

THE BROKEN LADDER: THE THREAT TO UPWARD MOBILITY IN THE GLOBAL CITY

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IN BRIEF

Sociological problems relating to globalisation, immigration and urbanisation are some of the issues facing major cities around the world today. These issues have led to social inequality and immobility, low fertility, and resentment towards newcomers and the “new rich”. If left unchecked, they can cause these cities to dwindle and die.

To avoid such a decline, advanced Asian cities should pay attention to the human dimension of urban living and adopt infrastructure and practices that are more family-friendly.

WHAT MAKES A CITY GREAT: DIVERSITY, SECURITY, ENTERPRISE, IDENTITY

Great cities are diverse, spontaneous and lively on the human scale

Kotkin argues that “Great cities are melting pots of myriad cultures, bustle with enterprise and are safe ... This manifests itself not through glittering skylines, cookie-cutter condominiums or mega-malls. A city’s uniqueness lies in the thriving life of its backstreets and bylanes.”

Great cities are safe and secure, harmonious, and economically dynamic

Singapore already manifests many of the traits of a great city. However, it too risks decline if it fails to develop more of a “sense of self” or to address the challenges of rapid urban growth.

GREAT CITIES DECLINE WHEN THEY BECOME TOO RIGID

Once-great cities can dwindle and die if they

Are unable to absorb newcomers

Globally, great cities (such as in Japan) that do not welcome newcomers have faltered, due to demographic decline and lack of entrepreneurial enticement.

Fail to ensure the upward mobility of citizens

Globalisation, immigration and urbanisation have also led to rising expectations and resentment towards the “new rich”.

In Singapore, the **focus on paper qualifications** may have

- reduced the dignity of labour and respect for lower-end work,
- limited alternative expressions of productivity or success,
- contributed towards social inequality and resentment.

AVOIDING URBAN DECLINE: THE HUMAN DIMENSION

Welcome newcomers but ensure opportunities for natives

Even as cities absorb newcomers, they need to preserve jobs for the native middle class, and ensure upward mobility for all.

We need the next generation

Singapore's "abysmal fertility rate" is a matter of dire concern, because urban transformation cannot happen overnight, and succeeding generations are needed in order to effect necessary long term changes.

Cities must be people-friendly to thrive

In advanced Asian cities, there is a pressing need to

- restore human scale and values,
- cultivate a sense of community,
- invest in infrastructure and education,
- make the city and workplace more family-friendly.

BALANCING ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS AND SOCIAL OBJECTIVES

Work/life balance: Not just for individuals

In order to balance economic growth with social democratic objectives, some compromise may become necessary. The decentralisation of work may play a key role in effecting a new equilibrium.

Look after all participants, not just citizens or residents

Scandinavia's economic model (an economically competitive society with high social transfers and welfare provisions) has led to low wage work being undertaken by immigrants, which has intensified social divides. Instead, a truly social democratic model would take care of not just its citizens and residents, but also foreigners who contribute towards the progress of society.

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