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Cities of Singapore

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Introduction

Singapore stands as a remarkable model of urban transformation—an island city-state that has reimagined its landscape and destiny in just a few decades. In the years following its independence, few could have predicted the dramatic metamorphosis from a bustling colonial port without natural resources into today's thriving, globally recognized metropolis. This evolution has hinged on meticulous planning and an unwavering commitment to liveability, blending richness of heritage with cutting-edge modernity.

At the heart of Singapore's success lies its unique approach to city building—one that eschews the traditional demarcations of "cities" as found elsewhere, instead structuring space, governance, and daily life through regions, planning areas, new towns, and community districts. Overseeing this orchestration are bodies like the Urban Redevelopment Authority and Housing and Development Board, whose coordinated vision has shaped everything from housing estates and transport systems to waterfront redevelopments and innovation precincts.

Yet, Singapore's story is not simply one of masterplans and blueprints. Urban development here has always been inseparable from the lived experience of its people, the vibrancy of its ethnic enclaves, and the commitment to community spirit. Streets lined with shophouses in Chinatown, the call to prayer echoing in Kampong Gelam, and stalls brimming with spices in Little India are as integral to the city's identity as its sleek office towers and gleaming MRT stations. Singapore's renowned "city in a garden" philosophy, dating back to the vision of its early leaders, ensures that green spaces and natural corridors touch every corner—preserving biodiversity and offering rare breathing space in the heart of high-density living.

This book, "Cities of Singapore," is both a comprehensive history and a guide for the curious visitor. It traces the development of each of the city's major regions, examining how they've grown from swampland or kampong to dynamic, urban destinations in their own right. Alongside essential facts and data, you'll find practical guidance: where to find the best street food in Tampines, how to explore new waterfronts, which housing estates offer unique glimpses into community life, and what cultural precincts reveal about the nation's heritage and modern identity.

Whether you are a visitor charting an itinerary, a resident seeking new discoveries, or a student of urbanism interested in how a small island sets global standards in city living, this book invites you to experience Singapore as a mosaic—of places, people, and possibilities. Each chapter unlocks a distinct facet of the nation's urban tapestry, revealing not just how Singapore is organized and built, but how it dreams and

thrives.

Welcome to the cities of Singapore—plural in diversity and unity, endlessly fascinating, and always in motion.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Making of a Metropolis: Singapore's Urban Transformation

Singapore's journey from a humble trading post to a gleaming global city is a testament to ambitious vision and relentless execution. When Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in 1819, he quickly recognized the island's strategic potential, laying the groundwork for what would become a bustling port. His initial town plan, known as the Jackson Plan of 1822, was the very first attempt at organized urban development, aiming to create an orderly settlement with designated areas for different ethnic communities and commercial activities. This early blueprint, with its grid-like road network, sought to establish Singapore as a commercial and administrative hub.

For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, Singapore's growth was largely unbridled and, at times, haphazard. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 dramatically increased maritime traffic and brought more people to the island, leading to significant overcrowding, the proliferation of slums, and issues with sanitation within the city center. The colonial authorities were slow to intervene, only beginning to engage in urban regulation in the 1890s in response to these burgeoning problems.

The challenges of rapid, unregulated growth eventually prompted the British colonial government to establish the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in 1927. The SIT's mandate was to address urbanization and improve the physical environment, leading to initiatives like road widening, the creation of open spaces, and the implementation of modern sanitation systems. However, the SIT's impact was initially limited, as it lacked the comprehensive authority to undertake overall physical planning and control development across the island. Despite building approximately 23,000 housing units by the time it was dissolved in 1959, it was far from sufficient to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding population.

A pivotal shift occurred in the mid-1950s when the colonial government recognized the urgent need for an overarching plan to guide Singapore's physical development. This led to the completion of the statutory Master Plan in 1955, which was approved in 1958. This Master Plan introduced crucial tools for land-use regulation, including zoning, density controls, and the reservation of land for essential amenities. The legal framework for this plan was solidified with the implementation of the Planning Ordinance in 1960, now known as the Planning Act.

Singapore gained self-governance in 1959, and with independence in 1965, the pace of urban transformation accelerated dramatically. The newly independent nation faced daunting challenges, including a severe housing crisis, high unemployment, and

widespread squatters, with roughly 75 percent of the 1.6 million people living in slums by 1960. The government, under the leadership of its founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, embarked on an ambitious program of urban renewal and national development.

A crucial step in this direction was the establishment of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960. The HDB initiated one of the largest redevelopment projects in Singapore's history, focusing on providing adequate housing and employment opportunities. The year 1964 was particularly significant, with the launch of the Home Ownership for the People Scheme, designed to give Singaporeans a stake in the country and foster a sense of belonging among its diverse population. This initiative allowed residents to secure an HDB flat within days, a stark contrast to the previous multi-year waiting periods. By 1985, the government's efforts had largely eradicated homelessness and slums, transforming living conditions for the majority of the population.

The early years of nation-building were marked by an intense focus on strategic, long-term planning. In 1967, the government initiated the State and City Planning Project (SCP) with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This collaborative effort culminated in Singapore's first comprehensive Concept Plan, launched in 1971. This macro-level blueprint laid out a strategic vision for the country's physical development over the next 20 years, focusing on a "ring" pattern of self-sufficient new towns encircling the central water catchment area. It also envisaged a robust network of expressways and a mass rapid transit (MRT) system to ensure island-wide connectivity.

The 1971 Concept Plan established the integrated planning process that continues to guide Singapore's development today. Subsequent revisions of the Concept Plan, such as the one in 1991, further refined this vision. The 1991 revision, for instance, introduced the concept of decentralization by dividing Singapore into five regions and proposing the development of regional centers outside the central area. This led to the growth of areas like the Woodlands, Tampines, and Jurong East regional centers, with a fourth planned for Seletar. The new downtown at Marina South was also a product of the 1991 Concept Plan, showcasing the foresight embedded in these long-range strategies.

Singapore's urban transformation has been fundamentally shaped by its unique administrative structure. Unlike many countries with traditional provinces or states, Singapore is a unitary state that relies on a system of regions, planning areas, and new towns for efficient urban and infrastructural planning. This meticulous approach has allowed for cohesive land-use policies and sustainable growth, ensuring that every parcel of land is optimized for the community's benefit.

The government's ability to acquire land for public development, enshrined in the

Compulsory Land Acquisition Act of 1966, has been a critical tool in this transformation. This act prevented private landowners from benefiting solely from public expense and ensured that land could be strategically used for community infrastructure, housing, and economic development. This legal framework has underpinned many of Singapore's most ambitious projects, from sprawling new towns to integrated industrial parks.

The journey of urban planning in Singapore is a continuous narrative of adaptation and innovation. From the early grid layout of the Jackson Plan to the sophisticated, multi-tiered planning framework of today, each phase has built upon the last, addressing emerging challenges and anticipating future needs. This relentless pursuit of a well-ordered, livable, and sustainable city has profoundly reshaped Singapore's physical landscape and the daily lives of its residents. The rapid urban development created a striking and ever-evolving skyline, transforming the city-state from a "third world" to a modern global city in just 50 years.

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