

MAKING SINGAPORE A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE, WORK & PLAY

Early efforts to guide Singapore's development

After Singapore attained self-governance in 1959, the Ministry of National Development was established to guide national land use, optimise scarce land resources and deliver affordable, quality public housing.

In 1960, the new Planning Ordinance replaced the 1927 Singapore Improvement Ordinance. A Planning Department was set up under the Prime Minister's Office and given the power to control the development and use of land across Singapore, safeguard land for new towns and redevelop the central area. It also had jurisdiction over roads as well as subway and utility reserves and was tasked with reviewing and amending the Master Plan every five years.



Aerial view of Telok Ayer Basin, Shenton Way, Robinson Road and Raffles Place in 1969.
Photo credit: Urban Redevelopment Authority

Creating our modern City Centre

Our unique and distinctive City Centre today is a result of various instrumental efforts introduced as part of the urgent urban renewal focus in the 1960s and 1970s. These efforts comprised unique solutions that demonstrated boldness and resilience in a time of many unknowns.

The renewal efforts aimed to enhance people's living environments and create a modern centre where the business, financial and tourism sectors could thrive. Part of these efforts included the Government Land Sales Programme in 1967 – a vital channel in which State Land could be released for private sector development.



Alan Choe (second from left), the first architect and planner heading the Urban Renewal Unit, briefing Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Mrs Lee and Mr Lee Hsien Loong on urban renewal.
Photo credit: Courtesy of Alan Choe

Conserving our built heritage



Mr Lee Kuan Yew's reply to Alan Choe on conservation efforts
Photo credit: Alan Choe



Learn more about Singapore's challenges, triumphs and the many champions who contributed to Singapore's conservation.

In the early urban renewal efforts of the 1960s, there were already plans to retain areas such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew also suggested that a committee study historic sites and monuments. This resulted in the creation of the Preservation of Monuments Board in 1971.

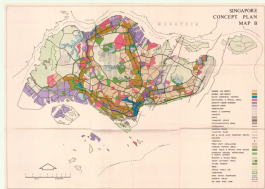
Meanwhile, the building of the MRT network offered a chance for architects from the Urban Redevelopment Authority to review the Central Area, which led to the Central Area Structure Plan in 1985. This comprehensive plan identified the need to conserve low-rise historic districts while creating high-rise developments. A defining moment was the 1989 Conservation Master Plan, where 10 areas were gazetted for conservation, including 3,200 shophouses. Today, in over 100 areas, more than 7,200 buildings and structures are conserved. Being adaptable and responsive in developing solutions that balance business and conservation needs remains a critical part of Singapore's planning efforts.

Laying the foundation of a liveable city

To chart Singapore's future and manage our land use more comprehensively, Singapore's first long-term plan was introduced. The 1971 Concept Plan laid the foundation of planning ahead for key infrastructure such as expressways, MRT lines and a world-class airport.

The plan also helped to retain the Central Catchment area as a nature reserve and envisioned the creation of satellite towns, with more jobs closer to homes. This decentralised approach continues today with regional centres and hubs developed outside the City Centre.

Despite the challenges of meeting increasing demands, the long-term plan has enabled Singapore to dream big. It remains the cornerstone of Singapore's far-sighted, integrated planning approach. It also stays flexible and is reviewed every 10 years through active collaborations amongst the public, private and people sectors to keep pace with changing aspirations and needs.



The 1971 Concept Plan took four years (1968–1971) to develop with help from the United Nations Development Programme consultants and involved experts, professionals and government officers. Extensive surveys of the landscape were carried out and data was collected from households and other sources. 13 idea plans exploring the best ways to organise our land uses were created before the 1971 Concept Plan was finalised.

Photo credit: Urban Redevelopment Authority

HOUSING A NATION



Breaking the back of the housing problem

In 1960, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) was dissolved and its public housing and planning functions were taken over by two new agencies, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) and the Planning Department. HDB was tasked with the daunting challenge of resolving the acute housing shortage. At an estimated cost of \$230 million, it embarked on a massive Five-Year Building Programme.

Housing construction proceeded at such a startling pace that The Straits Times in August 1964 declared that HDB was building "a flat every 45 minutes". HDB's programme was well-coordinated. Key departments governing land, building, resettlements and estates reported directly to HDB's Chief Executive Officer and Chairman. Proactive measures to enhance Singapore's building industry, such as open competition for manufacturing hollow bricks, also allowed HDB to build at a faster pace.

Building a stakeholder society through home ownership



Housing & Development Board flats at Kallang Basin, 1962.
Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Mr Lee Kuan Yew and then-Minister for National Development Lim Kim San viewing exhibits at a Housing & Development Board exhibition at Outram Road, 1965.
Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

By the early 1960s, a large number of Singaporeans had been resettled in HDB rental flats – a marked improvement from the overcrowded shophouses with squalid conditions.

In 1964, HDB's Home Ownership for the People Scheme was launched to enable low-income Singaporeans, who would otherwise not be able to buy homes from the private property market, to buy flats at affordable prices from the government on a 99-year lease. In contrast to the conventional model of rental public housing, which often resulted in misused and poorly maintained residential facilities, public housing owned by residents encouraged a sense of pride and place.

The Scheme received a boost in 1968 when the government allowed the use of Central Provident Fund savings for down-payments and monthly mortgage instalments. This, together with other schemes and grants introduced over the years, has made home ownership affordable and attractive.

First comprehensively planned new town

The earliest HDB estates were built on smaller state-owned land parcels in Queenstown, Cambridge Road, Old Airport Road and the Kallang-Whampoa area. Subsequently, larger plots paved the way for the creation of planned large-scale satellite townships called "new towns". Each new town was designed to be self-contained and provide a total living environment with employment opportunities, education, healthcare and recreational facilities as well as retail and food outlets.

Although Queenstown was the first town to be built in Singapore, Toa Payoh was the first new town to be fully planned and developed by HDB from the ground up. Built during HDB's second five-year programme (1966–1970), Toa Payoh was designed with four neighbourhoods grouped around a Town Centre. Each neighbourhood had its own set of shops, markets, food centres, schools; while the Town Centre included facilities such as a library, a police station, and clinics within walking distance from homes.



Aerial view of Toa Payoh Town, 1976.
Photo credit: Housing & Development Board



We went ahead to build entire new towns and among the earliest of our new towns was Toa Payoh. Originally just market gardens, some squatters, some villages, we cleared the vegetable farms and the kampungs and we put up a modern town taking shape, high-rise living, and we moved people into the high-rise flats.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong,
National Day Rally speech,
16 August 2009

Depending on locality and land availability, each neighbourhood in a new town contained 4,000 to 6,000 dwelling units. A neighbourhood was further divided into smaller housing precincts of around 400 to 800 dwelling units. Precincts were designed with footpaths and trees so that residents were bound to meet along the thoroughfares. This enhanced safety, promoted chance meetings among neighbours and strengthened community ties.



Crowd at a hawker centre, 1984.
Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

GROWING A GARDEN CITY



After independence, I searched for some dramatic way to distinguish ourselves from other Third World countries. I settled for a clean and green Singapore. One arm of my strategy was to make Singapore into an oasis in Southeast Asia, for if we had First World standards, then businessmen and tourists would make us a base for their businesses and tours of the region.

**Founding Prime Minister
Lee Kuan Yew,**
*From Third World to First:
The Singapore Story: 1965–2000*



Mr Lee planting a Mempat tree (*Cratogeomys formosum*) at Farrer Circus, 1963. The ceremony also signified the beginning of the first island-wide tree-planting campaign.

Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The start of Singapore's greening journey



Mr Lee having a meeting with officials on the tree-planting campaign, 1963. Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Newly independent Singapore's foremost priorities were to build housing and infrastructure as well as to support economic development and create jobs. Yet, nurturing a healthy, green and natural environment was regarded as an equally important aspect. This was a bold approach, as it was risky for a nascent nation to dedicate resources to greening in the midst of prioritising basic needs.

A key advocate of this was Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who took it upon himself to launch the greening of Singapore. He felt that a green Singapore was the most visible way to impress upon visiting foreign dignitaries, investors and businessmen that the city-state was well-organised. He used the analogy that if a garden was neatly landscaped and maintained, people would know that there was a dedicated and efficient gardener behind it. In addition, Mr Lee saw greening as a social leveller, where all Singaporeans would have equal access to greenery and green spaces. Underpinning this was his belief that nature would uplift the human spirit.

With that, in 1963, Singapore's greening journey began with Mr Lee, also affectionately known as Singapore's Chief Gardener, launching the first nationwide tree-planting campaign by planting a Mempat sapling at Farrer Circus. This was followed by a mass tree-planting programme all over the city – along new roads, on traffic circles, in housing estates, schools and car parks.



A tree-planting activity led by then-Minister for Social Affairs Othman Bin Wok in the Alexandra area, 1964.

Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



I have always believed that a blighted urban jungle of concrete destroys the human spirit. We need the greenery of nature to lift up our spirits.

**Founding Prime Minister
Lee Kuan Yew,**
*speech delivered at the opening
of the National Orchid Garden,
20 October 1995*



Tree-lined streets in Singapore, 1980s.

Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The Garden City vision

In 1967, the Garden City vision was introduced by Mr Lee Kuan Yew to “to green up the whole island and try to make it into a garden”. The Garden City plan for Singapore gained traction and initiatives were expanded in the late 1960s and 1970s.

For the greening of Singapore to succeed, the whole government had to be committed to it. Ensuring this was the job of the Garden City Action Committee, which was set up in 1970 and comprised key government agencies. It spearheaded the formulation of a greening policy and directed, coordinated and monitored the course of the campaign. Our founding leaders’ dedication to working together to green Singapore persists today, and the Committee continues to be instrumental in overseeing greening policies and facilitating inter-agency collaboration to drive Singapore’s greening efforts.

Decades of this determination and resilience have led to the lush urban environment we enjoy today. As the Garden City vision evolved into City in a Garden, and now City in Nature, the underlying intent remains: to provide a quality living environment. This has become even more critical with the existential threat of climate change and the need for nature-based solutions to future-proof the city-state.



Trumpet Trees (*Tabebuia rosea*) along the Central Expressway, 2023.

Photo credit: Andrew Tau

CLEAN, SUSTAINABLE WATER FOR ALL



Beginnings of the Singapore water story

Immediately after Singapore's independence, Mr Lee Kuan Yew called up the Chief Engineer of the Public Utilities Board (PUB), Lee Ek Tieng, and asked him if we could capture every drop of rain in Singapore.

Mr Lee's question to PUB was pertinent. Singapore had an average rainfall of 2,400 millimetres a year but was unable to capture much of this water. The main rivers were not suitable catchments, as they contained large amounts of sewage and other pollutants that contaminated the collected rainwater.

Strong leadership was critical to drive water management initiatives at a time when the government had other pressing priorities. The water policy was coordinated out of Mr Lee's office for the 31 years that he was Prime Minister.

First Water Master Plan

In 1971, the Water Planning Unit was set up under the Prime Minister's Office to study the scope and feasibility of new sources of water.

The outcome of the study was the first Water Master Plan drawn up in 1972, which outlined the way forward for a diversified and adequate water supply – including local catchments, recycled water and desalinated water – to meet future projected demand.

Today, Singapore has built a robust, diversified and sustainable water supply from our Four National Taps – local catchment, imported water, NEWater and desalinated water. In integrating the water system and maximising the efficiency of each of the Four National Taps, Singapore has overcome its lack of natural water resources to meet the needs of a growing nation.



It should be a way of life to keep the water clean, to keep every stream, every culvert, every rivulet, free from unnecessary pollution... It can be done.

**Founding Prime Minister
Lee Kuan Yew,**
*speech during the opening ceremony
of Upper Peirce Reservoir,
27 February 1977*

Cleaning up the Singapore River

From the 19th century, increasing trade and related urban and industrial growth resulted in the proliferation of squatters, backyard trades, hawkers, pig and duck farms, houses and other riverside activities such as boat repair works near the Singapore River. Large amounts of organic and inorganic waste were discharged into the waterways. The Singapore River became a polluted dumping ground with a pervasive stench.

Recognising that the state of the Singapore River had to be improved as part of Singapore's strategy towards sustainable development, Mr Lee Kuan Yew called for a 10-year river clean-up programme in 1977, which included the relocation of the riverside activities.



Unloading of cargo at the Singapore River, 1966.
Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy
of National Archives of Singapore

Resettling riverside activities



Singapore River, 1980s.
Photo credit: Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The Ministry of the Environment drew up and implemented an action plan involving various ministries and government agencies. Notices were served to businesses and individual premises along the river. Provision was also made through HDB for affected individuals and businesses to be given priority in housing and commercial premise allocation.

By the 1980s, approximately 46,000 squatters, 26,000 residential families, 610 pig farms and 2,800 backyard traders and industries were resettled elsewhere. In 1986, all the squatters had been resettled, meeting the eight-year timeline for clearing the catchment area.

Two industries were still operating at the Singapore River near the clean-up deadline. The shipyards were generating an estimated \$60 million a year in revenue and the authorities were initially concerned about the potential impact of relocation on the economy. Recognising the environmental need, the government eventually decided to bite the bullet and relocate them. In addition, street hawkers were licensed and relocated to temporary sites and later to designated buildings by 1985.

As a result of these efforts, the water quality showed tremendous improvement and the river banks were gradually transformed into beautiful riverside walkways and landscaped parks.



The Singapore River today.
Photo credit: National Parks Board