

Envisioning the Future Negotiating Public Space in Hanoi and Singapore

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Introduction

In the past centuries, several opposing political ideologies impinged on Southeast Asia, ranging from communist/socialist to market liberal/capitalist concepts, authoritarian dictatorships, one-/multi-party democracies. This has not only influenced the political system in each country, but has led to different economic arrangements and the search for country-specific paths towards political stability and economic growth, often accompanied by a dominant state vision of a better future.

Vietnam, classified as a middle-income country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 106 billion US\$ in 2010 (WB, 2012a), aims at becoming an industrialized country by 2020. The one-party state aims to realize this vision by developing a ‘socialist-oriented’ market economy (MPI, 2006: 54 f.). The emphasis is put on an export-oriented economy, the main products being crude oil, sea food, textiles and shoes. By offering inexpensive wage labor, Vietnam increasingly takes over China’s role as a strategic location for Foreign Direct Investment. However, despite Vietnam’s global integration and economic liberalisation initiated through the reform policy of Doi Moi in 1986, the political monopoly rests with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). After a short period of political relaxation previous to the APEC summit in 2006 and the WTO accession in 2007, the party-state has returned to its policy of undermining oppositional activities. In Singapore, classified as an industrialised country with a GDP of 208 billion US\$ in 2010 (WB, 2012a), the global hype about ‘knowledge society’ (sometimes also termed ‘knowledge-based economy’ or ‘information society’¹) led to

¹ Hornidge 2011b offers a conceptual and historical review of the notion ‘knowledge society’ as a globally communicated academic concept as well as a locally identified, future stage of development.

immense government action towards developing the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, research and development centres, knowledge diffusing institutions as well as the arts, theatres and museums (Hornidge, 2010, 2011a). The current programme fostering Singapore's development into a knowledge society envisions Singapore as 'Intelligent Nation 2015' and aims 'to navigate Singapore's exhilarating transition into a global city, universally recognised as an enviable synthesis of technology, infrastructure, enterprise and manpower' (iN2015 Steering Committee, 2006).

This paper assesses the influence of these dominant state visions on the urban landscapes² of Hanoi and Singapore. This is done by discussing Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square and Singapore's library system as examples for the changing conceptualizations of public space in both cities. Common to both units of analysis is their role as the capital cities of two states in Southeast Asia, both classified as authoritarian, to propagate and demonstrate the dominant state vision of the future to the nation and the international community. Although Singapore and Vietnam differ as regards development strategy and economic performance – GDP annual growth rate stands at 14.5% and 6.8% respectively (WB, 2012b) –, it is obvious that the ongoing economic developments also influence the design, function as well as the practices of public space. Singapore's authoritarian path to modernization was identified as a role model by the Vietnamese government and is followed in its attempt to create a 'civilized and modern capital'. In order to reduce criminality, prostitution and gambling in public spaces, both countries regard control over public space, including karaoke bars, necessary. Additionally, billboards, prohibition signs as well as symbolic architecture are used to educate the public and communicate the dominant state vision.³

The paper comprises three main parts. Part 2 redraws the conceptual basis for assessing and shaping public space under two dominant state visions. Parts 3 and 4 discuss the two case studies, Ba Dinh Square/Hanoi and the library system of Singapore. The case studies illustrate how the different state visions influence the reconceptualising of public space, which in turn develops its own dynamics. Thus the simple reshaping of the func-

² The term 'landscape' is to denote both the physical environment and the symbolic representation of social practices (Zukin, 1991: 16 ff.).

³ Malay and Chinese conceptualizations of space and the employment of symbolic architecture in the communication of these have earlier been studied by Evers (1977, 1997). With respect to Soviet societies, Rittersporn et al. (2003: 14) declare that the dominance of the one-party state in public space is partly expressed through propaganda and the state's power of controlling public discourse made explicit.

tions, meaning and usage of the spaces paves the way for public negotiations on the matter. This will then be discussed in the final part of the paper.

Methodologically the paper is based on qualitative field research in Hanoi in 2007/2008 and in Singapore in 2005, comprising semi-structured expert interviews and focus group discussions in Singapore with government representatives involved in the building and communicating of 'knowledge society' as state vision and representatives and staff members of the National Library Board and its libraries. Furthermore, participatory observation was carried out in Singapore's libraries. The case study of Hanoi is based on data gathered during one year of extensive field research, including participant observation on Ba Dinh Square. Additionally, expert interviews were held with Vietnamese social anthropologists, and architects. Data on the history of the place was obtained from the review of documents in the National Archives in Hanoi. For both cases research on government programmes, newspaper articles, press statements and secondary literature was carried out in early 2009.

Dominant State Visions and the Conceptualisations of Public Space

Since the 1960s and 1990s respectively Singapore and Vietnam, two countries aiming at economic growth, have taken concrete steps towards modernising their economies and societies. The notion of 'modernity' as well as the countries' paths towards it, have nevertheless been largely defined by the authoritarian state governments. In Singapore the state vision of modernity shifted from export-oriented industrialisation in the 1960s towards the construction of a knowledge-based economy from the late 1980s onwards. In Vietnam, after experiencing that the socialist path to modernization with a command economy as its focus had failed, the party-state indulged in transforming towards a market economy.

In this paper our understanding of these dominant state visions of the future is guided by Eisenstadt's (2002: 5) thoughts on 'multiple modernities'. He discusses modernity as a dynamic process of multiple interpretations of the common good and argues that premises of the established social, ontological and political order as well as the legitimization of that order are being challenged. Besides this human agency, Eisenstadt points to reflexivity in the modern programme. This reflexivity concentrates upon the 'possibility of different interpretations of core transcendental visions and basic ontological conceptions prevalent in a particular society or civilization; it came to question the very givenness of such visions and the institutional patterns related to them' (Eisenstadt, 2002: 4). Hence, the dominant vision –

in this paper the state vision of each country – can be continuously contested, negotiated and redefined. According to Eisenstadt, like modernity each state vision is ‘characterized by a number of possibilities realizable through autonomous human agency’.

The term ‘public space’ entails a number of different foci and definitions. Amongst the most commonly discussed aspects of physical public spaces (public gardens and squares) are ownership (public vs. private), openness and accessibility. Yet, a publicly owned building might be closed to the public or not, i. E. public ownership cannot be the sole criteria. The same holds true for virtual (mass media) and digital (internet) public spaces. With his focus on the rise and decline of the bourgeois public sphere of 18th/19th century Europe, Habermas (1987) followed Arendt’s ‘associational view’ thereby developing a ‘discursive public space’ model (Benhabib, 1992: 73). He therefore defined the ‘public sphere’ as a realm of conversation and discussion by private individuals on matters of public interest (Habermas, 1974). Despite critics of this definition for being universalist, eurocentric and andocentric (Howell, 1993: 311), Habermas’ notion of the public sphere is commonly referred to when talking of a ‘sphere of will formation’, where private individuals debate deliberately. This realm could exist in a public city square, in a privately owned home or internet platform. Consequently, a public place is not necessarily a public space synonymous with public sphere but only becomes ‘concrete’, i. e. develops from a public place (*öffentliche Fläche*) to a public space (*öffentlicher Raum*) when used by individuals to meet and interact.

In Hanoi and Singapore, both state governments shape and plan spaces for assemblage according to their respective vision. Yet, at the same time citizens (increasingly) contest, redefine and appropriate these spaces. While in Hanoi the official space of Ba Dinh Square is gradually being turned into a public space, in Singapore physical spaces for free discussion and collaborative learning are created by the government, yet the institutional and legal space permitting and fostering these free discussions is not given. Thus, in accordance with their state visions, both authoritarian state governments have created a space which, in the case of Hanoi, is capable of contributing to and, in the case of Singapore, demands fulfillment of its purposes, a process of political and legal liberalisation. Accordingly, we contend that the conceptualizations of public space are largely determined by the negotiation processes between citizens and state and are accordingly socially constructed. Lefebvre (1991) understands space as a production that is constituted by political agents and shaped by social processes. Consequently, every society or, in Lefebvre’s terms, every ‘mode of production’ creates its own specific space. More generally the constitution of space is

always accompanied by a parallel process of negotiating power relations. Space is constituted by action (L6w, 2001: 190 ff). Speaking of the 'social construction' of space thus requires looking at space in its relationship with types of behaviour, action, styles and expectations (Koenen, 2003: 157 f.).

Consequently, in times when social theory is preoccupied with the dissolution of space, an assessment of concrete space is even more necessary. It is the paper's objective to reemphasize the relevance of physical, virtual and digital space as location of the public sphere. These diverse spaces enable citizens to contact topic-related local and global communities and provide the fora necessary for meeting and interacting. In doing so, they are nevertheless moulded largely by the institutional and legal space given to the actions of the citizen within these spaces, as illustrated by the Singapore experience.

Thus, citizens' usage of public space is greatly determined by its materiality and accessibility. The design and outline of public space act as instruments of power to regulate and delimit people's movements and interactions (Allen, 2006: 445). Urban public spaces, monuments, squares and statues, are the crucial material serving the aim of nation-building and the maintenance of political legitimacy. Lefebvre (1990) adds, that states tend to represent themselves in the city via emptiness. In Hanoi, Ba Dinh Square, characterised by its vastness, exemplifies this expression of state power. In Singapore, the public library system illustrates how government-created physical space aims at knowledge-enriched social interaction and social capital-building for innovation development, while the legal set-up maintains state control.

From Command Economy to Socialist-oriented Modernisation

Shortly after gaining independence, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam curtailed private sector activities. In the 1950s it introduced the collectivisation of trade and agriculture as well as the socialisation of industries. Finally, in 1976 with the foundation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the redistributive system of command economy was extended to the whole country. At the end of the 1970s the country was struck by natural disasters, which led to severe famines. As it became obvious that the socialist path to modernization was failing to deliver the promised goods, this dominant vision of the future became openly disputed. People's awareness that there can be multiple ideas about the future made citizens challenge the current order and embrace their own vision of a better life through autonomous human agency. A first step in this process was the infiltration of the collectivized system by rural households, which resulted in an informal

contract system (Kerkvliet, 1993: 11). Anticipating the shortcomings of the current order, the Communist Party passed the economic reform programme of Doi Moi in 1986, introducing Vietnam's transition from a planned to a market economy. The renovation process had considerable impact on Vietnam's economic performance. Since the 1990s Vietnam has seen annual GDP growth rates of 7–8% and its global integration was achieved when Vietnam joined the WTO in January 2007. Nonetheless, economic reforms were not accompanied by political liberalisation. Instead, the Communist Party of Vietnam sticks to its single party rule, seen in the Socio-Economic Development Plan 2006–2010 which underlines this aim of fostering economic growth while preserving the political status quo by identifying the development objective as to 'continue the implementation of the strategy of accelerating the process of socialist-oriented industrialization and modernization of the country for Vietnam to basically become an industrialized nation by 2020' (MPI, 2006: 1).

Still the primary goal is the development of socialism, and a 'socialist-oriented market economy' is seen merely as a transitional phase (Weggel, 2001: 398, 404). The term 'Market-Leninism' demonstrates the co-existence of two diverging ideologies within one state vision. According to Logan (2000: 254) 'Market-Leninism' signifies that 'economic liberalisation sits uneasily alongside a still-rigid and highly centralised political system'.

Nonetheless, economic liberalisation has enabled scope for processes of negotiation between citizens and the state, capable of modifying existing state-society relations.

Making Visions of the Future Concrete – the Urban Landscape of Hanoi

Hanoi, as political centre of the country with a 1000 year history, is one of five municipalities under the direct command of the national government and maintains an outstanding position in the national urban system. Ho Tai (1995: 273) notes that the party-state has full control over the material structures, nurturing the collective memory. In contrast to more democratic countries, where public monuments are often the outcome of negotiation between official agendas and local communities, the Vietnamese state dominates the design, location and budget of public space in Vietnam.

FIGURE 1: Lenin statue with flower decoration ‘Congratulating the Party’



Source: Kurfürst, 2008.

Accordingly, public space is regarded as the physical expression of the socialist state's vision of the future. Rather than being public spaces, squares and monuments are official spaces dominated by state symbols and often not freely accessible to citizens. To comprehend the domination of one group in giving meaning to urban objects, Kong and Law refer to Gramsci's (1973) concept of 'ideological hegemony'. The ruling group presents ideas and values which are perceived to be 'natural' or 'commonsense' by the rest of society. Landscapes then have the power to institutionalise the given order, 'thus contributing to the social constructedness of reality' (Kong and Law, 2002: 1505). Yet these dominant ideas can be contested. According to Zukin (1991: 16, 18ff.) the landscape is formed by practices of both domination and resistance. That is what makes the social microcosm.

According to Scott (1990: 45), the demonstration and symbolisation of power is crucial to the continuity and maintenance of domination. In order to manifest the hierarchical order, symbolic gestures are required. In particular, authoritarian states tend to utilise public space for staged political performances to demonstrate their symbolic power. 'Parades, inaugurations, processions, coronations, funerals provide ruling groups with the occasion to make a spectacle of themselves in a manner largely of their own choos-

ing' (Scott, 1990: 58). Celebrations in the form of military parades organized on the occasion of National Independence Day or Ho Chi Minh's birthday are instruments of the state to mobilise the masses.

FIGURE 2: Police training at Bac Son Street



Source: Kurfürst, 2007.

However, global integration as well as private sector development increasingly pose a challenge to the state's defining power. With the introduction of a market economy a multitude of spatial producers has evolved, each of them leaving their imprints in the city's landscape. Multinational and domestic enterprises design the built environment according to their visions of the future, thereby creating new public spaces like shopping malls and amusement parks. In addition, citizens make makeshift improvements to their houses. In the context of these house extensions public spaces like sidewalks or pagodas and temples are often illegally occupied. Furthermore economic liberalisation resulted in a diversification of lifestyles, leading to an increasing usage of former official spaces by Hanoi's citizens for leisure and social activities. Thomas (2002: 1621) regards this as a contestation of the state-defined landscape. The following chapter presents the Vietnamese state's conceptualization of public space and its redefinition by citizens.

Thus, the example of Ba Dinh Square is chosen to exemplify the negotiation of different visions of the future between citizens and state.

Ba Dinh Square – Negotiating Visions

Spaces like Ba Dinh Square are a new phenomenon to Vietnam. Until the introduction by French urban planners of urban public spaces in the form of squares and parks, these structures were not an integral part of the emic conceptualization of space. Sacred spaces are emically considered to be public spaces. Pagodas, temples and, in particular, the communal house are the traditional places where the village community mingled (access depended on class and gender relations) (Drummond, 2000: 2381). Against this background, Ba Dinh Square is considered an ‘implant’, imported from the Soviet Union. In the process of nation-building the capital of the socialist government required a space, symbolizing its power. Hence, a place with the capacity to accommodate up to 100,000 people was built, modelled on the Red Square in Moscow (Ba Ngoc, 2006: 44).

FIGURE 3: Ba Dinh Square



Source: Kurfürst, 2007.

The site was chosen because it was here that Ho Chi Minh publicly declared independence from colonial rule on 2 September 1945.

The ‘symbolic ecology’ which denominates the spatial distribution of symbols in the urban landscape (Nas (1993: 15 f.), instantly catches the observer’s eye. Although the square was an uncultivated plot of land until 1945, buildings of the French administration like the *Résidence Gouverneur Général* were located on the periphery. The declaration of independence in the very centre of colonial power is a clear case of ‘counter symbolism’ as stipulated by Nas (1993: 16). The flagpole of French Indochina was redefined by hoisting the flag of the Viet Minh. Thus, Ba Dinh Square was turned from a fallow land plot into an icon of national independence, commemorating the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Once the identification of the concrete space of Ba Dinh with national independence had been established, the party strategically employed this symbolism. The reference to independence and the nation’s first president Ho Chi Minh provided the basis of the party’s legitimacy. Therefore the manifestation of this reference in concrete space became an integral part of nation-building. In addition, the party succeeded in creating a sacred space with the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. By locating the mausoleum in the west of the square and the later built National Assembly in the east, the party-state superimposed the socialist vision of modernity onto the former centre of colonial power.

Further steps in the redefinition of the urban landscape were the occupying of the surrounding buildings of the colonial administration with institutions of the socialist government and the renaming of streets after Vietnamese revolutionary heroes. The overall aim was to eradicate the colonial past from the collective memory (Logan, 2000: 216 f.).

‘As with Moscow for the Soviets, the North Vietnamese government wanted its capital city to encapsulate the vision of the new Vietnamese socialist state. Hanoi’s role was to be inspirational both in ideological and economic terms’ (Logan, 2000: 186).

The state vision is moreover reflected in the architecture of Ba Dinh Square. The construction of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum was completed in 1975 with the assistance of the Soviet architect Grigorievich Isakovich, who also designed the Cultural Palace as well as the Ho Chi Minh Museum. Its outer appearance recalls of the Lenin-Mausoleum in Moscow, hence symbolizing the power of the Communist Party (Logan, 1994: 60; Logan, 2000: 193). The square itself served, particularly in the early years of the socialist state, as an arena for military parades and state performances. Due to its official and symbolic function, the state exerted strict control over its accessibility,

citizens being granted access only for the purpose of paying tribute to Ho Chi Minh or attending state festivities.

However, recent developments observed on the square show an alteration in the function and usage of the square, thereby reflecting a shift in state-society relations. Since the 1990s Ba Dinh Square is increasingly occupied by citizens for social gatherings and sports. In reaction to citizens' rising demand for leisure space, the state made the square accessible for recreational and social activities in the early morning and evening hours. Ba Dinh Square has come to denote an open space within the built-up city. It is a space where urban dwellers go to in their spare time. Yet, it remains highly controlled and supervised with opening times being defined by the party-state. Political activities like demonstrations are not permitted on this symbolic space. As a consequence, although the official meaning is still apparent, it has come to additionally connote a 'public' space in the sense that citizens are more and more attracted to the square through self-organized activities rather than staged performances of the state. Evidence of the transformation is the state's growing inability to attract the masses. Thomas (2002: 1614) states that the crowd 'has had a huge semantic shift since the 1940s'. Popular events like the Southeast Asian Games tend to assemble more people than state celebrations (Thomas, 2002: 1615). A further suggestion of a growing self-organization of the public are the attendances at the funerals of the founders of opposition parties such as the Democratic Party and 'Bloc 8406' by hundreds of activists (*The Economist*, 26 April 2008: 14).

On the one hand the self-organization of the public poses a challenge to the socialist state and its instruments of control and supervision. On the other hand, the state acknowledges this shift and continuously withdraws from the public sphere, thereby creating a separated official sphere. One example for this is the festival in celebration of the Liberation of Hanoi in 1954, which took place on Ba Dinh Square in the evening of 10 October 2007. The celebrations were not open to the public. The square was so well sealed off with guards and fences that the public was withheld from participation. Citizens who come to Ba Dinh Square regularly in the evening, were surprised to find themselves excluded.

Other state orchestrations like the festivities on the occasion of National Independence Day (2 September) or Liberation Day (30 April) nowadays present themselves in a new format as well. In the past annual celebrations were accompanied by military parades and fireworks. Today, official celebrations of these events take place on Ba Dinh Square only every five years. In 2008, the party-state celebrated both days in the Vietnamese-Soviet Friendship Palace behind closed doors. On Ba Dinh Square

only a small ceremony was held, which comprised the obligatory visit to the mausoleum by the party and state leadership and the central committee of the Fatherland Front. However, in order to convey participatory elements, 'the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, comrades of the revolution, the mothers of Vietnam's heroes as well as representatives of all classes of the capital's citizens' were allowed to attend the festivities in the Vietnamese-Soviet Friendship Palace (ANTD, 03.09.08).

Citizens are well aware of the changes in the modes of celebration. Interviewees explained that the days of the Liberation of Saigon and International Labour Day have turned from national holidays into days free for leisure. Asked about what they did on these days they reported that they went on short trips to Ha Long Bay or even abroad to Thailand, Singapore or Cambodia.

Discussion

Even if it was not intended by the political elite, economic transformation initiated through Doi Moi fosters social change as well. Making use of their newly gained possibilities, citizens embrace their own ideas of a better life, disputing the socialist route to modernization. The result is the negotiation of diverse visions of the future between citizens and state. The encroachment on Ba Dinh Square, the icon of national independence, by Hanoi's residents is part of this negotiation process. We understand the state's fading potential to attract the masses with spectacles like military parades and processions as a sign that the state vision has lost its unifying appeal. Instead, the public increasingly organizes itself by participating in popular events like football games and concerts. Another form is the appropriation of spaces like Ba Dinh Square through every day activities (Thomas, 2002: 1618). In return, the state retreats into an enclosed official sphere for celebrations. Here, a clear shift of visions is taking place. As a result of economic liberalisation, private individuals have attained more freedom to make individual decisions like where to work, live and how to spend their free time. The diversification of lifestyles, especially noticeable in the city, argues for the existence of multiple visions of the future. This multiplicity hints towards a gradual abandonment of the former emphasis on a collective and a continuous transition towards a more individualized society.

In conclusion, concrete public space is only recently being produced in Hanoi. Citizens' encroachment on Ba Dinh Square gradually transforms this official space into public space. However, since accessibility is state-prescribed and state-controlled, the square's potential to serve as public space in Habermas' sense of the term remains limited. In fact, the space remains

governed by state dispositives. Yet, understanding everyday practices as 'modes of resistance' (De Certeau's (1984: xiv) term), citizens are able to evade discipline through their daily practices.

From Service Provision to Knowledge-driven Autonomy

In the late 1970s, Singapore's government identified the development of the information and communication technology (ICT) industry as well as the building of an island-wide ICT infrastructure as promising areas for future economic growth (Tan, 1980; Hornidge, 2007a: 241ff; 2010; 2011a). The idea that Singapore should develop into a knowledge society, a society saturated with knowledge consumption and production in all sectors of social, professional and economic life, was formulated as government aim (National IT Plan Working Committee, 1985). From the early 1980s to 1990s, the Singapore government consequently devoted itself to building an ICT infrastructure in conjunction with an appropriate legal system and the application of ICT in the public administration. The shift towards widespread application of ICT in Singapore took place in the late 1990s. Here programmes were launched, emphasising the application of ICT in private and professional life, education facilities and the public service. Also from the early 1990s onwards, these ICT-focused definitions of knowledge society were challenged by an increased awareness of the importance of local knowledge production for social and economic development (Hornidge, 2007b). The national research environment was greatly expanded and the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) supervising 12 biomedical and engineering research institutes was founded. In the mid-1990s, the realisation that a knowledge society requires the potential of every citizen led to a vast library scene initiated by government programmes such as 'Library 2000' and 'Library 2010' with which the Singaporean government aimed to reach out to every citizen in the use of ICT, knowledge creation and transmission. Finally, from 2000 onwards, the rich potential of creativity, the arts and culture, as well as the development of creative industries moved into the centre of government attention. This led to the formulation of documents such as 'Singapore: Global City of the Arts' in 1995, the 'Renaissance City Plan: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore' in 2000 (followed up by Renaissance City Plan II in 2005 and III in 2008) and the 'Creative Industries Development Strategy' in 2002 (Hornidge, 2010).

Despite this turn towards arts and culture as important breeding grounds for creativity and knowledge production, Singapore's legal system continues to enforce a disciplined society (Mui, 2000). This is reflected in

government censorship of the media including magazines, newspapers, movies, the internet and TV programmes.⁴ The Internal Security Act (Chapter 143, 1985 rev. ed. legislation of Singapore) allows the government to detain citizens without trial, and diverse forms of sexuality, e. g. homosexual intercourse, remain illegal (Section 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore), representing the state's dominance in defining social 'rights' and 'wrongs'.

While the aim to develop Singapore into a knowledge-based economy and society led to the building of the respective infrastructure (buildings, streets, places and information and telecommunication lines), the institutional set-up permitting and actively fostering free speech and free cultural expression is not yet given. Autonomous, experimental arts, regarded by Adorno and Horkheimer as essential breeding grounds for knowledge creation (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006, pp. 122ff.), continue to be restricted by a legal set-up which continues to maintain a high level of self-censorship within Singapore's society (Yap, 2000; Ooi, 2000; Jeyaretnam, 2000; Gomez, 2000).

Despite this legal situation, the Singapore government nevertheless still pursues its aim of fostering 'free' knowledge production through the creation of physical public spaces for collaborative learning in its island-wide web of libraries. In the following, we redraw the creation of these physical public spaces for the transfer, communication and creation of knowledge and ideas within Singapore's libraries and discuss their institutional embeddings and contested purposes.

Making the Vision Concrete, Expanding Singapore's Library System

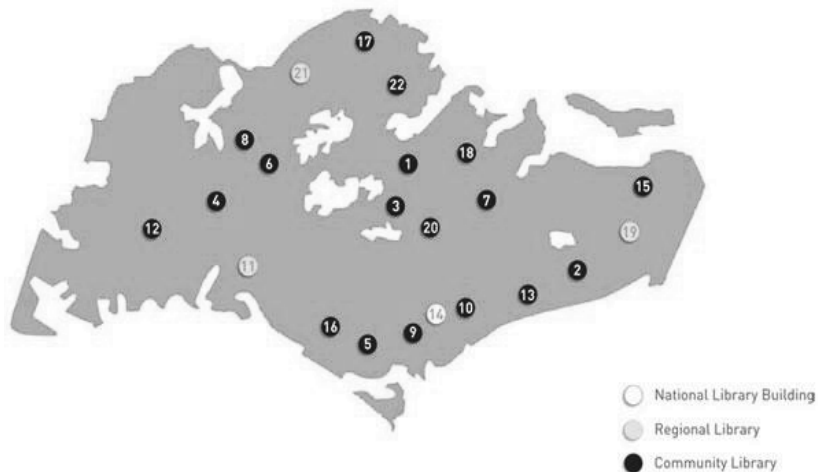
In the early 1990s, the government of Singapore identified the need to raise the general level of education and creativity in society. Consequently, and following the recommendations of the Library 2000 Review Committee, libraries were identified as an integral part of the national system supporting Singapore's development into a learning nation and knowledge society (Library 2000 Review Committee, 1994). The committee argued:

'We must expand Singapore's capacity to learn faster and apply the knowledge better than other nations. This differential lead in our learning capacity will be crucial to our long-term national competitiveness in the global economy where both nations as well as firms compete with each other

⁴ A recent event was the *International Herald Tribune* apologising for a story on dynastic politics in Asia, which, according to Asiasentinel, 'does not appear to include libel' (Berthelsen, 24 March 2010).

on the basis of information and knowledge' (Library 2000 Review Committee to Minister for Information and the Arts, 15 February 1994).

FIGURE 4: Network of national, regional and community libraries in Singapore⁵



Source: NLB, 2008.

On 16 March 1995, the Parliament of Singapore passed the bill to establish the National Library Board (NLB) from 1 September 1995 onwards. The board immediately started with the implementation of 'Library 2000: Investing in a Learning Nation (L2000)', as conceptualised by the Library 2000 Review Committee. Between 1994 and 2002 the library system was rapidly expanded, with library membership increasing from 972,522 in 1994 to 2,092,100 in 2002. The book collection was expanded from 3,700,200 in 1995 to 7,771,400 in 2002 and the loans of library materials increased from 10,077,400 in 1994 to 30,128,000 in 2002. Since 2002, the numbers have remained the same with slight fluctuations (NLB, 1998; SingStat, 2008: 286).

⁵ In addition to the twenty two libraries illustrated beneath, ten community children libraries exist.

On 31 March 2004, six years after the government's announcement that the National Library building would be demolished for urban redevelopment, it closed its doors and made way for a new National Library building in Victoria Street.

FIGURE 5: The new national library building in Victoria Street



Source: NL, 2009.

The green building of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, the National Library of Singapore opened on 22 July 2005, 1.2 km or a 15 min walk from 'The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay'. It is therefore located at the centre of the arts, cultural and museums district, the creativity hub of Singapore.

The National Library Board describes the new National Library building (architect: Ken Yeang) as 'a knowledge icon located in the heart of the arts, cultural, entertainment and civic district of Singapore'. The symbolism attached to the 'prominent landmark' is outlined further on: 'it embodies the nation's unflinching pursuit of excellence and its people's lifelong passion

for knowledge and learning. [...] the building symbolizes the nation's aspirations to be a global centre for information, knowledge and technology' (NLB, 2009b). The building houses the Central Lending Library, the National Arts Council Drama Centre, the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, an Exhibition Floor as well as two computer programming spots. As such, it aims to create the space for and also to represent the convergence of arts, knowledge, research and information and communication technologies (Paul, 2006: 2).

From 'Libraries' to 'Spaces of Collaborative Learning'

In order to develop Singapore's libraries from centres of knowledge sharing into centres of creativity and social capital building, NLB published 'Library 2010' (L2010) in May 2005. Based on the assumption that 'making information readily accessible, building content, sharing and exchanging knowledge, will help create knowledge capital' (NLB, 2005: 21), public libraries shall emerge as centres of discussion, interaction, cooperation; centres of social capital production (NLB, 2005: 23). The report accordingly stresses the need for a knowledge framework which aims at (a) enhancing individual learning; (b) fostering collaborative innovations; and (c) deepening social learning by providing the respective physical and digital spaces, as well as information, knowledge and expertise as illustrated in Figure 6.

Dr. Tan Chin Nam, the then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (the ministry overlooking NLB), explains the underlying rationale of L2010 a few months before its release as follows:

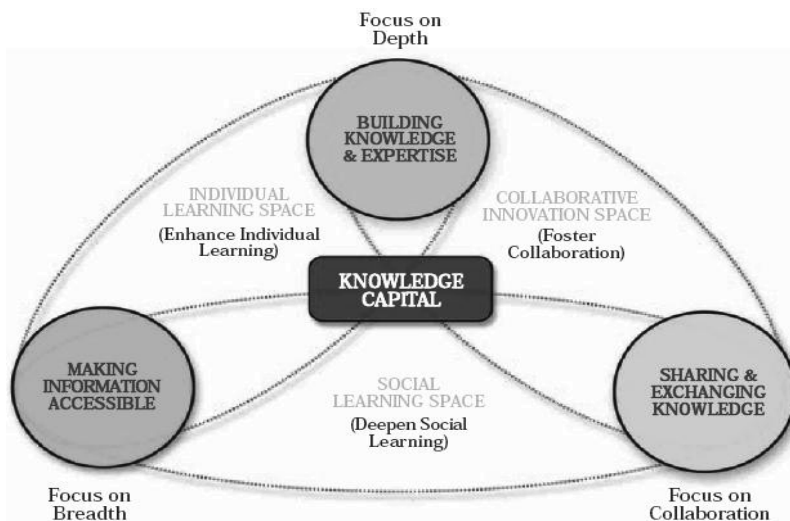
'Library 2010 will focus on collaborative learning. So it is not just individuals going to the library to learn but a community of learners. The whole library operation must then be seen as empowering people, equipping people with the knowledge, they will have to deploy. But how do you deploy knowledge? You must internalize it. You need to discuss, you need to collaborate and exchange views.'

Asked about the potential of an empowered civil society to promote political change, he points to the role of librarians in facilitating these processes: 'The philosophy behind it is to put in knowledge debaters [in order to] bring about the reduction and closing of the divide by soldering knowledge dividends' (personal communication, 2 March 2005).

The then Deputy Director of Information Services of the National Library Board adds: 'Library 2010 is looking at the exchange of knowledge and collaboration. If you put knowledge breadth and collaboration together, you create social capital. And if you then put together knowledge depth and

collaboration you get innovations. That's what we call 'knowledge dividends'. [...] So what we are aiming for is community ownership which we are lacking very much in Singapore' (personal communication, 28 February 2005).

FIGURE 6: L2010 – Building knowledge capital



Source: NLB, 2005: 21

In order to achieve this, the respective physical (not institutional/legal) space is created: 'Beyond expanding the learning capacity of the nation, we will now create the collaborative space and environment that build social capital and deliver knowledge dividends to Singapore' (NLB, 2009a). In an NLB internal review report of 2009, the provision of physical social interaction space in libraries to facilitate collaborative, experiential learning in groups and through volunteerism is listed as a requirement (NLB, 2009c: 129). To facilitate NLB-internal innovations and service improvement, thinking spaces for group discussions (i.e. Library Innovation Centre, Knowledge-Bank and Discussion Corner) and brainstorming sessions are to be introduced (NLB, 2009c: 38, 47).

Furthermore, digital public space in the form of library blogs (i.e. library@orchard, library@esplanade) has been created. Here the idea is to effectively engage the target audience and encourage online word-of-mouth marketing. The blog 'library@esplanade' aims to engage library users interested in the performing arts via the online space. Topics such as the relation-

ship of classical music and mathematics or the anti-clockwise direction of ballroom dances are discussed (library@esplanade, 2009).

Despite these attempts to position libraries as a third important place besides work and home in the lives of Singapore's citizens, L2010 has not succeeded in further increases in library usage: In 2007, 1,948,800 people were active members (slight decrease compared to 2002), the book collection comprised 8,219,000 volumes (slight increase) and 28,768,700 books (slight decrease to 2002) were loaned (NLB, 1998; SingStat, 2008: 286).

Social capital, nurtured through processes of collaborative learning and framed as a 'hidden potential of society' (NLB, 2005: 23), is identified by the Singaporean government as a key to innovation and the production of 'knowledge dividends'. That social capital is closely connected to critical thinking, and innovation to change, seems to be taken into account and accepted as long as it leads to economic, and with regard to the People's Action Party (PAP) political, survival. To foster the development of social capital, physical interaction spaces within libraries are created and librarians identified as 'facilitators' of the hoped-for 'free' discussions. The institutional space that legally protects the individual in thinking and acting freely nevertheless continues to be neglected in the state conceptualization of public space. Consequently, the physical space for interaction and the exchange of ideas that has been created has to be regarded as a predefined physical space, in which the public can choose to fulfil state interests. It does not qualify as 'public space' in Habermas' understanding of the term.

Discussion

While 'Library 2000', according to the above mentioned data on library usage, led to the rapid expansion and successful positioning of Singapore's libraries in the life of its citizens, Library 2010 had not led to a further increase in numbers and usage by 2007. The explicitly formulated aim of turning Singapore's libraries into the citizens' third most important place besides home and work could so far be realised only by those who were already active users. For those, the envisioned spaces for collaborative learning, brainstorming sessions and free discussion have systematically been created (i.e. cafes, group learning spaces, discussion corners, etc.) and individual, group and experiential learning sessions are organised and facilitated. However, due to the fact that this physical space is embedded in the given legal set-up, self-censored rather than free and open discussions are promoted. Thus, this space cannot be understood as a 'public sphere' or 'sphere of will formation' in Habermas' sense of the term, but rather as one defined by its users – i. e. more along the lines of Lefebvre. Users and

participants in discussions facilitated by librarians in the role of ‘knowledge debaters’ are nonetheless largely missing, resulting in a steady decline in the offer of such facilitated discussions (personal communication, Deputy Director of Research Services and Publications, NLB, November 2009). While this in itself underlines the above assessment that these physical spaces are simply not regarded as ‘public’ spaces by potential users, we can also interpret it along Lefebvre’s assessment of state representation via emptiness. With the aim of developing Singapore into a knowledge-based economy, Singapore’s government has taken enormous steps to foster culture, the arts and creativity. The realisation that innovative knowledge production and cutting-edge creativity nevertheless often originates from experiential breeding grounds and the exchange of opinion has led Singapore’s government to create spaces for free interaction and social capital building in its libraries. Librarians, as ‘knowledge debaters’ have been asked to facilitate these processes, and accordingly maintain physical presence. Yet, the hoped-for ‘soldering of knowledge dividends’ is hampered by the individual choice to not participate. To us, this choice of absence suggests a soft form of counter-will formation, of disobedience. Civil society is here representing itself via absence, clearly stating that free idea- and knowledge-formation as hoped for by the government requires an institutional, legal space protecting individual freedom of thought and speech as a prerequisite for critical, experiential, autonomous knowledge creation. Such knowledge can then be tapped for marketable and economically profitable innovations.

Conclusion

Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi, Vietnam and the spaces for collaborative learning in Singapore’s libraries exemplify the influence and limits of dominant state visions on the construction and conceptualization of physical public space. The example of Ba Dinh Square illustrates the negotiation processes between state and citizens about different visions of the future as represented in the struggle over the meaning, design and usage of public space. On the one hand the party-state aims at developing Vietnam into an industrialized society by 2020. On the other it seeks to maintain its one-party rule, thereby negating democratic pluralism. However, Doi Moi policy has not only brought about economic growth, but a diversification of lifestyles and hence a reduced emphasis on the collective. This change of vision is represented in citizens’ increasing participation in sport or cultural events, rather than in staged state performances. The state seems to be withdrawing from public life into an enclosed official sphere, which the official space of Ba Dinh is being re-appropriated by citizens through their everyday practices.

The example of the rapid expansion of Singapore's library system and creation of physical spaces for collaborative learning and open interaction outlines the ambiguity of Singapore's aim of developing into a knowledge-based economy and knowledge society. While Singapore's government has taken enormous and very focused steps towards building a diverse knowledge infrastructure (including information and communication technologies and their application, research and development institutes, the arts and cultural scene, the library network and the creative industries), filling this infrastructure with content by allowing for free speech and critical thought, autonomous and experimental arts, and behaviour and lifestyles opposing societal norms poses a great challenge. The creation of physical spaces for collaborative learning, facilitated by 'knowledge debaters', in Singapore's libraries exemplifies the conflict between hoped-for long-term economic prosperity as knowledge hub in the region (Evers/Hornidge, 2007) and the maintainance of power (and authoritarian rule) in a single-party democracy. While the physical spaces for discussion are created, the institutional and legal spaces for these discussions to be free, critical, contentious and stimulating are not. Instead a legal imbalance is maintained between the capacity of the state and the individual to shape social and cultural life and order, with the former being granted the legal possibility to dominate the latter. In consequence, the physical 'public' spaces created in libraries not only fail to meet Habermas' understanding of the 'public sphere', they are not even regarded as 'public' by its potential users and in effect are hardly used. With Lefebvre we regard the absence of civil society in these spaces as a representation of individual choice to not discuss in a government-predefined space and in the presence of a 'knowledge debater', but to remain absent as long as the physical space for 'free' discussion is not embedded in the legal space prerequisite for free discussion.

In each of the two discussed cases we look at a dominant state vision and its effects on the conceptualisation and use of public space in the context of an authoritarian regime. We argue that both visions of the future influence the design and practices of public space and lead to processes of negotiation between state and citizens over the existing order, changing lifestyles and power relations. They are manifested by defining and redefining public space but expressed in a number of different ways: in the case of Ba Dinh Square by simply employing the square increasingly for leisure and private activities and decreasingly for the celebration of the nation. In the case of Singapore's libraries by not using the spaces provided for collaborative learning but continuing to study individually. While we would like to regard these forms of re-negotiating the provided space as representations of slow but steady, liberalising change, the cases illustrate that state and society

are still in an ongoing process of negotiation about their spatial representation. Whether these negotiation processes in fact lead to steady liberalisation remains to be seen.

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