Rodolphe De Koninck, Pham Thanh Hai, and Marc Girard


While scholars may debate how to precisely define ‘urban’, most agree it entails some degree of density of population and the built environment. These are the concrete surfaces, buildings, tubes and cables and physical connections on the ground, in the air, and below our feet. Along with cartographers Pham Thanh Hai and Marc Girard, De Koninck mobilizes spatial theory and dozens of entrancing maps to demonstrate that ‘the systematic overhaul’ of the environment of Singapore, a prosperous, multi-ethnic city-state in Southeast Asia, ‘represents a deliberate and politically motivated form of social transformation and management, a transformation monitored from above’ (p. 2).

Singapore has long occupied a strategic position within the global economy. This is especially true since the mid-1960s, when the Singaporean industrial economy began its extraordinary rise. The growth rate of GDP never dipped below 10% between 1966 and 1973 and remained high and relatively robust for the next three decades. Singapore continues to be a major hub for financial, shipping, trade, scientific, and manufacturing activities today. This story of East Asia’s economic rise has, of course, been told many times. This book presents another view on the island city-state: the story of the continual physical and ecological transformation of national territory by the authoritarian developmental state that was part and parcel of Singapore’s socio-economic transformation.

The fifty stunning maps of the book are organized into seven sections that interrogate the geopolitics, ecology, demography, economics, social dynamics, and planning history of Singapore. A historically rich overview introduces each of the sections, and each map is accompanied by a concise explanation of the political and policy context, graphics, timelines, and statistics, and archival and contemporary photography. The effect is unexpected and entirely pleasurable: a coffee table book that makes a theoretical argument. It is true that the authors never leave the unique historical geographies of Singapore. Nevertheless, the processes they describe and illustrate evokes histories of state planners from around the world rearranging and reassembling physical and social environments.

One of the most striking territorial transformations details is in the physical features of the country—its vegetative cover, soils, coastline, topography, and hydraulics. Map 6, titled ‘Stretching the Land’ depicts the extending coastline of Singapore as more and more land has been reclaimed over the years. New geographical frontiers in this territorial stretching have been opened since the
2000s on the island of Pulau Tekong and the Northeastern Islands, the Southern Islands, and along the Strait of Johor to the north. Singapore’s surface area has increased by nearly a quarter, or 135 sq. km, since the middle of the 1960s, by reclaiming land from the sea (p. 22). Map 7, titled ‘Searching for Land’, demonstrates how building this new land has required extensive imports of stone, sand, and gravel. Until the mid-2000s, most of the sand that Singapore imported came from Malaysia—despite a ban that Malaysia placed on sand exports to Singapore in 1997. Not only do mass sand exports have a detrimental impact on fragile coastal ecologies, but Singapore’s newly reclaimed surface area also provides a potential basis from which to make expanded territorial claims in the strategic maritime space of Southeast Asia, where over 200 global shipping routes come together to make a dense knot.

Water too has been the object of massive physical intervention by the Singaporean state. While Singapore is blessed with high rainfall, it is also one of the most densely populated countries in the world. As such the planning authorities have long been concerned about the island’s water security. One of the major objectives of hydraulic interventions into the landscape has been to increase water storage. Map 9, titled ‘Collecting and Stocking Water’, shows the increasing surface area of Singapore devoted to reservoir storage through four sub-maps, dated 1958, 1975, 2006, and 2015. In 1958, the main island has only three small reservoirs, forming a small line in the centre of the island: the Sele-tar, Pierce, and MacRitchie reservoirs. By 2015, there are no less than sixteen major reservoirs on the main island, and one additional one on the island of Pulau Tekong.

The maps also highlight a central major pipeline that runs from Johor, Malaysia in the north through the center of the country to the historic city center in the south. Singapore has been importing water from Johor through a pipeline from as early as 1931. Although a water supply agreement was signed in 1961 that was in principle to last a hundred years, planners in Singapore have long been keen to diversify their water supply. Map 10, titled ‘Diversifying Water Supply Sources’, cartographically presents Singapore’s ‘Four Taps’ water security strategy. The four taps of diversified water supply are: harvested rain water, imported water from Johor, treated and reclaimed water, and desalinated water. The sub-maps show how the extensive system of artificial reservoirs, protected and unprotected catchments, sewage pipes, treatment centers, desalination plans, and the central pipeline from Johor come together to provide a networked physical infrastructure for Singapore’s water supply.

The book’s larger argument about the permanent territorial transformations in Singapore extends from the physical infrastructures of the country to cover a diverse range of topics, including the increase and spatial distribution
of foreign worker housing, parks, graveyards, shopping malls, industrial facilities, and roads, among other things. These carefully curated and captioned cartographic represent the rapid territorial and environmental transformations, which have the political effect of weakening the population’s emotional and cultural bonds, or sense of *topophilia*, with local landscapes. This in turn enables the state to exert greater monopoly over the population’s affections and loyalties, creating a sort of captive audience for the ongoing interventions of the developmental state.

The argument is premised on the notion that the Singaporean state is exceptionally empowered to shape land use for historical and institutional reasons (p. 39). By controlling spatial access, the Singaporean state is ‘able to consolidate its control over civil society, peacefully and to an extent rarely known in history’ (p. 128). When combined with the demands of capital for continuous creative destruction, this centralized state control over land results in a ‘relentless over haul of Singaporean living space’ that causes ‘territorial alienation’. This ‘constant remolding’, De Koninck argues, ‘leaves little space for the urban imaginative field in Singapore’ (p. 133).

Rapid transformation of lived environments is not unique to Singapore, however. Although the developmental state is highly involved, capitalist accumulation always occurs in political and social contexts shaped powerfully, if not exclusively, by state power. Even in the ostensible heartland of liberal civil society, England, the development of capitalism was catalyzed, nurtured, and maintained through interventions of the state (Marx 1867). There is room to temper the book’s overly pessimistic argument about the political effects of territorial transformations in Singapore. Capitalist modernization is, if nothing else, a contradictory and ambivalent process, full of peril as well as potential. Marshall Berman, the irrepressible urbanist and philosopher, understood that to live in capitalist modernity entails a distinct experience of ‘space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils’ that emerge from finding ‘ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we know, everything we are’ (Berman 1982: 15).

To find some of this complex ambivalence with regards to Singapore’s political history, one can do worse than turn to Sonny Liew’s remarkable historical graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2016). Liew also relies on the juxtaposition of text and graphics to make his point, albeit of course in a very different way than De Koninck and colleagues. Over the course of more than 300 lovingly illustrated pages, Liew takes us through the life of his nation through the oral history of an elderly cartoonist. Emotion, affinity, and intense nostalgia is expressed here for a diverse range of Singaporean histori-
cal geographies—cinemas, amusement parks, night soil men, communists, and striking bus drivers to name a few. These affiliations exceed the ability of any state to monopolize completely, and Liew’s story subtly suggests alternate histories and meanings of Singaporean national identity. The book embodies the agonistic but potentially creative process so beautifully captured in by Berman: the production of meaning with and against the transformative powers of capital.

De Koninck and colleagues make significant strides in explicating Singapore’s historical geography. The book is a labor of tremendous love and energy, and may awaken social scientists to the value of cartography for the exposition of state formation and territorialization.

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References