post enlightenment conceptualisations of the wilderness (loc. cit.). Nature in pre-enlightenment thinking was a threat (Bell 2001; Cocks et. al. 2020). With the enlightenment, nature, in the West, came to be seen as a creation of God, and intellectuals increasingly romanticised the idea of nature as pure (Nagle, 2005, p959; Cocks et. al. 2020). This romantic conceptualisation of nature has been unseated by industrial and capitalist conceptions of nature (Roth & Dressler, 2012, p.366). Such market-oriented thinking suggests that the wilderness can be safeguarded against overexploitation, so long as it is assigned the appropriate economic value (McAfee, 1999, p.152). However, this line of rhetoric has been criticised by scholars such as McAfee, who write that ‘green developmentalism’ is a ‘fantasy’ which perpetuates ‘demonstrably unsustainable economic trajectories’, governed by the desire of international elites, and ultimately, ‘dooms’ the fate of diversity (loc. cit). Her ideological critique is matched quantitatively by scholars Crook and Clap, who demonstrate several ways in which economic evaluations of wilderness areas and nature-products are often inflated, poorly accounted for, or else simply do not offer a viable pathway to sustainable harvesting (Crook & Clapp, 2021, p.167). It is their conclusion that although management practices may be a valid alternative to wholesale destruction, they cannot in themselves be considered a viable form of conservation (ibid, p.174). In the Singapore context, many of the city’s closest neighbours, like many countries in the Global South, struggle with planning protections for nature against urban development due to the pace of population growth (Shackleton & Cocks, 2020, p.4-5). Yet Singapore itself, by virtue of its colonial history and wealth, has been led from the outset by strong governmental regulations when it comes to land use and rights (Ali, 2002, p.284). Singapore’s colonial heritage, where much of the island's land resources were cleared for rubber plantations, has increased state consciousness about the limited land resource of the island, and encourages prioritisation of environmental protections in the contemporary era (Goh, 2001, p.12).

### 3.2. Strategic placemaking in a global world

*The sense of dislocation which so many writers on the subject apparently feel at the sight of a once well-known local street now lined with a succession of cultural imports—the pizzeria, the kebab*

*house, the branch of the middle-eastern bank—must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonised peoples all over the world as they watched the importation of, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonisation, maybe British (from new forms of transport to liver salts and custard powder); later US products, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca-Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas. -Doreen Massey*

Globalisation theory describes power as distributed along global networks or ‘flows’ (Appadurai, 1996, p.33). Thus, to succeed globally, cities must be able to: (a) negotiate global trade (Gaviria & Emontspool, 2015, p.181-182), (b) market themselves as an ‘authentic’ and cosmopolitan destination (Yeoh, 2005, p.946), and (c) position themselves as a spokesperson for the interests of their region (Sassen, 2005, p.28-30, 40). Above all, these cities must advocate for their own local uniqueness. Successful global promotion, however, must be balanced lest the city find itself consumed by the global market at the expense of its local inhabitants. Friedman, for example, writes explicitly about the ways in which Hawaiian, Congolese and Japanese identities are produced around the world through the process of consumption, as well as the way in which Hawaii, for example, has been perpetuated as a place, *outside of Hawaiian control* (loc. cit; 1993; p.740). Friedman’s Hawaiian example is a perfect articulation of this danger: of a place ‘eaten up’ by tourism, at the expense of local practice and everyday life (ibid, p.740). Placemaking which is not strategic leads to the consumption of a locality and its culture, outside of the control of its inhabitants, and in these instances, such places are at risk of feeling ‘inauthentic’ as local, everyday consumption of place is exchanged for global-facing parodies of the site’s identity, often leading to a sense of inauthenticity.

Authenticity, as it is often identified, can however be safeguarded against the global consumption of place. Building on Friedman’s work, it is possible to see how deliberate efforts to manage the production, and global consumption of, space and culture can create a kind of ‘strategic’ placemaking practice, in which specific, local engagements with space are either marketed for global consumption or safeguarded against global exploitation (Friedman, 1991, p.159). Strategic placemaking is differentiated from informal, organic placemaking in that it is placemaking which seeks a deliberate political or social outcome (see, fig. 1). Consistent with a postcolonial perspective, authentic environments do not dispossess the local inhabitants of a space, and instead locate them as the key agents of the production and dissemination of local cultures, through local spaces presented for global consumption (loc. cit).

### 3.3. Postcolonial place– wilderness known?

*The earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.*  
-Edward Said

Placemaking has been essential to colonialism: not only in the physical occupation of land and territory but also in the ideological positioning of these places (Ling, 2003, p.259). Contemporary approaches to placemaking have implemented postcolonial theory in order to recognise indigenous forms of placemaking. Globally, much of the most biodiverse and undamaged natural environments are in the territories of indigenous peoples (Painemilla et. al., 2010, p.5). Where wilderness designation exists as a political environmental protection, scholarship has emphasised that for indigenous groups, it is important that these decisions include protections for traditional relationships to the land (Watson et. al. 2011, p.4). Yet at the same time, postcolonial research has firmly established that the demarcation of national parks, monuments and similar localities are spatial demarcations of land distinct to the settler imaginary (Lynch, 2024, p.197). As historian Raf de Bont writes, “creating the illusion of a timeless and human-less wilderness [has] required the erasure of indigenous populations” (de Bont, 2022, p.66-67). If both of these statements are true, then the difficult question which presents itself is whether a postcolonial, or even decolonial wilderness is possible. Recent research has made deliberate efforts to include indigenous perspectives in wilderness studies (see, for example, Watson et. al. 2011, p.2). Such efforts are not always straightforward: many indigenous groups do not culturally delineate between ‘human’ and ‘wild’ environments, and do not see the places they inhabit as ‘untrammelled’ (ibid, p.4). Led by Rössler’s academic examination of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites (Rössler, 2006, p.334), many scholars have argued for cultural landscapes as a tool by which indigenous groups may effectively defend their claim to land rights and usage in debates on conservation and wildlife management (Davidson Hunt et. al.2010, p.142; Hill et. al. 2011, p.571; Plieninger et. al 2014; Shultis & Heffner 2016). To this end, there has been an increased focus on local ecological knowledge (sometimes referred to as ‘traditional knowledge’) which offers insight into types of placemaking at the local indigenous level, and pathways for this knowledge to be incorporated at the state level (Aswani et. al., 2018, p.2).

Efforts to account for local knowledge are not always successful. As the literature on indigenous placemaking stresses, the degradation of traditional knowledge through factors such as loss of language and dominant global culture is an additional challenge to wilderness and conservation efforts.,Thus indigenous communities become less resilient to change, and lose their position as perceived authorities

on wilderness knowledge in the global context (Aswani et al., 2012, p.11). In the Singaporean context, the multilayered colonial history of the island has led to an erosion of the ‘native’ indigenous group as a meaningful ethnic marker for many Singaporeans (Tan, 2016, p.242). However, academic evaluation of local and traditional knowledge can be complicated by a deep connection to spiritual and religious meaning which extends far beyond technical proficiency (e.g. Davidson-Hunt et. al., 2010, p.140). Moreover, where indigenous communities are given the space to offer contributions in regards to their local knowledge, they are often asked to do so on a voluntary basis, with no financial compensation offered by governments or developments (e.g. Hill et. al., 2011, p.587), further excluding these knowledges from participation in global wilderness strategies. The diminishing local knowledge of wilderness places in turn degrades global wilderness knowledge, and fictional or idealised, non-specific wilderness imaginaries are forced to stand in where concrete or culturally specific meaning once thrived. Wilderness research which focuses on decolonising wilderness imaginaries stresses the importance of transparency in regards to wilderness and conservation policy (Watson et. al., 2011, p.13).

While wilderness imaginaries are typically considered from uniquely Western viewpoints, there exists an emerging body of literature addressing non-western wilderness imaginaries. There are some key challenges in engaging with wilderness research outside of the Western context. As Cocks et. al. write: “many indigenous peoples do not perceive themselves as being distinct from nature” in the first place (2020, p.9) and even where the distinction of wilderness makes sense, no two ecosystems are alike, and the site-specificness of biodiversity make the comparison of international wilderness even more difficult (McAfee, 1999, p.148). Further, indigenous language and wilderness knowledges are in decline through global urbanisation, and changing climate conditions further destabilise local ecological knowledge (Aswani et. al. 2018, p.1-2; Cocks et. al. 2020, p.7). Nevertheless, global approaches which build on indigenous wilderness imaginaries are essential in creating pathways to sustainable wildernesses in the future.

The decision to address future nature-spaces, through the framework of wilderness imaginaries is far from uncontested, and indeed, many scholars have moved away from the concept of the ‘wilderness’ altogether, choosing instead to focus on notions such as biodiversity and sustainable development (Callicott, 2002, p.302). While these approaches are useful in negotiating political sensibilities, for example in the context of conservation work, in this research the ways in which the wilderness is imagined is itself an integral aspect of the study. To ignore the significance of the wilderness imaginary simply because of its conceptual challenges would deny a fruitful avenue of study in regard to placemaking and futures research. It is better, then, to address the challenges present in wilderness imaginaries directly and many scholars have sought to do so. Environmental philosopher W. S. K.

Cameron's (2006) outline of the key challenges which attend evaluations of the wilderness can also be used as a framework for reviewing the literature which illustrates how the wilderness is problematic across five distinct categories: 1.politically, 2.culturally , 3. practically (performatively) 4. ecologically and 5.conceptually (p.29).

For Cameron, valuing the wilderness is politically problematic in that it is, in the context of the American frontier, the product of cultural genocide (2006, p.29). This political problem of the wilderness is not unique to frontier America. Joshua Dent, for example, highlights how wilderness was often used to describe the vast landscapes encountered by colonial explorers in Australia and Canada, despite the fact that those landscapes were rarely as empty of human life and society as implied (2014, pp.61). Despite critical attention from academia, the wilderness concept has remained culturally relevant, especially in the West (Shultis & Heffner, 2016, p.1234). This cultural relevance poses a threat to indigenous communities, whose traditional relationships to the land are challenged by policies which regulate human activity, and historic wilderness imaginaries which erase their history from the landscape (Cameron, 2006, p.29). Often, the process of nature conservation itself becomes a 'spectacle' in which value is generated from the performance of conserving rather than the protection of the environment itself (Brondo, 2015, p.1405). Simultaneously, these designations, which allow for human interaction, often prioritise human engagement which generates income such as neo-liberal tourism (Shultis & Heffner, 2016, p.12340). Even within the literature, use of the wilderness term to denote various kinds of nature environments – such as intact forest landscapes (IFLs), for example (e.g. Potapov et. al., 2017, p.2) – remains popular, often because it is practical. Despite its problems, the wilderness is still globally imagined, and therefore still has a powerful role in shaping political and social policies for conservation and protections.

### 3.4. Authenticity and authority

*A city is a pattern in time. No single constituent remains in place, but the city persists... -John Holland*

*Space speaks and does what it says. - Henri Lefebvre*

Development into a global city can come at a cost to its local inhabitants. Most commonly, increased globalisation in the city is identified as a lack of 'authenticity': as foreign and local residents begin to see global marketplaces and tastes dictate spaces which were previously dominated by local preferences (Southworth & Ruggeri, 2011, p.507). Sometimes this globalisation is identified more specifically:

Singapore, for example, has been criticised for the manifestations of its global identity: and particularly the ways that this globalised identity results in the 'Disneyfication' of the city (Naruse & Gui, 2016, p.474). Indeed, theme parks are often seen as a stereotypically 'inauthentic' place, but authenticity is perceived according to a number of different factors, including modification, construction, artificiality and marketing (Lovell & Bull, 2017, p.2). Authority, seen in the form of the strategic state planning of place, leans into the global, modern "shrinking" of place, increasing the visual aspects of place at the expense of the embodied, multisensory experiences of place in time: the very attributes which make place 'authentic' (Birkeland, 2016, p.44). According to such critiques, Singapore has commodified certain aspects of its culture for global palatability, leading to an inauthentic experience of the city (Naruse & Gui, 2016, p.474). Although defining the concept of authenticity is particularly challenging in the context of placemaking, most scholars reference authenticity of place to the ways, and frequency, which local inhabitants engage and organically placemake locales (Southworth & Ruggeri, 2011, p.501).

## 4. Methodology

This study uses exploratory observations as a starting point for a deeper analysis of the ways in which place is made in and around Singapore, with particular reference to the city and wilderness imaginaries, to explore how Singapore negotiates its postcolonial identity as a global city. This research is qualitative in approach, combining semi-structured interviews with textual analysis, participant observations and digital ethnography, to capture a well-rounded impression of the ways in which Singapore is imagined and produced as a global city (Newing et. al, 2011, p.99). This research uses a variety of ethnographic methods based on their capacity to offer the opportunity to learn from, rather than study, different groups of people (Spradley, 2016, p.3).

### 4.1. Ethnographic fieldwork

A short fieldwork trip in November 2023 laid the groundwork for this research project, using ethnographic fieldwork methods such as informal interviews, participant observations, site observations and material ethnography. During the fieldwork period I was also able to build key relationships which helped in later interview stages, since fieldwork offered the opportunity to connect with informants (Blommaert & Jie, 2020, p.3.). The Atelier Youth Hostel was my base for the fieldwork period.

Located in the Chinatown district of the city, it was close to many of the key landmarks of the city, as well as the CBD area to which many locals commute. By staying in such a central area, I was able to conduct sequential observations at key sites such as the main Chinatown mall, Lau Pa Sat hawkers centre, the Marina Bay sands, Clarke Quay, Orchard Road and even the Botanical Gardens. The Atelier Youth Hostel was also a primary source of international informants, as the small size of the establishment meant that it was common for guests to meet for breakfast and discuss their communal plans; as well as broader interests and hobbies. Several of my interlocutors were guests at the hostel that November, and kindly agreed to participate in the project.

During the fieldwork period, I visited a number of key sites in Singapore, dividing my time between ‘must-see’ destinations for tourists, as well as more ‘authentic’ Singaporean locations, less-visited by foreigners, thereby conducting a balanced observation of place. In this latter task I was aided by two key individuals, who acted as gatekeepers for the project, helping me to gain access and local insight to Singapore (Reeves, 2010, p.317). Through these gatekeepers I was taken to residential neighbourhoods like Woodlands and Toa Payoh, to HDB building projects and even across the border to Malaysia, to go shopping and partake in leisure activities in Johor Bahru – a common practice for young local Singaporeans. The nature of their role as gatekeepers meant that both had an increased insight into my research interests and aims, although I was able to limit the impact of potential bias by using the ethnographic method to create an inductive project design (Walsh, 1998, p.248). Additionally, my research was not viewed as sensitive by most respondents, including both my gatekeepers, meaning that they were very candid and relaxed when discussing the city, its plans and its future. It is possible also that as a queer couple living in Singapore, both of these individuals had experience being in sometimes-uncomfortable tensions with Singaporean state structures – a process which scholar Minwoo Jung describes as the ‘quiet politics’ of negotiating Singapore’s soft-authoritarianism in culturally productive ways, and which gives rise to an increased reflexivity on the structure and power of the state (Jung, 2022, p.878).

## 4.2. The interviews: participant sourcing

In order to focus the research on the specific ways in which Singapore’s local identity has been shaped by contemporary globalisation processes, this study deliberately centres on a youth demographic. While older participants, could offer reflections on the changing ecological and political environment of the region, conversely, young adults offered the opportunity to address the future implications of local



knowledge and placemaking in Singapore, as it is the successful inheritance of cultural, and placed, knowledge which engenders its preservation into the future (Aswani et. al. 2018, p10). More importantly, this youth demographic has an increased familiarity with global imaginaries - especially those formed online and through increased globalisation and global mobility – offered a more informed response to these questions (see, for example, Nayak, 2016, p.4-5).

For this research project I used purposeful sampling of relevant organisations to help find interview participants and supported these sample groups with contacts made through my fieldwork, as well as some snowballing (Mason, 2017, p.78). Following the lead of Diehl and Chan in researching the youth perspective on urban planning in Singapore, my target demographic was young adults, aged 18-35 (2021, p.92). Since the Singaporean government recognises its citizens as legal adults at the age of 18, but does not offer single individuals the opportunity to buy government-sponsored housing (HDBs) until the age of 35 (Brownstein, 2017, p.389), these age categories felt like naturally existing markers of the first stage of adulthood in my local context, and it made sense to replicate these parameters in my international cohort. By targeting interviewees from both local and international backgrounds, the research was able to more accurately pinpoint the local vs. global rhetoric of Singapore as a place, as well as to explore interactions between these discourses.

Local participants were not limited only to Singaporean nationals, but permanent residents who have lived in Singapore for a minimum of three years and can therefore demonstrate a long-term relationship to Singapore as a changing place, as well as a personal investment in Singapore's future. Likewise, the international perspectives of Singapore are not restricted only to tourists visiting Singapore on holiday, but also to short-term visitors to the city for work or internship opportunities. In opening up the participant pool in this way, the research was able to account for some of the ways in which contemporary globalisation has expanded mobility beyond labour or tourism, although these considerations remain important to the overall findings (Amin, 2002, p.394-395). These considerations of the participant groupings also help to counterbalance the ways in which analysing the data according to a 'local' vs 'international' binary may oversimplify the project's findings.

Although several of my interviewees were contacts made during my ethnographic fieldwork, not all my interviewees were sourced in this way. Several individuals were contacted via social media, primarily through Instagram, on the basis of their social media accounts being dedicated to travel and having recently featured life in Singapore, or to life in Singapore more broadly. Social media offered the easiest visual indicator or interest overlap for my participants, but some sub-demographics were harder to reach through social media: men were harder to find than women, for example, or had a lower response rate.

Likewise, there were a limited number of local Singaporeans working in the (digital) influencer sphere around Singapore and finding locals to approach who were not active influencers was even more difficult. I reached out to a number of key institutions, Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), several Singaporean design studios on Instagram, and the National University of Singapore's Landscape research group to attempt to gain additional participants. In addition, I engaged the help of my local gatekeepers in recruiting young Singaporeans who were active or engaged with social media – and these individuals, together with those who responded to my expressions of interest online, formed the main body of my respondents. By selectively approaching participant, I was able to control to a greater extent the chances that my participants would be receptive to, and reflective on, the research material.

### 4.3. Ethnographic observations: preparing interviews

I conducted a number of informal interviews during my fieldwork period – for example, with staff at the youth hostel, workers in the city such as restaurateurs and taxi drivers, and with a number of youth hostel guests, which were instrumental in understanding of the research background, and in structuring the questions for later ethnographic interviews. For example, one informal interview with a taxi driver was key in focusing attention to the effect of non-state actors on the use and production of Singapore and its global identity. I was asked which sites of Singapore I had seen, and which had been my favourite place. As the driver quizzed me on key locations (Had I been to the Gardens by the Bay, to the Jewel, would I come back to see the Merlion, when it reopened?) I realised that his role driving tourists across the city, and recommending them locations, made him a key stakeholder in articulating the important places across Singapore's cityscape. When I told the driver that my favourite destination had been Haw Par Villa, a quasi-theme park from the 1930's filled with thousands of plaster figures depicting various scenes from Chinese mythology, he was clearly taken aback. "Why you go there?" He asked, and laughed, "Wow that's a really authentic Singapore experience... I think only Singaporean children are taken there, by their grandparents." He frowned, "Maybe not anymore, but when I was a kid." The question was how to approach the 'taken-for-grantedness' (Fox, 2017, p.29, 30) of Singapore's environment for its local inhabitants, and to some extent, its visitors. The unique place-identity of Singapore – whatever it could be said to be – was clearly changing, but how could I address these questions of place and placemaking, in a way that made sense to locals whose experience of the city was so grounded?

#### 4.4. The interviews: interview structure

The main body of research data comprised semi-structured ethnographic interviews, held over Zoom. In these interviews the questions were deliberately open-ended and descriptive, to offer my participants the opportunity to reflect on the visual and global identity of Singapore, as they experienced in their everyday lives, or through their travels respectively (Spradley, 2016, p.58). Each interview was designed to be approximately one hour in length, and with nine key questions. Six key interview questions centred around interviewee's description of the city, its cultural and physical characteristics, and its differentiation from other global cities they had experienced. The additional nine questions were more directly around nature and nature-spaces in Singapore, and globally. In addition, over the course of conducting the interviews, three additional questions, regarding food, ethnic placement and plans for the future were added to my question list after arising naturally in the first four consecutive interviews.

In total, I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews for this project, 6 primary interviews with local participants and 3 auxiliary interviews with international participants. The interviews were proportioned this way in order to account for the greater availability of international-facing discourses on Singapore's identity online, with the aim of creating an overall research design which was equally informed by both local and international-facing productions of the city. The key details of my interviewees can be found in the figure below (see fig.2). Please note the names of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

	Name	Local/ Int.	Details	Thematic Link
1.	Mandy (f.27)	L	French national living in Singapore 4 years with her Singaporean partner, applying for PR.	Works in real estate. Runs @newtosingapore -a social media account dedicated to life in Singapore for new inhabitants to the city.

2.	Bea (f.24)	L	Singaporean national born and raised in Singapore.	Works in construction design, involved in urban projects.
3.	Gemma (f.25)	L	Singaporean national born in Singapore and raised primarily in Dubai, returned to Singapore for university and work	Studied political science at university, working in multinational company.
4.	Max (m.29)	L	Singaporean national born and raised in Singapore.	Engineer working in construction/related field.
5.	Yasmin (f.33)	L	Singaporean national partly raised in Australia, the UK and Ireland. Active social media presence.	Worked as an air hostess for Singapore Airlines, now works for an international company in events management/client service.
6.	Martine (f.26)	L	Singaporean national born in Bangladesh and raised in Singapore, did a study abroad program in the UK, now working with early education.	Interest in art, aesthetics and design, part of role is particularly an enrichment program for young Singaporeans designed around exposure to nature.
7.	Krishna (m.27)	I	Indian national, now naturalised in Canada	Works internationally as a systems engineer for a Canadian transport service, participates in international marathons.

8.	Ceres (nb.22)	I	American national, 1 <sup>st</sup> gen, visited Singapore in November 2023	Studying urban development and geography at university.
9.	Dinah (f.31)	I	American national, 1 <sup>st</sup> gen, visited Singapore in November 2023.	Partner is an architect who shares interests, also enjoys hiking and outdoor activities.

*Figure 2. Interview participant list*

#### 4.5. Digital ethnography and textual analysis

This research used digital ethnography and textual analysis to contextualise the interview findings. Digital ethnography was primarily conducted as a textual analysis of the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s website, more formal sources for future and present placemaking Singapore were made the subject of focus through a thorough investigation of the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s “Long Term Plan” and associated pages on their home website, which I treated as a text which I then processed and analysed (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 2). In addition, I referenced Tiktok and Instagram social media platforms to support informal iterations of this more formal plan; looking through photo and video content which was tagged with ‘Singapore’, especially forms of travel media: which have been noted as a key source of placemaking local identities in global networks (Ling, 2003, p.257-258; Urry, 2003, p.156). The digital ethnographic work conducted on these platforms informed the selection of texts for analysis from other media.

The texts for analysis were grouped, similarly to the interviews, by ‘international’ and ‘local’ placemaking material. In the former category, video and photo content posted online by international influencers is taken as the main body of text, while for the latter, it is more formal visions of the city presented by government and industry planning documents, such as brochures, online websites, digital illustrations and texts are analysed. By supporting the analysis of state-produced materials with their reception by informal agents, this research refers to a local production of Singaporean identity and place which is not uniquely located in government planning and policy, despite the contextual realities which cause substantial overlap between these fields.

#### 4.6. The role of the researcher: reflections on ethics and positionality

I conducted this research in alignment with the principles of informed consent, ensuring that participants were fully aware of the study's objectives and understood that I was seeking reflections on their personal experiences, rather than any specific answers (Hammersley, 2014, p.538). While the primary focus of this study was not politically or culturally sensitive, avoiding direct engagement with political critique or social taboos, it was essential to approach the research with the highest ethical standards. As Chih Hoong Sin argues, all research requires continuous ethical consideration, with consent viewed as an ongoing process of communication rather than a one-time event (Sin, 2005, p.290). Given that personal, identifiable information was not necessary for the research findings, standard procedures were implemented to protect participants' privacy and personal boundaries. These included anonymising data, providing a written statement on the research's purpose, and issuing a consent form that outlined participants' roles, rights, and due process. Over the course of my research, it became clear that this anonymisation had additional benefits, particularly for local interlocutors. It allowed them to feel more comfortable discussing the 'soft authoritarian' structure of the Singaporean state (Roy, 1994, p.233), leading to more candid critiques that might not otherwise have been expressed. Several local participants even remarked directly on the increased freedom this anonymisation afforded them in sharing their perspectives.

As a researcher, I found myself in a position where the demographic for this object of study was quite similar to my own. This overlap offered the research a number of advantages, most particularly in building a connection with my interlocutors over a shorter period of time. By accentuating the similarities between myself and my interviewees, I found myself in a position of confidence, where participants revealed more intimate details, beliefs and reservations about the political systems, economic disparities and ecological concerns about Singapore. My participants were from a privileged background- each with higher education degrees and a personal history of international travel. Their English fluency and international reference offered particular insight into the role of Singapore in the global world, but also allowed me to build trust by being open about my own experiences living and travelling internationally.

The semi-structured approach was varied in effectiveness with each different interview. Given the aspects of ethnographic interview which align with a 'speech event' (Spradley, 2016, p.58), my more extroverted interlocutors thrived in this environment, and these interviews ran long and were filled with observations and experiences from their lives. By the same token, for more introverted interlocutors this format was

more challenging; a not uncommon challenge for this kind of methodology (Akhavan et. al., 2016, p.203). In particular, local informants, culturally driven to academic metrics for success, were unbalanced by questions that had no clear answer, most often from cultural differences which led them to feel that they should ‘answer correctly’ or alternatively, that the answers were obvious and there was no need to elaborate (Eckhardt, 2004, p.402; Nguyen, 2015, p.22). Respondents with backgrounds in engineering and ‘hard sciences’ were most affected by this challenge, although even they were quite reflexive in their articulation of the struggle: a number of respondents, both in scientific and creative fields, reflected directly on the cultural differences of education and research, noting that the Singaporean education system, shaped by its soft-authoritarian governance model, values success and efficiency, sometimes at the expense of creativity and critical reflection (Mohamed & Turner, 2015, p.340; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002, p.152). Additional questions and reassurances of the informal nature of the interviews helped to put these interlocutors at ease.

## 5. Consuming Singapore

### 5.1. State placemaking in Singapore: considering the ‘Master Plan’

The image of Singapore is strategically developed for its local constituents through political communications. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), as the branch of Singaporean government which deals chiefly with the development and land-use planning of the island, stakes very specific claims on the creation of Singaporean-ness particularly in regards to landscape. Through planning documents, illustrations and written statements, the URA fosters a specific imaginary for the future of Singapore and the ways in which strategic placemaking may realise this imagined future. Primarily among the many documents and expositions which the URA hosts on its website is the ‘Long Term Plan’ (also referred to as the ‘Master Plan’) an architectural plan for the use of all 734.3 square kilometres of Singapore’s land. Many of the URA’s texts can be found online on their website, including an interactive digital map of the current master plan, which serves as a direct avenue for imagined iterations of the city to be shared with local actors (URA, 2024). Through this formal, and future-oriented placemaking strategy, imaginaries of Singapore are constructed at the state level and disseminated into social practice.

In interview, a number of participants discussed the master plan, both directly and indirectly, in their descriptions of land usage in Singapore. For many, the master plan was such an effective document because of the ‘conformist’ mentality of Singaporean locals in following government guidance. This conformity was variously identified by interviewees through three primary motivators: 1. a deep-seated trust in the vision of Singapore's first president, Lee Kwan Yew, who developed the original long-term concept plan (see fig 3); 2. institutionalised ‘brainwashing’ through Singapore’s well-developed education system; and 3. a distinct lack of natural resources on the island: especially land-resource. In particular,

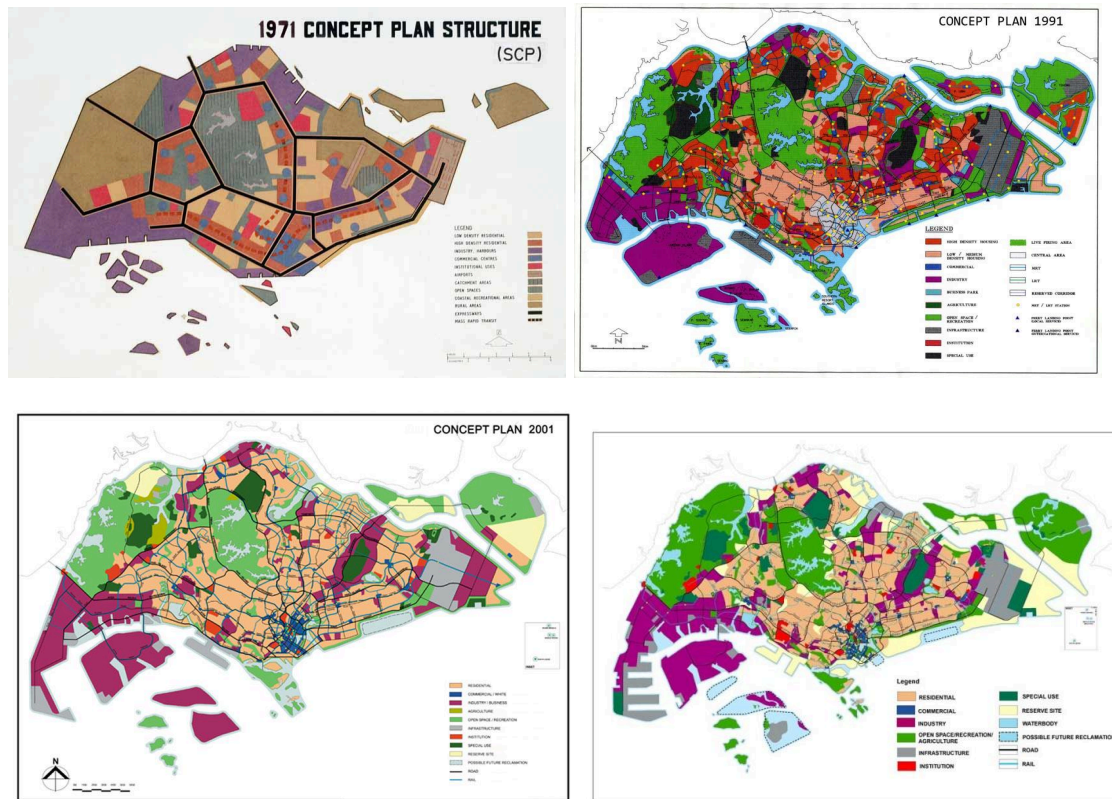


Figure 3. The long term plan from 1971, 1991, 2001 & 2011

Yasmin commented on the reasons for Singaporean’s faith in the master plan, stating:

A lot of the people just have this thinking like... Why fix Something isn't broken? So they just continue with that whole structure. ...it's not really very propaganda-istic but everyone recognized that the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew has made a lot of contributions into thinking for Singapore's future- I think he was like a visionary: he could see into the future...



Yasmin was particularly confident in her description of the late Prime Minister, and particularly how he was envisioned by Singaporean society. Her description was echoed in the sentiments of other interlocutors. What was particularly important to her, and to the others, was the ability of Lee Kwan Yew, in developing the master plan, to account for the Singapore of the future, and to continue planning for this city that he envisioned.

He probably saw 20 years ahead of the current [time]. If he was alive now he would be thinking all the way with Singapore in 20 years, and then he would be planning ahead for that. So I think during independence, when we separated ourselves from Malaysia, he knew that we wouldn't have any land or resources except for the very good strategic point where we were on the Straits of Malacca for important exports. So I think he planned the city structure according to how he was going to make our people and our economy and GDP grow.

By the same token, waning faith in the master plan among the locals I interviewed was aligned with the inability of the current plan to convincingly imagine a distant future for the island, particularly in regards to sustainability.

While the first two motivations were only described by local interlocutors, the third was also recognised by international interviewees. The limited resources which are naturally available in Singapore have pushed the state, by necessity, to be careful with its natural assets, and plan for future securities. Indeed, many local interlocutors pointed to the role of green technologies in state strategies for developing places across the island. Bea, for example, mentioned the importance of the “new-water” program, which through desalination and recycling, will offer Singapore drinking water which is not available naturally, and is currently bought from Malaysia as a part of a larger trade-deal with Singapore’s neighbour.

All local respondents had some degree of engagement with the plan as a whole, both as a bureaucratic function, and in terms of everyday use. At the everyday level, respondents were familiar with the plan because it had very real effects on their future housing: one participant explained to me that a lot of her friends check the plan, especially when it is updated, in order to develop a strategy for their housing applications. More desirable housing areas provided by the government, as this interlocutor explained, were newer buildings, especially those which were not too far away from the city, in areas which were close to lots of good facilities, such as parks and hospitals. This everyday engagement underpinned more political and theoretical assessments of the plan, as they were made by my interlocutors. Most significantly, these theoretical assessments of the plan questioned its ability to prepare Singapore for the future: and especially, for a future where the city was green and self-sustaining enough to support their generation. A couple of respondents even stated that since the plan did not seem to be evolving to meet

the needs of the youth of Singapore, they found it difficult to imagine living in the city in the future: even though it was their primary home.

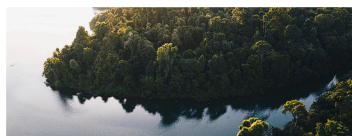
## 5.2. Planning for the wilderness

The master plan has an express focus on safeguarding and promoting the nature/wilderness spaces of Singapore. The master plan articulates a ‘green and blue’ strategy for Singapore and its surrounding islands, and demonstrates the ways in which this land will be conserved or ‘shared’ with other social functions (as parks, walkways etc.) (see fig 4).

### Steward: The Green and Blue

Singapore is recognised as a biophilic City in Nature, thriving with biodiversity and greenery enveloping our urban landscape.

To bring Singaporeans closer to nature, active stewardship of our natural capital and restoration of nature into our urban landscape can ensure that Singapore’s rich biodiversity and green spaces can continue to provide ecosystem services that bring numerous benefits, including improving Singaporeans’ well-being and enhancing climate resilience.



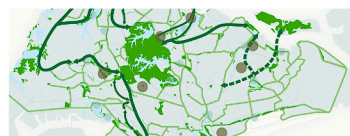
Stewardship of Natural Capital

Multi-Functional Green and Blue Spaces



Climate Resilience Through Nature

Green and Blue Plan



While the green spaces of Singapore are advertised as being a key part of the ‘clean & green’ ethic and strategy, a close look at the revisions to the master plan over the decades since its inception nevertheless showcase that many of the remaining undeveloped areas of Singapore are scheduled for development in the near future. It is perhaps for this reason that interviewees expressed a degree of scepticism in their reflections on the ways in which Singapore as a state and city considers itself to be environmentally conscious, or indeed, sustainable. Respondents were hopeful that future versions of the plan would account for this diminishing natural reserve.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the ‘Steward: Green and Blue’ page

One respondent, Bea, even mentioned the 2024 revisions to the plan, suggesting that there may be a chance for rewilding on the island through the introduction of ‘wilderness corridors’. These corridors, as

they are displayed on the URA website, would stretch through key areas of the island, and connect smaller patches of parkland and natural areas (URA, 2024, see fig.5).

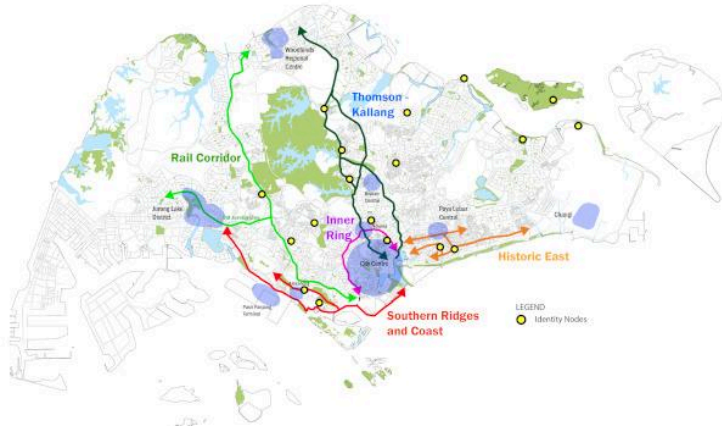


Figure 5. Map of the URA proposed 'corridors'

According to the master plan, these corridors have been developed with the express aim of re-creating the natural junglescape of Singapore, as well as ensuring that what little wildlife remains on the island has a clearly connected habitat across these smaller parks and reserves (loc. cit.). However, although Bea understood the plan for the introduction of these places, she was sceptical about their ability to

accommodate authentic nature. For her, while these spaces continued to be planned as 'dual' or 'multi purpose' areas (in which humans could also move between areas of the city) they left little space for real wilderness development.

The tension at the heart of the future wilderness planning, for many participants, was the tautological relationship between wilderness and planning, or wilderness and accessibility. For most of the respondents, one of the main advantages of Singapore's city-structure was its accessibility, and the way in which well-planned mechanisms allowed for an efficient and cohesive quality of life across the island. However, this comfort and access were qualities which were not a part of the wilderness imaginary for *any* of my respondents, and a few commented that the very reality of accessibility – paved footpaths through the jungle, for example – were contrary to the wild and wilderness. In essence, the very thing which makes wilderness *wilderness*, for many of my respondents, was that it was an organic, messy, naturally-occurring phenomena which could not be planned by the state. No number of "planters", "rooftop gardens" or wilded corridors could improve their perceptions of wilderness in the city, since none of these introductions ultimately changed the underlying structure of the city itself. While the city, and its norms and needs, continue to structurally underpin the use of space in Singapore, none of its 'clean and green' strategies can introduce wilderness places in the city.

### 5.3. Indigeneity and wilderness in Singapore

In the discussion around Singapore as a place, especially in regards to planning for ‘wilderness,’ a number of my interlocutors mentioned Sisters’ Islands as a key nature-place. Some interlocutors differentiated Sisters’ Islands as a more ‘untouched’ natural environment, positioning the area more like wilderness, or in some cases, suggesting that the environment was once a wilderness area, although it could not be considered wild anymore. This differentiation of past wilderness was particularly interesting given Singapore’s colonial history: and the extent to which Singapore as an island has been colonially imagined (and indeed reimagined) as being *carved out of the wilderness* (Geh & Sharp, 2008, p.185). The Centre for Ethnobotany in Singapore’s botanical gardens, for instance, dedicates a considerable amount of its exhibit to the colonial founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles (fieldnotes, 2023; Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2024). In my preliminary fieldnotes, what stood out about this exhibit was not only the placement in the museum itself, but the lack of postcolonial critique afforded the exposition. Where other tourist landmarks in Singapore showcased post-colonial sensibilities, when directed toward other east-Asian contexts, the same was not true for critical approaches to Singapore's own history. For example, in the “From East to West” exhibit in the Singapore’s National Museum, many references were made to the legacies of colonialism in the region; particularly in Malaysia and the Philippines (fieldnotes, 2023). The same was not true in the Centre for Ethnobotany: in part, perhaps, because Singapore views its own colonial history as exceptional in the region. In some ways, Singapore is proud of its British colonial history. A number of interview respondents commented on the disproportionate representation of colonial English buildings and sites when it came to preserving the heritage areas of Singapore city. This is perhaps not entirely surprising: Singapore’s significance as an English port is, historically speaking, directly correlated with its contemporary position as a global city (Yeoh, 2001, p.460). Although some interviewees could identify non-colonial buildings and places which had been preserved for cultural heritage, these were seen to be either less prominent, less prestigious, or less well-preserved than those which hailed from British colonisation. Some interviewees even made the link between the preservation of British heritage in this way, and Singapore’s popularity as a tourist destination for Europeans and Americans outside of Europe, citing the ‘increased familiarity’ of Singapore’s architecture, especially in the centre of the city, as a quality which made the city less foreign and more approachable for these visitors. The same pattern of Western amelioration can be seen in Singapore’s efforts to shape itself as a ‘garden’ city, rather than a city in the wilderness: as the ‘garden city’ moniker suggests a kind of controlled, safe experience of the jungle for foreign, and often Western, tourists.

Conserving 'natural' or 'wilder' places is also clearly a part of a cultural conservation effort in state planning, however. Sisters' Islands, as one of the most recent places to be included in the explicit plans for Singapore, near Sentosa, is not perhaps the best example of true 'wilderness' so much as it is a leisure or recreational place with nature. More illustrative, perhaps, is the example of Lazarus Island, given by Martine, who mentions that Lazarus island like Sisters' Islands, is a wilderness or nature space which has only just been brought into local consciousness as a useable area of the city, and likewise, has in recent history changes from a reasonably wild and uninhabited area to a more controlled parkland, complete with paved pathways and toilets. These two islands, along with Pulau Ubin, were identified as the only 'authentic' Singaporean landscapes, although they were not uncontested. However, even in such places, almost none of my participants could identify an 'indigenous' people of Singapore, inasmuch as they may exist outside of the Malay ethnic group already considered to be one of Singapore's primary demographics. In essence, the only 'indigenous' people to be acknowledged by my interlocutors were Malay, and in being Malay, these groups were either identified as Singaporean or Malaysian, thus rendering the 'indigenous' category obsolete. Part of the challenge in articulating indigeneity comes from the lack of physical, visually identifiable places from these histories. As Martine commented:

Sometimes even when we learn about it [indigenous history], there's nothing for us to look at. So we don't remember this kind of history. Because when I was younger, we used to learn a lot of folktales about Singaporean folk tales. We also learnt them, but because they're not they're not consistently shared all the time we forget most of them. All we know, besides Stamford Raffles for founding Singapore, is Sang Nila Utama who was an Indonesian prince who came over to Singapore like 700 years ago. Yeah, that's it. I mean - that's all I remember.

Memory is important for Martine's sense of Singapore, as it is for many of my other local interlocutors. For Martine, and others like her, the stories which tell of a non-white, non-English Singaporean history are more tenuous precisely because they have no physical place in the city. Their place, in nature and the wilderness, has been made liminal: existing only on the diminishing peripheries of Singaporean city-life.

## 6. Singapore the City

### 6.1. Singapore as anywhere, Singapore as nowhere: pitfalls of a global city

Since its independence from Malaysia in 1965 (Turnbull, 2009, p.1), Singapore has clearly showcased a desire to be considered a global city. On the URA website, for example, plans for the city are described as being motivated by a desire to be “world-class”, while the various revisions of the master plan are framed as accounting for “changes in local and global trends,” and ensuring that the “plans remain relevant to address future challenges and meet the needs of Singaporeans” (URA, 2024). Each of my informants directly reflected on Singapore’s role as a global city, often couched in terms of Singapore’s significance as an international centre of business and finance. Both international and local informants were quick to identify Singapore’s appeal in terms of its role in the financial world, often tying international consumption of the city through travel to business interests. Interestingly, this reflection was also prominent in their descriptions of the physical structure of the city, such as the central business district (CBD). The CBD was one area which interviewees consistently pointed to as distinct from the rest of Singapore, often citing the lack of locals living in the area as a reason for its separation. Further, many interviewees identified the global architectural styles and landscapes in this part of the city as isolating it from the rest of Singapore: the combination of high rise buildings, expensive condos, English-heritage buildings and tourist landmarks dissociating this area from the everyday lived experiences of the city for locals (Lee & Yeoh, 2004, p.6).

The overt state efforts to reproduce Singapore as a global city are not always met with positive internal reception. While it may be economically advantageous to present Singapore as an international city with international mores, for the inhabitants of the city, and even for guests, this internationalism can come at the loss of local identity and uniqueness. One informant, Ceres, reflected on this globalisation/generalisation complex from the outset of our interview:

...I didn’t have any super big, like, ‘wow, this is so different [moments]’...I feel like I get jaded to cities; when I go to them I think this is just another city on my roster”

In Ceres’ experience, the more ‘global’ a city was, the less its environment spoke to the cultural uniqueness of its people: and in some cases even led to the direct erasure of local identities. This idea was not unique among the interview respondents. Many interviewees, and especially Singaporean residents, expressed disappointment that there were not more cultural heritage buildings in the city. For some, this idea was expressed through blunt statements such as “Singapore has no history”, while others were more

nuanced in their reflections. Martine reflected on the oral nature of Singapore's history and the way that this history, in failing to find a concrete emplacement in the city's architecture, was slowly beginning to erode with new, globalised generations of the city's population.

The development of many city sites across Singapore has led to an increase in 'global' architectures such as those described by my local interviewees, but there were additional sites of global architecture identified by my international respondents. According to a number of my interlocutors, these locations – the airspace café, the shared work offices, the 18sqft apartments – were reminiscent of the architecture and arrangements of cities all over the world, and therefore diminished Singapore's local sense of place in favour of global tastes. More specifically, each of my interlocutors directly identified places which, in their experience, erased local aspects of Singapore's identity. The trendy restaurants and cafes, for example, built in stylised, indoor locations, where young adults in the city go to drink expensive coffee and spend time with friends, were seen by a number of my interlocutors as directly impacting the erosion of Singaporean place. There was nuance between the description of these places by Singaporean and international respondents. The increase in global architectures in the city led international visitors to locate more of its authenticity in nature: and specifically in multisensory experiences such as climate. By contrast, while all my interlocutors labelled non-places such as global coffee shops and restaurants as 'overpriced' (or for those from American capitals, 'the same as home') for Singaporeans, the reason for this added cost was acknowledged: the experience of sitting at the location, for leisure, in the air-conditioning, is additional product sold by these upmarket locales. To this end, it was logical to many of my Singaporean participants that the use and consumption of these places should come at a higher cost than alternatives: since they were offering different services. In short, Singaporean interlocutors were aware that they were *paying for the consumption of place*.

In addition, a few of the Singaporean participants commented on the evolving role of these locations in the city – specifically in regards to social status and performativity. According to these interlocutors, certain kinds of 'trendy' locations offered an avenue for different Singaporean youth to stake claims to certain kinds of identities. Places popular for the social elite, for example, for young businessmen or bankers, were differentiated from those for 'normal' Singaporean young adults through aesthetics and placemaking. Interviewees described these places as "Westernised", "elite" and even "boring". Likewise, taking photographs while socialising at certain restaurants was described by some interviewees as a way of showing your overall status as a wealthy young person, or at the least, to show that you were conscious of the trendy places to be – culturally discerning and globally connected.

Not all of the ‘unplaced’ sites in Singapore were marked out for the elite, however; shopping malls and centres of commerce were also identified by my interviewees as key unplaced areas. Shopping malls in particular were a subject of discussion in the interviews. A number of interlocutors described the way that Singaporean shopping malls had changed in recent years. Bea, Yasmin and Gemma, for example, each noted the ways in which malls are becoming more homogenous over the island. “I feel like when I was young you could go into the mall and look for what you wanted in all these little shops- now it’s just the same shops in every mall.” Said Bea. Her sentiment was echoed by Yasmin: “You know there’ll be a H&M and garden space, and a cafeteria.” For these young Singaporean women, these stores, moving in at the expense of smaller boutiques owned by independent sellers, limited the choices of young Singaporeans and had an overt impact on their tastes, and the matching format of each commercial space minimised the opportunities for individuality. This was a sentiment echoed by Mandy in her description of the differences between Singapore and other Southeast Asian city capitals. Mandy, in referencing Singapore’s neighbouring city Johor Bahru (JB) stressed the opportunity and individuality of young entrepreneurs in JB, when compared with Singapore.

[In JB] cafes would be more artsy, where in Singapore, businesses often do not take risks to be different. It's often the same things, or there are a lot of chains, where in Malaysia, even only in JB you can see a lot more individual endeavours - in terms of like ‘I want to open a cafe, and I want to have this theme’ and they go more ‘all-in’ in terms of the theme, the decoration or the food. They try different things... are more unique.

This difference was noted by a number of others too, who stressed the limitations of this ‘safe’ approach that local business people had to developing new sites in Singapore in developing a contemporary local sense of culture. One respondent referenced this lack of space for local engagement through the example of art and artmaking: commenting on the irony of the state offering “designated” spaces in the city where young people could go to practise graffiti: a traditional artform of resistance (Miladi, 2018, p.241). The tendency towards uniformity, driven by commercial safety, and government regulation, was perceived by interviewees as not just limiting consumer choice but also suppressing the growth of a unique and vibrant local culture in Singapore.

Indeed, the increased homogeneity of this marketplace, reflective perhaps of the increased homogeneity of the global marketplace, was given special significance by a number of participants in relation to the future for young Singaporeans. The limited spaces for youth in the city were being increasingly eroded by the development of such sites, creating a cycle in which the youth demographic, with decreasing space for their use in the city, increasingly spent time in places like malls and cafes, rather than in other indoor or



non-commercial locales. In turn, their use of commercial centres as key areas of socialisation is recorded by the state, which then prioritises the creation of more sites such as these for young Singaporeans to use. This was a concern for the older youth generation, who had seen the rise of this cycle of consumption in place, but who were still old enough to remember times when Singapore offered its youth a variety of spaces on the island which were not explicitly geared toward commercial consumption, nor indeed, which were paid to enter, such as leisure centres or sports facilities.

## 6.2. Singapore in the future

The status of Singapore as a global city sustains a contemporary sense of self in its local inhabitants, and ensures them access to global networks of power. However, this title offers its inhabitants little if it cannot be sustained in future. For this reason, the production of a sustained, imagined future in which Singapore continues to participate in international networks as a ‘global city’ is essential to the continued imagination of Singapore as a place. Imagining the future, collectively, is vital in shaping the local identity and place of Singapore today. When Lee Kwan Yew took office in Singapore’s very first post-independence government the future he and his party imagined was for an island which imagined itself as a whole and multiethnic, modern nation (Chua, 2002, p.5). Today, Singapore still exercises this imagined future in order to guide and structure its local identity, albeit with revisions which directly address global insecurities. The crisis of climate change, for example, poses an existential threat to young Singaporeans: especially because Singapore as a nation-state is so resource-poor. As a consequence, Singapore relies on trade with its neighbours to ensure its sustenance and future success. The vision of Singapore as a “green” city, then, with vegetation, sustainable energy practices and potential future resource management, is pivotal in assuaging this existential anxiety. Likewise, concerns of an AI or technologically dominated future are incorporated into Singapore's future-vision by imagining it as a “smart” city, in which technology is integrated seamlessly into human life. By developing a future imaginary which responds directly, or indirectly, to ontological insecurities held by young Singaporeans, both government and non-government actors in the city stake claims around what it means to be Singaporean, and how the local Singaporean identity may continue to be supported even in the unsteady and unknown conditions of the future.

Urban planning, landscaping and design may each be seen as pathways to future cities. These processes are bridges which connect a totally imagined – and essentially fictitious – future to the lived and embodied everyday reality. Through planning materials such as illustrations, digital mock-ups and even

descriptive text and educational pieces, the imagined future of the city is connected to the lived experience of contemporary Singapore, and the future of the city becomes less dreamlike, and more tangible. These two pieces are equally integral to the construction of future, and by association, the contemporary identity of Singapore. Just as these plans are meaningless without a collectively imagined future, so too are these imagined futures meaningless without a connection to the present: a connection which places them in the realm of the *possible*. In the case of Singapore, with its particular model of “illiberal” democracy (Mutalib, 2000, p.313), the state is the primary arbitrator of these plans and the imagined futures to which they lead. Nevertheless, even if the state safeguards the authority of this planning, it is still not possible for the state to be the sole arbitrator of place in the city. Place is lived and embodied, and therefore, it is the local inhabitants of the city who are the ultimate authority on creating authentic place in Singapore.

The state may craft strategic plans for the city, but it does also afford *some* agency to city stakeholders, such as individuals and businesses, in contributing to the imagined futures of Singapore – inasmuch as they are able to do so without relinquishing their oversight and control of the greater plan for the city. This extension of choice – choices offered within the overall ‘master’ plan for Singapore’s land use, is not only visible through the more practical aspects of design and planning, but also in the act of collectively dreaming the future of Singapore, too. Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority’s webpage offers several concrete examples of this, including several callouts offered biannually to participate in challenges and competitions to design various aspects of Singapore’s development (URA, 2024). There are examples of this in the leadup to the 2024 redesign of the master plan, however, a more complete example can be seen in the pages of the 2022 “Space for Our Dreams” exhibition (URA, 2024). Through the exhibition itself, as well as its digital presentation, the URA page invites non-government actors to be included in the state-structured ‘dreaming’ to a Singaporean future, thereby ensuring its continued governance of the project, and attempting to limit resistance through performative inclusion.

The “Space for Our Dreams” page is lively with colourful photographs which blend architect’s illustrations of the planned developments seamlessly with real photographs of various existing communities and structures in Singapore (see fig 6). In presenting these images equally, and sequentially, throughout the page, the site blurs the line between the imagined future of the city and its current, successful reality; inspiring confidence in the planning process, and in the state’s ability to realise the promises dreamed in project plans and documents. Even the first image, a colour-coded map of the city, is bright and vibrant. Throughout each iteration, and the text describing it on the page, the URA site places a consistent focus on the plan’s role in “ensuring a high quality living environment for all Singaporeans” (URA 2024).

The imagery of the URA “Space for Our Dreams” site is underpinned by the text for the site. On the main page, key headlines lay out the primary themes according to which the plan has been designed. They are as follows: “Live: Well and Together”, “Work: Anywhere and Everywhere”, “Play: Healthy and Happy”, “Move: Efficient and Connected”, “Cherish: Distinctive and Loveable”, “Steward: The Green and Blue”, “Sustain: Low Carbon and Resilient”, and “Paya Lebar Air Base: The Next Flight”. Each of these titles use a kind of pathos to call action and inspiration into the imagined future of the city – with the exception perhaps of the final title, which is more pragmatic than the others in scope. By reducing the language of the plan to these keywords, the plan is able to communicate its main aims clearly and quickly to a large audience. The text of the site in this way almost mimics Singlish, the English-based creole language of

Singapore, in its straight-forward sparse construction of sentences (Hseih et. al., 2022, p.115-116). Singlish is largely a spoken language and is considered informal and not usually appropriate for use by government or official communiques (Tan, 2017, p.85). Yet in the multicultural, and more importantly multi-linguistic environment of Singapore – which gave rise to the dialect in and of itself – also necessitates that effective communications from government bodies uses short, impactful words to describe their mission: so that they can be easily understood and picked up by the various non-English speaking communities of

## Space for Our Dreams Exhibition

Following the year-long public engagement, we launched an exhibition for the Long-Term Plan Review titled “Space for Our Dreams”. Explore the long-term plans and possibilities charting Singapore’s future.

**Overview**

**Live: Well and Together**

- More Homes for New Needs and Aspirations >
- Future-Ready Towns >
- Inclusive and Close-Knit Towns >

**Work: Anywhere and Everywhere**

- Attractive Job Nodes >
- A Future-Ready Economy >
- Flexible Spaces for Innovation and New Needs >

**Play: Healthy and Happy**

- More Recreation Closer to Homes >
- A Playful City for All >
- An Island of Green, Blue and Fun >

Figure 6. Screenshot of the URA ‘Space for our Dreams’ page

Singapore (Hseih et. al., 2022, p.115-116). These keywords thus help to lay the groundwork for the more extensive descriptions found within each of these sites: providing an overview which is filled in by more detailed descriptions of how different aspects of the plan seek to fill different community needs. In this way, the site is able to present a variety of detailed schematics clearly and carefully, without risking that by doing so, the audience will lose sight of the bigger (and much more appealing) discourse surrounding Singapore's future.

Each of the sub-pages on the URA site, introduced by titles, also serve to make more palatable some of the very critical concerns for Singapore's future. For example, under the banner "Live: well and together" the site addresses in parallel, concerns for the continued standard of living in Singapore, the challenges posed to the state by its ageing population, and the loss of tradition and heritage – in the form of communal ideology. Throughout Singapore's modernisation, independent, rather than community living has been increasingly popular, a concern among older generations of Singaporeans. By framing living well and living together under the same title, the site orients the two as mutually dependent. Likewise, under the title "Steward: The Green and Blue" anxieties surrounding the limited natural capital of Singapore and the ways in which climate change may threaten the city and its inhabitants are directly addressed through a variety of 'green' or natural solutions, each presented as the solution to a specific problem surrounding climate change. As with the challenges presented by the ageing population of Singapore, these environmental challenges are presented in the positive: a closed, solutions-oriented discourse which frames the plan as being more than equal to the challenge of ensuring a prosperous future for the country.

### **6.3. Singapore: a smart city, a safe city**

There are a plethora of key terms used in the body of texts addressing Singapore's future which, collected from a business lexicon, speak to the promise of future prosperity through technological advancement. For example, statements on the URA website advertise how the long-term plans of Singapore have been (and still are) designed to "facilitate growth", "promote the exchange of ideas and innovation". In interviews, a number of participants reflected on technology as an inbuilt aspect of Singapore's city structures, often in the context of accessibility, and in discussing the ways in which Singapore's excellent public transport and system processes worked by virtue of technological excellence. This excellence was often also a main point of comparison between Singapore and neighbouring cities in the region, such as Johor Bahru in Malaysia, or even other cities in Thailand or Vietnam. Technological competence, and

futuristic, accessible city infrastructure were part of what set Singapore apart as a local global city. Although, by the same token, a couple of interviewees referenced Shanghai or Tokyo as regional players which had an even more developed and ‘futuristic’ cityscape. For both of these interlocutors, who had experience travelling in both of these cities, Shanghai and Tokyo leaned more into the privatised use of technology in space: one interlocutor, for example, gave an example of the robotic food delivery systems she encountered in hotels on a business trip to Shanghai, while another pointed to the use of technology in other East-Asian cities to engender not only good access but futuristic service. Singapore was seen by my interviewees as being technologically competent, and driven, but not wholly futuristic. The “smart” city image that Singapore offered was instead one which was functional, and increased comfort in the lives of its inhabitants, while at the same time promoting ecological practice and physical and mental wellbeing. In this respect, the state has been incredibly successful in engendering comfort and access to its citizens: who all commented on the availability of public transport, suitable housing and green spaces for public citizens.

In conjunction with the accessibility of Singapore as a smart city, many respondents in the interviews addressed the idea of Singapore as a very safe city. “Clean and safe” one Singaporean respondent joked, when asked to describe the city, “I feel like that’s what we are all taught to say”. Whether or not safety was not something that they directly challenged throughout their day-to-day life, or experiences in the city, this consistent reiteration of Singapore’s safety was enthused by each of my interlocutors. When Ceres, as a black non-binary person from New York, discussed their experiences in the city, they stressed the importance of ‘getting lost’ in the experience of exploring a new city for the first time, and particularly as a practice which encouraged real and authentic connections with different local groups within the city. In telling me a story of how they found themselves semi-lost in an obscure neighbourhood of Singapore, toward the evening, I asked more directly about their sense of security. Their response was clear: no, they were not afraid in any way for their safety. Ceres was more reflective, on this subject, however, after discussing the difference in attitude through different neighbourhoods in different cities. They confirmed that while they did not feel unsafe in Singapore, nor did they feel unsafe in many of the immigrant neighbourhoods of New York – a feeling of social trust which they attributed to coming from a Latin cultural background, which values social interactions and community mentalities.

For Ceres, although there was always the potential for danger in their home neighbourhood of Brooklyn, this danger was presented first and foremost through social issues such as drug-use and the free access of weapons, rather than particular social groups. By contrast, in Singapore, where crime is much more strictly punishable and weapons not as easily accessed, Ceres commented that they felt more concerned that they would be ‘butting in’ on someone else’s local neighbourhood life and be asked to leave, rather

than feeling unsafe. This experience was one which Ceres articulated differently to their experience in Bangkok, where they said there was, due to the lack of access, more chance of being stranded at an inconvenient time or unsafe location in the city. For Ceres personally, the feeling of isolation in Singapore was less about physical access or safety, and more about social disconnection. They directly compared the experience of being in Bangkok with the experience of being in Singapore according to the interaction with local people.

I think people [in Singapore] just are down to business. They're like, I'm going home. I have to work. I think that's what I could feel: the work culture. Like, I think that the people I interacted with... work just got mentioned, school got mentioned... regardless. Versus Bangkok people were like "so like, this fruit is really good. Glad we got this good fruit this season- you know there's a really cool place down the block. If you want to go..." I feel like people were like, "oh, you should try this thing." Like, "this is something that I like", or "this is like my family's recipe", like one of the woman that I met at the Loy Krathong festival. She was like, "oh, like we should go meet my friend because she makes a really good curry!" And she just, like, walked me down the block. I'm just following this woman down this dark block to go meet her friend who made some curry... and that curry was *mad*. It was *so* good.

While it was potentially risky to follow a stranger promising food, Ceres said that in their experience, it was possible to read the nature of an interaction and experience based on the 'vibes' and they did not feel threatened in this circumstance. If anything, the alienation from neighbourhoods in Singapore was more unsettling, as although people were friendly, Ceres felt that there was a reluctance to act on the curiosity of seeing a genuine tourist in the neighbourhood, and less desire to connect culturally with newcomers.

Safety was regarded as a key attribute of Singapore for many other interviewees as well. Many stressed the unanimity of descriptions of Singapore as a safe city, and associated this safety with the heavily-rules-based society, strict legal punishments for criminals and the clean and well-serviced public facilities such as transport and housing. All the local Singaporean interviewees touched on the changing nature of Singapore, and reflected on the changes to safety practices in the city since their grandparents and even grandparents' generations. For a number of interviewees, the collectivist and communal attitudes which had prevailed during their parents and grandparents time were waning in contemporary Singapore in favour of more individualist social norms. Indirectly, the communality of public life was linked to the overall safety of Singapore as a city. Directly, this collectivism was linked to use of space. Many interviewees discussed the role of government housing in developing a culture of community and neighbourliness. A number of interviewees expressed pride in the community of older Singaporeans, who continue to use the communal spaces under public apartments to play mahjong or other traditional games, or even just to drink beer together. One respondent commented on the 'openness' of living in these

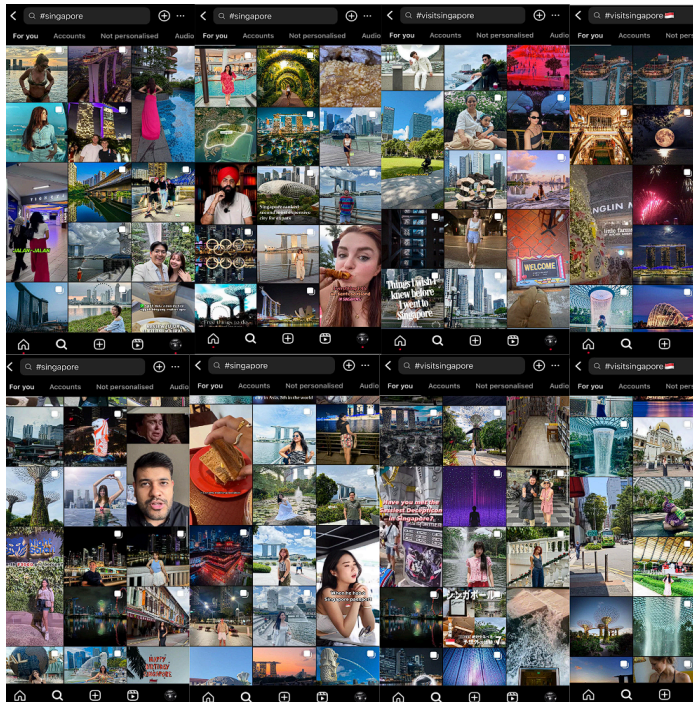
communities had even changed in her living memory; that the HDB's (government housing) had been more open, literally, in that people would not lock their doors, and neighbours would often drop in to one another's apartments to help out with specific tasks or even just to chat. Although these practices were no-longer embodied in the city, their absence was more evocative for local respondents as a lack of shared cultural values, rather reduced safety. Since previous generations belonged to a collective culture, the move toward a future without this collective identity was a specific concern to many of my interlocutors – who felt that Singapore's identity was both physically and culturally located in collectivism.

#### 6.4. Singapore: a green city, a clean city

Given the tropical landscape from which Singapore was built, and the continued impact of this landscape on the climate and infrastructure of Singapore today, a lot of the material which markets Singapore globally focuses on its image as a “green” or “garden” city. This epithet is descriptive in the literal sense: in that it encapsulates the many ways in which Singapore seeks to integrate greenery and plant-life into its urban and built environment, but also in its allusion to Singapore's more recent plans and efforts to make itself an environmentally sustainable city. Digital ethnographic research of Singapore online, on video and image sharing platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok, showcase Singapore as a lush and vivid urban landscape (see fig 7.)

This image is deliberately perpetuated by the Singaporean state online: perhaps best typified through recent tourist development projects, such as the Changi airport ‘Jewel’ a 130 ft waterfall (the tallest indoor waterfall in the world) and greenery park in the middle of Singapore airport, as well as the Marina Gardens by the Bay: a man-made park of giant ‘trees’ which define the Singapore coastline (Yeoh, 2018, p.137). These landmarks dominate the tourist, and social media, depictions of Singapore online, and

influence visitors to the city into believing that they are essential depictions of Singaporeanness.



*Figure 7. Screenshots from top Instagram hashtags for Singapore*

This density of greenery within the urban structure of Singapore was a primary finding in the interviews as well. Almost all of the respondents referenced Singapore as a “clean and green” city, especially the residents of Singapore who had been raised in the country. International visitors commented directly on the “green infrastructure” of Singapore: made particularly visible in sustainable and nature-based architectural wonders such as the Gardens by the Bay, and the Changi airport jewel. One respondent, whose background was in urban design and planning, referenced the Singaporean laws designed to protect overdevelopment, stating “they have a law there, if you develop on a certain patch of land, then you have to be sure to replace the exact density of greenery you develop- that's why there are so many green rooftops and gardens etc.”. While almost all respondents commented on the greenery which made up such an important part of the city and its image, few respondents considered this greenery ‘nature’: on account of

on account of



its ‘manufactured-ness’. This is not to say that this kind of greening practice was received negatively by the main body of my respondents. Quite the contrary, the greening of Singapore was seen in a positive light by almost all my respondents, and a few even acknowledged additional ‘positives’ to this greening, like Martine, for example, who noted the creativity and artistic expression which was involved in placemaking a greener city. There were a few exceptions to this trend. One interlocutor, for example, referenced Sentosa Island’s beaches as a natural aspect of the Singaporean coast: unaware that this coast was man-made. She was corrected by a friend in the same room. Similarly, a number of other respondents discussed Singapore’s natural land reserves as being ‘real’ nature, so long as it was in the context of untouched land outside of the city proper. Greenery which was contextualised through planning and development, such as potted plants, trees planted in the median strip, and community parks and gardens, were not considered as true nature spaces, since they were not natural, but derived from the direct decisions and execution of man.

An important focus emphasised in the URA’s long-term plan is not only the protection of different habitats and wild areas in Singapore, but also the connection of these sites to one another through ‘corridors’ (see fig 5). This process is defined by the URA as “de-fragmenting” Singaporean habitats; which have been isolated from one another over the development of Singapore’s different areas. Using simple illustrations to help visualise the text’s main content, the “Stewardship of Natural Capital” page differentiates between five categorisations of green spaces in the city: 1. scrubland/grassland, 2. urban vegetation, 3. exotic-dominated vegetation, 4. native-dominated old secondary forest, and 5. primary forest (URA, 2024). These ecological nature spaces are different again from what the plan presents as “multi-functional green and blue spaces” which are nature places the plan envisions as being with community use – for example through recreation and leisure activities (URA, 2024). These green and blue spaces include nature parks, parks and recreational routes (such as pathways and walks between different nature-park areas). On the whole, these green and blue spaces are visualised by the long-term plan as more urban than the five categorised nature spaces.

Another visually and culturally distinctive attribute of Singapore, as identified by interviewees was its cleanliness: especially in relation to other cities in Asia. Both Singaporean residents and temporary visitors were quick to identify Singapore as a clean city: one respondent even explained that when she first moved to the city, locals would tell her it was “so clean that you could eat off the metro floor”. Cleanliness is seen by Singaporeans and internationals as reflective of Singaporean efficiency and success. Being able to maintain a high degree of cleanliness, not only in private areas such as apartment buildings, shopping centres or hotels, but also in public centres like metro stations, is indicative of the collective success of Singaporeans as respectable, clean, and respectful citizens. This cleanliness was

frequently juxtaposed in interviews with comparisons to other regional cities. In my own fieldwork experiences, my gatekeepers warned me particularly about the decrease in sanitation when we crossed the border to Johor Bahru for the day. This depiction is in no small part influenced by Singapore's colonial history: a reflection, at least partly, of English colonial doctrine which taught hygiene as a kind of religious practice and ethnic division (Tiffin, 2001, p.41-42). To some extent, it appears that certain modes of colonial discrimination have been incorporated into contemporary Singaporean identity discourses: characteristics that the colonial state valued, at which the Singaporean city now excels. In this way, the city Singapore can be seen as the gold-star student of its own dreams: achieving the very best results in its self-imposed exam for international palatability. The emphasis on cleanliness not only reinforces Singapore's image as a modern, efficient state but also continues to shape the expectations and identity of its people, driving them toward a vision of 'success' as recognised on the global stage.

## 7. Singapore as an Authentic Place

### 7.1. Sanitisation and sterilisation: culture as dirt?

In the first instance, the cleanliness of Singapore as a city was remarked on by both visitors and locals alike as one of the hallmarks of the local area. This cleanliness was taken to be a positive attribute of the city's local and international identity, and offers many advantages to its inhabitants in terms of health, comfort and access. Locals were proud to come from a place where cultural pride was enacted through the keeping clean of Singaporean streets and public venues, although this pride was often expressed, through interview, through association rather than through outright praise. International visitors to the city were on the whole more overt in their praise for Singapore's cleanliness. One respondent commented that the arrival in Singapore was a 'welcome relief' after spending the previous night in the Manila airport. However, beyond the surface-level assumptions of cleanliness as a positive social attribute, there was an interesting observation to be made about the knock-on effects this cleanliness had for both local and international interpretations of Singaporean culture as a whole. Most telling, perhaps, was the comment made by one interlocutor when asked how to identify 'more authentic' Singaporean places. "Honestly," She replied, "I just look for somewhere with more dirt — not somewhere dirty — but somewhere less clean. Not as tourist-clean." Cleanliness, as sanitisation, was a form of erasure for many of my interlocutors, both Singaporean and international. There was something a little disconcerting about the

degree of cleanliness for some of my interviewees, especially those from other global cities, who were accustomed to associating the population density of city life with, well, dirt.

The immense cleanliness of Singapore, for both visitors and locals, made some areas of the city feel inauthentic: prepared for consumption in a way which was incompatible with daily life. The preparation of space, for consumption, made certain areas of the city (especially the more tourist-oriented ones) feel superficial, performative, or temporary. Partly, perhaps, this feeling in local Singaporeans is connected to the lack of clear distinction between tourist and non-tourist areas of the city. As one informant, Max, explained to me:

There is touristy locations which I wouldn't go for almost a whole year. Only like once a year. That will be like Orchard Road. Yeah. Where else? Sentosa is a bit touristy. But then again, it's like Singaporeans go there to have fun, so yeah. Like for one good example of a tourist location where locals would go would really be the airport. We would just go there for dinners, we can go there for movies, we can go there for shopping of clothes and hypermarkets - supermarkets. Yeah. There is no clear distinction. It's not really a tourist location.

For local inhabitants like Max, local places are being increasingly conjoined in global-facing tourist places, leading to a consequent blurring of the lines between foreign and local consumers of Singaporean culture. However, as these externally-oriented places in Singapore show, the encroachment of global sensibilities on Singaporean place have situated Singapore in a kind of everywhere-nowhere limbo. The very processes and built environs which shape Singapore into this culturally hegemonic, sanitised space are the architectures which erase its cultural specificity. If it is the airspace café, the shared work offices, the 18sqft apartments and the endless shopping centres which make Singapore a non-place, it is especially through their uniform aesthetics, bright, time-erasing lighting and palatable cleanliness that they achieve this erasing effect.

## 7.2. Nature as food and food as culture

Academically, there is a strong connection drawn between nature and food, especially when food is considered in the context of 'traditional' or cultural dishes (FitzSimmons & Goodman, 1998, p.193-194). Singaporean attitudes to food is also conceptualised in this way by its inhabitants, especially by locals. Almost all the interview respondents referenced the Singaporean hawkers centres as the most culturally significant and most authentic places in Singapore. Some interviewees mentioned particular hawker's

centres which they avoided visiting due to over-touristification: Lau Pa Sat, for example, one of the oldest Hawkers centre in Singapore, or Newton food centre, which was featured in the feature film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and has consequently raised its prices for the tourist market (Henderson et. al. 2012, p.849). However, due to the multi-sited nature of hawkers centres in the city, the popularisation of the hawkers centre as a typically Singaporean place is not enough to supersede local consumption of the site. Hawkers centres remain primarily emplaced in everyday Singaporean life, and in their ability to collectivise the diverse food traditions of Singapore's different ethnic groups, operate as a key place of cultural production in the city.

In Singapore, where nature and food are both purchased for consumption from 'Othered' neighbours and not from the island itself, food is a symbol of shared identity across ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Singapore and its inhabitants see its food as imported both literally, as resource scarcity, and figuratively through the imagination of the city as a blend of cultures (especially through foods) which come from different localities, and ergo different environments (seen through food). Martine gave an example from her youth, when a teacher in social studies class was introducing the concept of multiculturalism in Singapore using an analogy to food. In her retelling, the teacher used the analogy of a 'melting pot' and 'salad' to describe the two ways in which multi-ethnic or multicultural societies can operate. In the former, the various ethnic and cultural traditions of different groups are brought together and blended to create one, harmonious, new cultural 'melting pot'. In the latter, different ethnic groups remain culturally distinct, and each group brings something to contribute to society as a larger whole. In the anecdote, however, Singapore was ultimately characterised by the class as neither a true 'salad' nor 'melting-pot' society, but rather was more like rojak: a traditional Singaporean dish of mixed vegetables and fruits, drizzled with a sweet and sour sauce made of prawn paste, lime, peanut and palm sugar (Singapore Infopedia, 2024). In Malay, rojak literally translates to 'mixed'; and in Singapore, just as in the example made by the anecdote, the dish is often seen as representative of Singapore's blended culture itself (loc. cit.). For Martine and her young class, the crux of Singaporeanness was not located in the dish of rojak itself, but in the sauce. However, even in recounting the rojak anecdote as an adult, Martine struggled to articulate what 'the sauce' symbolised in contemporary Singaporean culture.

In particular, food is seen to be symbolic of the four primary ethnic groups of Singapore, and the collectivisation of food consumption, in the hawkers centres across Singapore, is seen as one of the most authentic, embodied experiences of Singaporean culture. All of my interlocutors referenced the centrality of hawkers centres to Singapore and its identity, to varying degrees. The sentiments were expressed most succinctly by Gemma, stating "...food is what connects us across different ethnicities, regardless of race, language or religion- that kind of thing." For Gemma, eating "any local food" counted as participation in

this connection, so long as individuals went to order from the “aunties and uncles” at the stalls, ate “off the plastic tray”, with the “fans whirring” and “sweating onto the plastic chairs”. In short, the conditions for practising Singapore were not in fact defined by the kind of local food being eaten, or even the eating of local food itself, but rather, the emplacement of this activity: the shared experience of consuming the hawkers centre itself. In the collectivisation of food, Singapore can be seen as typical of a multicultural society – which identifies separate cultural groups and traditions in the city, and groups them as independent contributors to Singaporean society as a whole (Lian, 2016, p.23). Food, then, just as Gemma articulates, is a key arbitrator of cultural background. Food, like Singaporean citizens, has a definitive and distinct cultural or ethnic identity. Food, in a way, is divisive. Yet, by the same token, the practice of eating food together, as a neighbourhood, in the local, communal space of the hawkers centres, is a symbolic overcoming of the cultural difference which would otherwise see Singaporeans eating ‘their’ traditional cuisine in private family spaces such as the home. Instead, all of the traditional foods of Singapore are open to be enjoyed in an authentic way by all of the ethnic and cultural groups which constitute Singapore’s demography. Place is essential to the process of being Singaporean, since it is the place of hawkers centres which make possible the combining and collectivisation which characterises contemporary Singapore to its inhabitants.

International interlocutors were equally sensible to the importance of hawkers centres as authentic local spaces. All of my international respondents who were visiting the city for just a short time referenced their many trips to eat at Hawkers centres as one of the most ‘authentic’ and important experiences in the city. For them, the atmosphere of hawkers centres was different from other areas of the city. The hawkers centres, although still clean, safe and sanitary places, were not as polished as other places in the city, and were often situated in unairconditioned outdoor areas which were more uncomfortable than their indoor food-court counterparts. A number of interlocutors also described this estrangement as an auditory experience of place: through language and sound. The blended Singlish of hawkers markets is especially pronounced, and at least one interviewee described the difficulty in ordering from ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ at different stalls since these older-generation Singaporean residents do not always speak English. This discomfort, and strangeness, however, seemed to serve to produce a more authentic sense of place to the eyes of foreign interlocutors. Since its specificity as something different, or unrecognisable, to their own global sensibilities was precisely what the hawkers centre environment offered to them as a locally specific, unique experience.

### 7.3. Authority vs. authenticity

How Singapore as a state creates and sustains an imaginary of itself online, and in real life, is not tantamount to its reception. The inability to produce a real and believable image of itself, either through its built environment or other sites of cultural production, often leads to complaints of the site being “inauthentic” or “fake”. Perceptions of authenticity, in this way, can be seen as a helpful tool in measuring the success of the Singaporean state, and other agents of the city, in producing a local identity for local and global consumption. From the outset, many interview respondents were dubious about the concept of heritage conservation in Singapore. Aside from claims that Singapore had no direct urban heritage in the form of buildings, there were also comments from a number of different respondents which reflected the Europeanised nature of what few historic buildings did exist in the city: a colonial footprint which was not reflective of the cultural background of the different ethnic traditions of contemporary Singapore. For some international and local respondents, parts of the Singapore city resembled other European capitals, such as London or even Germany. For others, the preservation of Singapore’s heritage buildings was commendable, but disproportionate in reflecting European urban history at the expense of a more multicultural one. Non-western heritage sites, such as Kampong Glam or the Sri Mariamman Temple, were not only historic architectures: they were still in use, suggesting almost that only Western Singaporean values had progressed over time in the city. For other interlocutors, it was the superficiality of the preservation of non-Western heritage sites which misrepresented the city. By keeping only the basic structure of such sites, such as the houses of Tanjong Katong, and retrofitting them with modern facilities and appliances, these interlocutors worried that there was no substance to the conservation of these buildings. Instead, conservation of these heritage sites operated more for their aesthetic quality, rather than to preserve a way of life, or a history of Singapore which would endorse the uniqueness of its local identity.

Authority plays an important role in the development of Singapore’s local identity across the board. As a semi-democratic state, Singapore’s government is the single most powerful actor in designing and executing the long-term plan for land use in the city. By creating various government bodies designed with the sole purpose of arbitrating and producing Singaporean places, the state produces the idea of a multi-stakeholder commitment to building and advertising Singapore as a whole and functioning place-identity. Local interlocutors were cognisant of the monopoly of the state in Singapore, although were all quick to distance the city from visions of despotic, dictatorial leaders. Most settled for descriptions of the state as “not exactly a democracy,” one referred to Singapore as a “controlled democracy.” One of the most outspoken interviewees prefaced their opinions jokingly saying “I have such

big opinions about the government...please don't kill me. If I disappear you'll know who took me.” Comments such as these illuminated the importance of anonymising my participants in this research, and demonstrate the extent to which critical perspectives of the government are not tolerated in Singapore, despite its outwardly liberal image.

In lieu of being able to build organic relationships to the environment or landscape of the city itself, many of my local interlocutors referenced a relationship to friends as family as the single defining trait of Singaporeanness. For many, if not all, cultural identity failed to find a comfortable emplacement in the city, even if the city was a natural and desirable location for these identities. As a consequence, values of selfhood and the city were frequently discursively separated, and the identity of Singapore the city was often described in terms which had no deeper meaning than the casual, nationalised aphorisms through which they were expressed. (i.e. Singapore as “clean and green”, Singapore is a “safe city”, Singapore is “very accessible”, especially the metro, Singapore is very efficient, Singapore is fast-paced.). One respondent, Ceres, talked about the kind of ‘brainwashing’ which Singaporean citizens seemed to be prone to during their education and upbringing, “It’s very: ‘There is no war in Ba Sing Se’” Ceres joked, a reference to American TV show *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (2005) in which a young rebel is imprisoned by clandestine state actors to be ‘reprogrammed’ from resistance to compliance with city-state discourse. The joke references the ways in which Singaporean locals often repeat the same or similar catch phrases when talking about the city to foreigners: a homogeneity which suggests training, inauthenticity, or else discomfort or inability to criticise or challenge the official state narrative of Singaporeanness.

Singaporean residents themselves, as interlocutors, were both more and less forthright in their description of the same topics. A number of interlocutors discussed the ‘sheeplike’ mentality of Singaporean citizens, and many stressed the strong educational training which led students and young people to follow a strong cultural contract for social and cultural behaviours. Some reflected directly on the ways in which resistance, or even milder forms of government criticism can be shut-down by Singaporean authorities. “We often say that Singapore is a fine country” one interlocutor explained to me – a play on the double meaning of the word fine as both ‘okay’ and as a monetary penalty for wrongdoing. By imposing harsh consequences on milder forms of everyday resistance, and exercising additional control over everyday life, the Singaporean state is able to ensure that the long-term plan for Singaporean land-use is strictly adhered to by its local residents. It is not only through the formation and execution of strong punishments that the Singaporean state maintains a firm control over land use and placemaking in Singapore, however. Primarily, interviewees commented on the use of permits as a means to ensure that different spaces and areas around the city were being used appropriately by various community groups. Yasmin, for example, noted that buskers and other street musicians, as well as artists who wanted to hold pop-up stalls along

streets or in public walkways, each needed a permit in order to do so around Singapore's busy areas. For Yasmin, it was nice, in some ways, that potential buskers were essentially vetted by the city: ensuring a high quality of music being performed in public areas. However, by the same token, she lamented the lack of opportunities for young Singaporeans to be creative and take risks, noting that the abundance of permit-culture was also what prevented areas like Clarke Quay from developing a unique local identity, like the ones which have developed in other global city neighbourhoods, such as on the banks of the Thames in London, or the banks of the Seine in Paris. Important to note, here is that Yasmin's examples, both European, were offered as suggestions for the ways in which Singapore should emulate, and produce, its own local environment. Rather, these examples illustrated the ways in which creativity and freethinking were afforded little opportunity to young Singaporeans in building and engaging with their local environments in everyday ways – in essence, by limiting the opportunities for young Singaporeans to be creative with city-spaces, state authorities were less likely to be challenged by proposed uses for the space which did not already conform to the long-term plan for each of these areas.

The use of permits as a means of population control extends to other facets of the placemaking of Singapore, as well. For example, Martine joked about the designated space for protests in Singapore – Hong Lim Park – a space which had been ascribed to be for protest activity by the government, but for which protest organisers still needed to apply and receive a permit in order to legally protest there. "It's right next to the police station". However, while Martine commented on the space and its ironic placement, she was reluctant to make the comment anything more than a passing aside. Permits were also the subject of discussion in relation to the 'wilderness' areas of Singapore, located in the islands off the main city, such as Pulau Ubin or Sisters' Island. In the case of those islands which were open for public use and recreation, limitations to human impact are usually monitored through the selective granting of permissions. To camp overnight in Pulau Ubin, for example, it is necessary to first gain a permit from the government, detailing your needs and intentions. Two or three participants described the state-organised field trip to Pulau Ubin which is incorporated in their education at around the age of fifteen. This government-sponsored venture, designed deliberately to expose Singaporean youth to their natural environment and its associated heritage, is made possible through the extension of specific permits by the government to these school trips; yet again ensuring that state actors are facilitating the exposure to key locations in the Singaporean imaginary are framed through discourse created and developed by the state, such as through school syllabi and trips.

Nonetheless, despite the great power that the Singaporean government has in planning and executing strategic notions of place in the city. The authentication of these plans is ultimately achieved through everyday engagement on behalf of Singapore's local population. Although many respondents could not



identify active resistance to the planning and placemaking strategies of the Singaporean state. Everyday resistance was perhaps practised by a number of different local actors. Not all of these forms of resistance were deliberate. Many of the examples of place being consumed contrary to its original design come as a by-product of community engagement, rather than a calculated reaction to the plan itself. For example, one interlocutor gave the example of football, being played by children in HDB foyers:

What tends to happen with older buildings, older buildings tend to have this huge space in the lobby, and it's supposed to help with ventilation. So it's just like open space under the flats. So that's why a lot of kids used it to play football. Even though there'll be a sign saying 'no football playing here'. But there's no other space to play football because we don't have, like, an easy accessible football court. In most estates, right? It isn't badminton court. And Football is a game that you can play anywhere. So I still do see kids playing football there, once in a while.

The use of these spaces, rather than more formal, paid venues for sports, was an important distinction for my interviewee, in that they offered a real, and spontaneous avenue for young Singaporeans to engage with place. In a sense, the consumption of place was creative, and original, for each group of children who discovered its potential as a football field. In claiming the lobby as a football field, these groups were imbuing the space with their own local meaning: and thereby making an authentic local place.

The success of state placemaking strategies has been greater internationally; where the brand of imagined Singapore is not challenged by everyday engagements with the city itself. While the claims which state actors make about the city of Singapore as a local identity are not inherently false or misleading, they nevertheless do not tell the full story of local culture and identity within the city. In essence, the very simplicity and palatability of these discourses – which make them so popular with the international community – are the traits which make it difficult for the city to sustain long-term engagement from local agents: for local inhabitants to develop long-term, unique engagements with the cityscape itself.

## 8. Conclusion

### 8.1 Considering Singapore's future

Singapore, a city which has overtly publicised and promoted itself as a 'green' city, is a place in which greenery and wildlife are visually incorporated into the cityscape, even as its inhabitants enjoy the convenience of living in a global city. Despite the success of these strategies and the consequent

international recognition of greenness as a core aspect of Singapore's identity, thus far, there is no real recognition of 'wilderness' places in the city. Nature, where it is seen and acknowledged in the city, remains a liminal manifestation of government strategies for greenness. However, for Singapore's inhabitants, global wilderness imaginaries are clearly located in non-human and *especially* non-city environments. Consequently, they cannot identify any 'wild' places within the city or its surroundings because there are no organic spaces on the island; every acre is accounted for. Thus, while Singapore's strategic urban planning has been effective in creating the *idea* of a green city, the placemaking of wilderness has fallen short. Through the creation and management of its long-term plan, the state has effectively created a barrier in its own efforts at reintroducing wilderness spaces into the city; since in the eyes of local observers, these spaces cannot be verified as 'authentic' wilderness until they are unstructured and inaccessible – characteristics at odds with Singapore's global place-identity.

For the youth of Singapore, two ostensibly opposing values are at the forefront of their ontological insecurity. First, the diminishing presence of a purely local Singaporean cultural sensibility. Second, the ecological and environmental security of the world. Both of these concerns are inherently rooted in place. For the former, it is the absence of a distinctly local place within Singapore—the city itself—that has contributed to the erosion of a uniquely Singaporean culture. The removal of local shopping centres and independent stores in favour of globally-recognised chains, for example, or equally, the 'gutting' of heritage buildings, leaving only the historical façade, have diminished the physical markers of cultural Singaporeanness. For the latter, it is both the limited land-resources of Singapore, as well as the vulnerability of Singapore as an island in Southeast Asia, which make environmental sustainability not only a theoretical or ethical concern for its inhabitants, but also an imminent and practical one. Singapore's survival as a place is contingent on its ability to provide power, clean water, and protection against natural disasters (such as rising tides and flooding); securities currently negotiated via trade with neighbouring countries, or through the now-changing natural environment. Yet these two key challenges to ontological insecurity are also inherently intertwined: if Singapore as a local place and identity, is built securely on imported water and the *plastic* chair (read: on practices which are not ecologically sustainable), how can Singapore be brought into a future which is eco-friendly? What is clear from the findings of this interview study is that Singapore is in need of a revised city imaginary: one which adequately accounts for the ontological insecurities of its youth inhabitants. Moreover, the youth's concern for a stable environmental future suggests that a part of this revised city imaginary must incorporate for nature, and even explicitly for wilderness, in order to be convincing as a viable future for these young Singaporeans.

Singapore's soft authoritarian structure, then, offers a unique potential to pioneer this integration to create an authentic wilderness/city imaginary. The Singaporean case illuminates future placemaking strategies which may alleviate the current tension between authoritative vs authentic production of place, and highlights the key role which global imaginaries play in formulating a strategic placemaking approach. With its 'soft-authoritarian' structure, the Singaporean state controls almost all the practical aspects of placemaking and maintains this authority through various measures, such as the enforcement of high fines for the misuse of place. However, if space must be consumed by local inhabitants in order to become 'authentic', then in Singapore, while local 'wilderness' has been strategically imagined and planned, this strategy has yet to be authenticated by local and non-state actors. If the wilderness and the city are imagined globally as opposites, then it follows that for the city and its inhabitants, wilderness and nature places will continue to be estranged. Typically, this situation is to the detriment of wilderness, resulting in continual erosion of extent and diversity of wild habitats. Even where city-dwellers have an interest in or care for these environments, the wilderness will remain foreign, and suffer the diminished agency that its liminality affords in global networks of power. By contrast, integration of these concepts into a more nuanced imaginary has the potential to foster understanding and acknowledgement of the importance of nature and wild spaces, even within local and city landscapes. What Singapore offers, then, is a very real opportunity for a future wilderness to be imagined as embodied in the city.

## 8.2 Future applications

This research project has provided a useful point of departure for future studies of global placemaking practices, strategic placemaking, and the role of global imaginaries in shaping contemporary and future place. Further, this research has laid the foundation for explorations into abstract ideas which nevertheless take at the heart of their study a connection to the lived and local experiences of place. In addition, this study has raised important questions for future research on authenticity, environments and cultural research: if there is no urban, built environment in which cities locate their local identity, what becomes of those identities? Future studies which focus on the question of authentic and strategic placemaking have the opportunity to investigate the relationships between these multifaceted aspects of place and locality, especially in regards to the role that strategic placemaking may offer for the future of conservation, and especially of wilderness conservation. This research suggests that strategic placemaking plays, and will continue to play, an integral role in successful wilderness and cultural conservation in the future, and future studies would offer the opportunity to examine the ways in which strategic placemaking may be optimised in order to protect cultural and wilderness places from global exploitation. \*

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