



LEE KUAN YEW CENTRE  
FOR INNOVATIVE CITIES

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# What Is A City For?

Joel Kotkin

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What is a city for? In this urban age, it's a question of crucial importance but one not often asked. Long ago, Aristotle reminded us that the city was a place where people came to live, and they remained there in order to live better, "a city comes into being for the sake of life, but exists for the sake of living well" (Mawr, 2013).

However, what does "living well" mean? Is it about working 24/7? Is it about consuming amenities and collecting the most unique experiences? Is the city a way to reduce the impact of human beings on the environment? Is it to position the polis — the city — as an engine in the world economy, even if at the expense of the quality of life, most particularly for families?

I start at a different place. I view "living well" as addressing the needs of future generations, as sustainability advocates rightfully state. This starts with focusing on those areas where new generations are likely to be raised rather than the current almost exclusive fixation on the individual. We must not forget that without families, children, and the neighbourhoods that sustain them, it would be impossible to imagine how we, as a society, would "live well." This is the essence of what my colleague, Ali Modarres and I call the 'Human City'.

Living well should not be about where one lives, but how one lives, and for whom. Families can thrive in many places, but these bearers of the next generation are not the primary focus of much of the urbanist community. I am referring here to urban neighbourhoods like in Singapore or in the great American cities, as well as the country's vast suburbs.

These are not necessarily the abodes of the glittering rich, or the transitory urban nomadic class, who dominate our urban dialogue, but a vast swath of aspiring middle- and working- class people. They are not necessarily the places that hipsters gravitate to, or lure people thinking of a second or third house.

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## The Family and the City

Let's start at a different starting point: the city at ground level. "Everyday life," observed the great French historian, Fernand Braudel (1992), "consists of the little things one hardly notices in time and space" (pp. 29, 71). People in cities live more or less ordinary lives, start business, raise families, go to church, play in local sports teams or perform in neighbourhood cultural events and local sports tournaments.

Focusing on the human city has nothing to do with rejecting urbanism, but turning it into a different proposition that centres on people and families. It is not a break with the urban tradition, but a validation of an older and more venerable ideal of what city life should be about. Cities, in a word, are about people, and to survive as genuine, real places, that are distinct and unique, this is what they need to be about.

This notion of the city as a challenge to family formation is a relatively recent one. Familialism is still hard-wired into us, and one wonders where we end up if it loses its grip. Freud saw the family as intrinsic to human society and to the development of urban civilisation. "Eros and Ananke [love and necessity]," he wrote in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1962), "have become the parents of human civilisation" (p. 48).

Cities — the crucible of "human civilisation" — have centred on families. The family hearth, notes Fustel de Coulanges (1980), stood at the core of the ancient society of the Greek city-states as well as in Rome. In developing the early classical notions of civility, "the point of departure was the family", he writes, with an ever-increasing sense of what are the *gens* and the community of citizens (pp. 86–88). In Rome, the decision by the upper classes to eschew family life was of particular concern to the Emperor Augustus, who saw in it a threat to the future of the state (Balsdon, 1969, pp. 82–83).

In Jewish history, family ties were the very thing that preserved Jewish communities as they persisted to survive in the ghettos of Europe, as well as in the largely urban diasporas that spread from Spain to the Islamic Middle East and all the way to Asia, including here in Singapore. "Children," the British Talmudic Scholar, Abraham Cohen (1975) noted, "were thought as a precious loan from God to be guarded with loving and fateful care" (pp. 170–171).

Chinese civilisation, of course, was built around a large extended family, keeping several generations, if possible, under the same roof. Individual achievement and struggles were all encapsulated within the context of the

family; one never took credit, or shouldered blame, alone (Hucker, 1975, p. 10) As the Chinese began to spread to Southeast Asia and beyond, they carried elements of this family-centric culture with them. Kinship ties, according to the sociologist, Peter Berger, constituted “the absolutely central institution” of overseas Chinese businesses. This system could be seen not only in Southeast Asia, but among Chinese enterprises in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australia (Weidenbaum and Hughes, 1996, p. 30).

Like Judaism, Islam built on the traditional kinship values of early societies (Hourani, 1991, p.105). Islam provided detailed laws of inheritance and responsibility of parents to their children and children to their parents in which the regulation of the treatment of women and children — were codified and given divine blessing. The great Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun (1967) saw an ebb and flow in “the shadow and power of group feeling” — lodged in clan and kinship relationship — as determinative in forging powerful dynasties linked directly to the family of the prophet, cementing the link between bloodline and sacredness (pp. 124–127).

Buddhism, too, placed the family high on its hierarchy of values. The family was to be animated by Buddhist virtues. Buddhism ranked the family as “the core: of the broader society”. Respect for parents and proper relations within the family’s everyday life were starting points for a more enlightened community. Notes the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Zen Master Dogen,

Those who see worldly life as an obstacle to Dharma see no Dharma in everyday actions; they have not yet discovered that there are no everyday actions outside of Dharma.

(Family Buddhism, 2013)

The modern family came with the rise of the modern city, largely in Europe, and later, America. After the fall of the Roman Empire, ties between parents and children, as historian, Phillippe Aries suggested, were often tentative. Christianity, particularly in its early years, also sought to reduce the primacy of kinship relationships in order to assert its more universal message. Many also sought out a life in the priesthood or as nuns; as many as one in ten women in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Florence were celibate (Aries, 1962, p. 128).

It was the “growing affluence of cities”, notes historian Steve Ozment (2001), that ushered in this new familialistic era (p. 58). This was more evident later in the bourgeois paradigm — so lovingly portrayed in the paintings of Rembrandt and others — of 17<sup>th</sup> Century of Dutch cities such as Amsterdam, which historian Simon Schama described as “the Republic of Children.” As a Dutch poet wrote:

And I know of no one that has ever lived  
That has not had his childish dolls  
That has not sometimes fallen.  
... this game though it seems without any sense  
Has a little world therein  
[For] the world and its constitution  
Is but a children’s game.

(Schama, 1997, pp. 485–500)

## **The Present Urban Trajectory**

Such cultural norms were transmitted to American cities such as New Amsterdam, which later became New York, by immigrants, from Holland and through Europe. Anyone who is the offspring of working class Jewish immigrants can recall how families, even in small apartments, maintained their powerful links often at night, around the kitchen table, which was to serve as what historian, Irving Howe called the “matrix of the family”. The great actor Zero Mostel once described the often crowded and chaotic urban kitchen as “my own private Coney Island”, referring to the seaside amusement park in Brooklyn, which was “home to both of my parents and all my grandparents” (Howe, 1976, pp. 171–183).

Cities have long nurtured families. Perhaps, this was a carryover from the rural or small town past. Immigrants to New York from small towns in Britain, Ireland, Germany and Russia or to Singapore from China, India or Malaysia carried with them the solidarity of the village — the system of collective support from an extended family. Religion and religious institutions supported familialism, and lower expectations about life and comfort allowed for large families to co-exist in relatively small places.

Increasingly, particularly in high-income societies, this is not so much the case. The countryside generated the vast bulk of urban population to sustain earlier cities despite their fetid and disease-ridden conditions.



There were, for example, much higher death rates in Manchester than in the surrounding countryside (Hammond & Hammond, 1958, p. 41). Cities and families have had a long, and sometimes, tortured relationship. For much of urban history, disease ridden and unsanitary cities kept death rates high, particularly among the young (Lynch, 2003, pp. 42–43).

Some historians describe an “urban graveyard thesis”, which notes that plagues and higher infant mortality in cities were compensated only by migration from the countryside. “What life added,” noted historian Fernand Braudel (1992), “death took away” (p. 71). This is still somewhat true in some developing countries as well. The life expectancy in Mumbai today, for example, is 57 years old — ten years below the national average (Sharma, 2009).

But, unlike India, which still has a vast reservoir of villages, in many countries the rural areas are rapidly depopulating. This is a phenomenon we see not only in Europe and North America, but also in East Asia, notably China, and parts of Latin America. The population left behind is increasingly old; to harvest crops, farmers now have to rely more on imported labour (Gujral, 2001, p. 28).

This leaves cities dependent increasingly on the fecundity of its own population, or on the movement of people from other, often poorer cities — essentially a competition for labour markets, customers and talent of all kinds. Yet, it seems increasingly clear that the modern city is tilting to be adept at creating what Tulane University geographer Richard Campanella (2013) calls a “kiddie wilderness”.

This is true even in places, such as Singapore, which are safe, have strong economies and excellent education systems, usually a successful formula for families. Yet, Singapore and Hong Kong have among the lowest birth rates on the planet and may soon face the full brunt of the demographic winter. The percentage of Singaporean citizens among the residential population has dropped from 90% in 1970 to barely 63% today (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2012). Only migration — in Singapore from India and China, and in Hong Kong from its vast Chinese periphery — are keeping these places vibrant. But, one has to wonder for how long.

This is occurring, albeit more slowly, in the United States, where rural populations have started to drop for the first time (Yen & Dreier, 2013). Yet, cities, too, are becoming ever more “kiddie-free”. Over the past two decades, demographic research by Ali Modarres, director of urban studies at the University of Washington-Tacoma, reveals that the percentage of

families with children, although dropping in much of the country, is falling most dramatically in our largest, and densest, urban areas. Indeed, over the past decade, places such as New York City, Chicago, Seattle, Boston, Los Angeles and San Francisco have experienced deep declines in the number of families with young children. This can be seen in declining enrolments in many urban school districts, including in relatively low density Sacramento (Schwartz, 2013); Chicago alone has 145,000 fewer school age children than a decade ago (Yaccino, 2012).

So, even as some of America's urban cores have clearly strengthened, largely due to immigration and the migration of younger people, the city seems largely incapable of retaining and nurturing families. An analysis by age cohort by demographer, Wendell Cox finds that, if you take the generation that was aged 25 to 34 in 2000, and look at where they lived in 2010, you see a 15% shift of population out of the core cities and a double-digit move into the suburbs. This ten-year period correlates closely to when people get married and start having children (Kotkin, 2011).

This has been supported both by interviews and by survey research. It is clear that having families in crowded, expensive global cities is becoming increasingly difficult. In a recent survey for the Manhattan Institute by Zogby Analytics (2013), 58% of people with children under 17 years old would consider leaving New York City for better opportunities elsewhere. Among single people, only 42% felt this way. Married people, those between 25 and 54, and those with middle incomes (roughly US\$75,000 to \$100,000) were far more likely to consider exiting the city than those who were single, older, wealthier or poorer (Zogby, 2013).

This reflects a national pattern. A comparison of 2000 and 2010 data suggests that among cities with more than half a million population, the decline in the number of children aged 14 and under is nearly universal. Among the 29 cities that had half a million or more population in both census years, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit witnessed the highest numerical decline in the number of children aged 14 and younger. In all four cities, the decline in this age cohort was 100,000 or more. During the same period, Forth Worth, Charlotte, Austin, San Antonio, Oklahoma City, and Phoenix were among the top gainers in this demographic category.

Proportional to the size of the population, the greatest decline of the 14 and under population occurred in Detroit, followed by Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Chicago and Baltimore. Ranking by proportion of changes in the population of children puts Fort Worth first, followed

by Oklahoma City, Charlotte and Austin among the highest gainers and Detroit, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. among the lowest. Astonishingly, very few major census designated places in the United States gained in their population of 14 and under; they mostly witnessed a decline. This is despite the fact that very few actually shrunk in population.

Overall, nearly one-third of all censuses designated places, regardless of their population size, gained in their population aged 14 and younger. All others declined. The greatest rate of growth in the younger population occurred in smaller places with less than 250,000 residents, which includes some larger suburbs. Among the nine cities with one million or more population in 2010, only Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, and Dallas witnessed a growth in their population of 14 and younger. All these cities, unlike Chicago, grew in population. This means that cities like New York and Los Angeles are increasing their proportion of older age population, while cities such as Fort Worth, Charlotte, Austin and Oklahoma City are witnessing an increase in their younger population.

## **The Global Perspective**

This, as we know, is not just an American phenomenon. In developing countries, where the megacities of the future are being formed, as the price of space rises, the quality of life declines, and city services become less accessible and efficient. Average household size and fertility rates in cities have begun to decline. For example, while The World Bank data puts fertility for China and Japan at 1.6 and 1.4 respectively, Beijing and Shanghai are experiencing much lower rates than the national average. In Tokyo, fertility rate is about 1.2. In Shanghai, according to National University of Singapore demographer, Gavin Jones (2009), it has dropped to a remarkably low 0.7.

These phenomena can be seen in virtually every part of the world, from developing countries such as Iran, China, Mexico and across Northern Africa, birth rates have plunged towards those of higher income countries as they have urbanised. Birth rates among Muslims in Europe, as well, have dropped (Pearce, 2010, pp.114–116). Divorce over the past decade has grown by 135% in Iran, where women now constitute 60% of college graduates. Meanwhile, household size has declined to less than 3.5%, according to the most recent national census. In Tehran, another city of largely apartment dwellers with forbidding cost of living, especially for

housing, the latest average household size in 2011 was reported to be 3.1 (Erdbrink, 2012).

In the short run, such countries — which had high fertility rates in previous generations — might even benefit from this slow birth rate overall as excess population threatens the viability of societies and economies. They may enjoy, for a decade or two, the advantage of rapidly growing workforces with less distribution of both old and young. But, countries such as Egypt, Brazil, Vietnam and Iran all need to fix their economies and restore hope. As the age-old adage goes, there is a need for cash since even if it is still late spring, it won't be too late until the freeze develops.

This future is far closer at hand in the most advanced, highly urbanised high-income societies around the world, in Europe, North America, East Asia and even for countries such as China, due in part to the one-child policy. Due in part to rapid urbanisation, these countries are all facing a huge residue of negative impacts due to plunging fertility. The most extreme case may be Japan. By 2050, according to UN estimates, Japan will have 3.7 times as many people 65 and over than 15 and under. By comparison, as late as 1975, there were three times as many children (15 and under) as people 65 and over. In 2050, the number of people over 80 will be 10% greater than the 15 and under population (United Nations, 2010).

When Japan's population first fell to near replacement levels in the mid-1970s, other East Asian countries were still having five or six children per family. But, as these societies progressed, with prodigious rapidity, birth rates dropped. Singapore fell to replacement rate soon after Japan, and the other societies did so by the 1980s. This was a huge drop from 1950, when the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 6.6, according to the United Nations (UN) (United Nations, 2010). In all these countries, the decline continued in the ensuing decades; by 2005 the TFR was actually lower in the other “tigers” than in Japan itself. Essentially, the gap between places like Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea simply lies in timing; they may be seen as entering the tail end of autumn, precursor to the onset of “demographic winter”.

Without some broad societal shift, the problems now affecting Japan will extend to the rest of high-income Asia, and even to China itself. Taiwan, for example, expects its over-65 population to pass its 15 and under population by 2017 (Mozur, 2011); for Singapore and South Korea, this will likely occur by the middle of the next decade (United Nations, 2010). By 2050, the 80 and over population could exceed the under 15 by

75% in Hong Kong, and by 30% in Taiwan (United Nations, 2010).

The implications of this pattern include such things as declining workforces, a weaker consumer base, and growing disequilibrium between the labour force and the soaring aged population. Singaporeans may party on now, but the future may not be so bright for diminished generations ahead.

## **The Rise of the Post-Familial City**

The roots of this change in the nature of cities lies in shifting cultural patterns that have been developing for well over a century. This transformation first was most marked where the socialist revolution indeed took place: there was a push among the urbanised Bolshevik vanguard towards, as historian Orlando Figes notes, “pioneering a new type of family — one that liberated both parents for public activities — albeit at the cost of intimate involvement with their children”. The Communist Party was determined, as Leon Trotsky later noted, to “take the old family by storm” and root out the old habits (Figes, 2007, pp. 11, 160).

On the road to creating the “higher sociobiological type, the superman” envisioned by Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Castro sought to undermine the old familial ties and replace them with loyalty to the state. This ideology does seem to have created a “new man”, and perhaps, more importantly, a “new woman” who, shred of old beliefs, religious or societal, no longer looked to the family for support, but, focused on society and the needs of the state. Not surprisingly, many of the lowest fertility countries are both highly urbanised and former Communist states, most especially Russia, the Baltic, Eastern Europe; the lowest birth rate in the Americas is in its one Communist holdover, Cuba (United Nations, 2010).

In the West and advanced capitalist countries, urban familialism has been under a somewhat different ideological perspective. As early as the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, H.G. Wells (1901) witnessed a new division in the urban landscape, defined a divide between a “home world” of families with children, and another, more urban “enormous complex of establishments and hotels, and sterile households, and flats, and all the elaborate furnishing and appliances of a luxurious extinction” (pp. 75–76).

In the American city until the 1950s, notes historian, Sam Bass Warner, “the basic commitment was to familialism” (1972, p. 190). But as new

opportunities for less dense, and affordable, housing grew, many families — particularly, during the era of the great baby boom — began to flee close-knit urban neighbourhoods for the ever more distant suburban fringes. Writing in the 1960s, sociologist, Herbert Gans already identified a vast chasm between the family oriented suburbanites and those who favour urban core living — “the rich, the poor, the non-white as well as the unmarried and childless middle class” (Bogart, 2006, p.108).

This division has informed the current wave of urban theory. Religion and family — critical to cities for thousands of years — are barely mentioned in the writings of leading urbanists, including the great Peter Hall. In the hip new urban analysis, family is often supplanted by the notion of “urban tribes”, largely unmarried and childless people who sometimes seek out friends to serve as one young person put it, “your family away from home” (Peterson, 2003).

Cities have long been ideal places for the restless and not pinned down by family or neighbourhood. But, once a person got older, it used to be widely expected that one would marry, try to have a family and remain close to blood relatives, and often as well one’s “ethnic tribe”, if you have one. Today those belonging to the “urban tribe” are becoming the most sought after demographic groups by urban boosters, and essentially, expected to eschew family until late in life or perhaps, never (Watters, 2003).

The notion of the city as largely a post-familial construct has been widely embraced by a whole generation of urban thinkers, planners and developers. In books written by city boosters such as Richard Florida, the family barely plays a role. Instead, the emphasis has been placed on younger, primarily single populations, including same sex and unmarried couples (Florida, 2002). While we do agree that these demographic groups need to be fully considered, we wonder why families could not receive the same attention in our urban development agendas.

Perhaps, the most cogent formulation of this approach comes from the University of Chicago’s Terry Nichols Clark, whose theory essentially sees the city, particularly, the urban core, as functioning as an “entertainment machine”. In the new milieu, “citizens” expect their cities to provide ‘quality of life’, “treating their own urban location as if tourists, emphasizing aesthetic concerns” (Clark *et al.*, 2004).

Such changes, Clark admits, represent a clean break from the city of the past where key local amenities were schools, churches and neighbourhood

associations. The new city, built around the needs of what he calls “the slimmer family” of childless couples and often single professionals, focuses primarily on recreation, arts, culture and restaurants; a system built around the newly liberated individual. In this urban schema, family remains peripheral, largely irrelevant to the city’s long-term trajectory (Clark *et al.*, 2004, pp. 291–318).

Indeed, increasingly the proponents of urbanism have turned away from cities as familial places, seeing their future as places that lure agglomerations of talent, mostly young, or unmarried, and predominately childless. Eric Klinenberg, a New York University Professor and author of the widely touted *Going Solo* (2012), celebrates the fact that, as he puts it, “cities create the conditions that make living alone a more social experience...”. The paragons of urbanism, according to Eric Klinenberg, are precisely those with the lowest percentages of family households, including Manhattan, where singles constitute the majority and average rents approach US\$4,000 monthly, more than twice the national average (2012, pp. 4–10, 207). With rents high (US\$3,300 for a one bedroom) middle-class families are almost inevitably kept at bay (O’Leary, 2013).

For young professionals, Klinenberg (2012) argues, the “anonymity” of being on your own is a sign of success, a mark of distinction, and as a means to incorporate the anonymity that can “make city life so exhilarating”. Promoting this kind of exhilaration now informs much of urban policy. Rather than try to reverse the single-isation of the urban core, cities seem determined to double down their bet on single, childless and otherwise non-familial households.

Developers hope to accommodate the post-familial demographic by creating ever-smaller apartments, with sizes smaller than 300 square feet (28 square metres). These apartments, which have gained the support of mayors such as New York’s Michael Bloomberg, obviously are intended to house single professionals; it is inconceivable for middle or even working class families to inhabit such spaces (Hoffman, 2012).

Similar plans have been announced in Singapore, as well as London (Jia, 2012). Such “hobbit” apartments already exist in Tokyo and will soon be seen also in San Francisco (Christie, 2013). The drive for ever-smaller apartments has clear implications for families. But, since families barely exist as a priority among urban pundits, we cannot expect this would be of great interest or concern to them, despite the massive impact that will be felt, soon but, even more later.

## The Issue of Class in the Post-Familial City

The other great issue facing cities lies in the growing class divide. Historically, cities have been places of aspiration — people went there to improve their lot. A great city, wrote the philosopher, René Descartes, writing specifically of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Amsterdam was “an inventory of the possible” (Braudel, 1979, p. 30). People and families came to cities, like my own grandparents who migrated to New York at the turn of the last century, to seek out opportunities and uplift themselves.

But, today cities are increasingly in danger of becoming not places of aspiration, but geographies of inequality. In the United States, for example, the greatest disparities are increasingly found in our densest, most expensive and important cities. New York, for example, has the worst inequality — and Manhattan Island, arguably the most important urban geography on the planet, has an income disparity between its upper and lower quintiles of 52 times, levels that rival those of Namibia (Roberts, 2012).

Similar phenomena can be seen in virtually all the most prominent cities in the high-income world from Berlin and Toronto to Los Angeles. London, New York’s greatest rival for global pre-eminence, has evolved over the past century from what one writer called “a hell of poverty” to a relative egalitarian city in the second half of the 20th Century; now once again, we see the return of the “two Londons”. It is now a city of both the most expensive real estate in Europe and some of the poorest parts of the European Union. London now has the highest proportion of working age adults in low-income households of any region in England.

The impact of poverty is particularly marked for children. Almost half of children in inner London are poor, compared to one in five in the outer rings. Two forces are primarily responsible here; the erosion, particularly, in the urban core, of middle- income jobs, largely as a result of globalisation and technology. The other is as a result of soaring property costs, in part caused by what one may call “forced densification”. Unable to create decent middle class housing, the emphasis in housing is for the rich, the childless and single population (Hills, 2007, p. 6).

Unaffordability has become a scourge for families. When 30% or 40% of income is spent on housing, it becomes very difficult to have enough to pay for the education, food and clothing of children. This is a driving force towards post-familialism, not only in the high-income cities but also in developing country cities such as Mumbai or Mexico City.



## Hotel Singapore or the Sacred Place?

To these questions of low fertility and declining social cohesion, we have to add the question of values. From their origins, cities have relied on three great characteristics — what I call the sacred, the safe and the busy. We still understand the importance of the last two, security and commerce. No city has succeeded in this way more than Singapore. Yet, still something is not working well. After all, in recent polls from Gallup, Singaporeans — despite all their many accomplishments — rank among the most pessimistic on earth, along with Greece, Italy and Japan (Manchin, 2012).

Perhaps, then we should look at the third aspect of urban success — the sacred. Discussion of this has all but disappeared from urbanist thought since at least Lewis Mumford. If you read the accounts of travellers to cities throughout time — in Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Africa and here, in Asia, religion was a supreme value. As Mumford put it:

Behind the wall of the city life rested on a common foundation, set as deep as the universe itself: the city was nothing less than the home of a powerful god. The architectural and sculptural symbols that made this fact visible lifted the city far above the village or country town.... To be a resident of the city was to have a place in man's true home, the great cosmos itself (Renn, 2013).

Mumford was onto something here in positing how great temples and such distinguished the city as unique. They were like time capsules, tying the past to the present. They tied people specifically to the past. Such sacred values have underpinned familialism from ancient times. These sentiments are in decline in most advanced countries and particularly, in urban centres, and with serious consequences for the future.

One clear impact has been on birth rates. The decline of fertility and urban familialism is most marked in those countries — notably, in East Asia and Europe — where religious sentiment has been in decline. In East Asia, the percentage of people who think religion is important is a mere 19%, this is the lowest in the world, just ahead (or behind, depending on your point of view) of Europe. Half of Britons under aged 18 to 34 consider themselves non-religious compared to 20% of those over 55. Similar patterns have developed in the United States — the one high-income country with a strong religious presence — particularly among the new

generation (Kaufmann, 2010, pp. 9–10, 65–67). As one writer put it, in the hyper-secular Czech Republic more people believe in UFOs than in God (Gannon, 2006).

It seems clear that the reduction in religiosity is directly related to low fertility rates; the very areas, in America and elsewhere, where faith is fading are also those where childlessness is most advanced. Wendell Cox suggests that, in American cities, there is a 36% variation in birth rates related to the degree of spirituality. Cities with higher levels of belief — say, Salt Lake City, Houston, Dallas and Atlanta — have relatively high degrees of family formation while those with the lowest, such as San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and Boston have far lower rates.

Urban thinkers today barely reflect on religion. Indeed, some such as Richard Florida (2013) have argued that higher degrees of secularism imply a more advanced society. And, it is true that societies that are denser, with fewer children, are often richer in terms of per capita income, at least before calculating the cost of living. But, is this, to use an overused phrase, “sustainable” not only demographically but as a society?

I would extend this notion of sacred place to a whole set of unique institutions and places, those that make one feel an irrational commitment to a place. As urban theorist, Aaron Renn (2013) suggests, this includes places like Times Square in New York, or the War Memorial in Indianapolis; it could be the Eifel Tower in Paris, Trafalgar Square in London or the ring of mountains surrounding the great cities of the American West — Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland.

This notion of the sacred, and the unique, is very relevant here in Singapore. Years ago, the Ministry of National Development ran a seminar of Singapore as a city of memories. Few places have as unique a heritage as this city, born as a global city but still distinct as an urban area on earth — a tropical melting pot whose heritage is rich but is under constant pressure to conform to a global pattern that obliterates differences, and all those things that adhere people, and families, to a place.

I would define this conflict as one between the interchangeable and the irreplaceable; the sacred and the identical, if you will. As one writer put it to me, Singapore has two paths before it. One is to search and nurture its Singaporean-ness, or to become what she referred to as “Hotel Singapore”, that is, a place of transit for a nomadic global population — from the highest end of specialist to the day labourers — moving from place to place. Rather than live in tents, it is hotels, service apartments, or rented bungalows.

To be sure, such nomads are necessary, particularly, in a global hub. But, it is one thing to accommodate this class; it is another to allow this kind of person to dominate the urban landscape.

Like cities around the world — particularly, global ones like Singapore — there is incessant pressure to conform to a universal model to appeal to this nomadic class. The Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas speaks of “a larger and seemingly universal style”. He compares the end of urban distinctiveness to “the disappearance of a spoken language” (Admin, 2012). You can now see the same basic Frank Gehry structure in myriad cities around the world. The malls that dot Orchard Road are crowded with precisely the same shops as those in Los Angeles, Dubai, London or Mexico City. As a visitor, the search for something that reflects Singapore’s intrinsic value increasingly takes more time, and greater precision. If it were not for my Singaporean friends, I would never encounter them.

This extends beyond the predictable architectural structures, malls and global brands. In America, the prophets of urbanism often speak of authenticity but the places that are blessed by the priesthood of hipness. Even in as storied a city as New Orleans, gentrification, notes geographer, Rich Campanella (2013), has not only brought about a “kiddie desert” but a gradual loss of character of some of America’s most storied neighbourhoods where restaurants specialising in foods like beet filled ravioli — the kind of thing one expects to find in Portland, Williamsburg, Brooklyn and other favourite locales of the hip and cool.

In the process, placeness is slowly eroding, and with it, the sentimental ties and sacred space that ties people, and families to a specific place, a neighbourhood and a city. In the drive to achieve acceptability from the followers of urban fashion, a city can lose its soul, and, over time, its very reason to exist.

## **Rethinking the Urban Paradigm**

Some might argue that these concerns are sentimental, archaic and self-defeating. When I hear representatives of large financial, architectural, and development interests speak about Singapore, they suggest the city should become ever more dense, build more iconic structures and add, perhaps, five million people.

For the very affluent, as well as the nomadic classes, this might be appealing ideas, but what about the Singaporeans themselves? I would argue, unlike many ascendant and ambitious cities, Singapore does not have to prove its global character. It was, after all, conceived, as a global city. It is intrinsic in its DNA.

What may matter more is to re-ask my original question: what is a city for? And my answer is a city exists for its people, and to nurture families that grow, identify and share a common space. The issue, then, is how to do this while staying competitive in the global economy.

But, what has worked in the past may not guarantee the future. As my old *sensei*, Jiro Tokuyama instructed me as a young man — the key challenge is how to unlearn the secret of past success. He predicted 30 years ago, when everyone was hailing Japan as the world's great role model, that there was a need to break down the structures that had propelled the country to the pinnacle of economic success. Japan stands as proof that a society that cannot throw aside its old formula is doomed to decline — in its case, not only economically but demographically, and, if you will, spiritually.

I mention this because in the future, Singapore will have to evolve into a society that takes its basic DNA — diversity, discipline and ties to the global economy — and re-invent itself in a way that plays on its uniqueness. In my mind, that means Singapore will no longer be able to rely simply on its mobilised brain power, which now must compete with the huge mass of China, India and other developing countries, and learn to become a thought and design leader, a place where ideas start and are implemented. A follow-on strategy cannot work in the future.

My answer lies with this: it is with Singaporeans and their aspirations. The late Soichiro Honda once told me that more important than gold and diamonds are people. And, to be sure, Singapore has achieved much by training its people to meet global standards, indeed to exceed them. This has been the key to its past success.

We need to think about those things that will keep Singaporeans here, and allow them to use their essential skills to create new ideas and products. This will require new thinking in areas such as corporate structure and particularly, housing. Essentially, we have to re-think the whole urban paradigm and address what British author Austin Williams (2010) has called “a poverty of ambition”.

The solutions being proposed by urbanists do not address the critical questions of inequality, loss of sacred place, and, most critically the

survivability of families. The notion that ever more density is a solution begs the issue of what is sustainability? Williams (2008) has called sustainability as “an insidiously dangerous concept, masquerading as progress”. Through policies that seek to reduce the dreaded “human footprint”, sustainability sometimes advocates policies that make things more expensive for the middle and working classes, and, as suggested by me earlier, this makes the formation of families increasingly difficult. In this sense, Williams concludes, “the ideology of sustainability is unsustainable” (2008, pp. 4–8, 13).

Perhaps what we need then is a new definition of “sustainability”. Is a city without children either sustainable or desirable? History has shown that countries that have seen a rapid decline in childbearing — from ancient Rome to 17<sup>th</sup> Century Venice and modern day Tokyo — generally lose some of their economic and cultural energy. A city without children and families becomes, over time, just a spot on the map, competing with other spots for the migrating pools of talent and capital.

So, how does this work for Singapore, a city with little in the way of space to expand? Fortunately, Singapore still has important assets — if it can mobilise itself with its customary energy but with an eye to different goals. One great advantage is the Housing and Development Board, which can help create a human city by providing larger, more family-friendly environments. Ideas such as allowing generations to share contiguous space; as grandparents age, perhaps, more can be done to accommodate their needs while providing more critical space to the new generation.

Another could be the growing information-based economy, which might allow more Singaporeans to work closer or even at home, something that might help promote both familialism and a greater sense of local community. In the United States, working at home grew faster percentage-wise than any mode of work between 2000 and 2010 (Cox, 2011). In that decade, the country added some 1.7 million telecommuters, almost twice the increase of 900,000 transit riders (Cox, 2011).

This has tremendous implications for both the natural and human environment. A study by Global Workplace Analytics, indicates the potential for telecommuting to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, the typical telecommuter is a professional in her/his forties, which is also a prime age for people with families.

This tends to be truer in places like Silicon Valley and other tech-

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<sup>2</sup> Visit (<http://www.globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics>) for more information.

oriented places like Austin, Portland, Denver, San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle all rank among the top metropolitan areas in percentages of people working at home. High-tech and work at home are potentially very complementary.

Another critical step to achieving a more human city lies with the park system. Given that the vast majority of Singaporeans do not have access to their own backyards, park systems are critical, particularly for families. In New York, non-profits have done a wonderful job restoring Central Park, which is a playground for a mostly affluent population and tourists, but, perhaps, some of the private largesse should be extended, although there appear to be many less well-cared for, less celebrated parks in the outer boroughs (Squadron, 2013).

Great cities that want to attract and retain families, must maintain that spiritual nourishment that comes through contact with nature. Olmstead's (2005) vision of Central Park, for example, was to provide working class families "a specimen of God's handiwork" (pp. 278–291). Today, the most ambitious programmes for park building are taking place in the suburbs, such as Orange County's Great Park, which is slated to be twice the size of Central Park (Orange County Great Park Corporation, n.d.). Or in the sprawling family-friendly cities such as, Raleigh's nearly completed \$30 million Neuse River Parkway, cutting through 28-miles of heavily forested areas (Kirkpatrick & Riley, 2013). Or Houston's bayou-oriented green ways (<http://www.bayougreenways.org/>) or Dallas envisioned vast new Texas-sized, 6,000-acre park system, along the Trinity River (<http://www.trinityrivercorridor.com/>) easily overshadowing New York's 840-acre Central Park.

In this aspect, Singapore's work on expanding its park systems, and connecting them into an archipelago of green space, represents a prescient and inspiring example. It must become part of a broader strategy of creating an urban landscape that addresses the essential needs of families rather than address the priorities of aesthetes, speculators and planning theory. People, particularly, as they form households, need not just splashy entertainments and iconic buildings but a more human-scaled environment that raises sentiments and commitment to a place.

Ultimately, it is this sense of home that we need to restore to the city, if we are to nurture community, and family. This is true whether one lives in Singapore's Heartlands or, as I do, in the dense, but largely single-family, and much dissed, sprawl of Los Angeles. At the end, it is a question of

identity with one's place. As my fellow Angeleno, author and essayist D J Waldie, suggests:

I believe that people and places form each other... the touch of one returning the touch of the other. What we seek, I think, is tenderness in this encounter, but that goes both ways, too. I believe that places acquire their sacredness through this giving and taking. And with that ever-returning touch, we acquire something sacred from the place where we live. What we acquire, of course, is a home.

It's a question of falling in love... falling in love with the place where you are; even a place like mine... so ordinary, so commonplace, and *my* home.

(Waldie, 2013)

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