



BY GEORGE WEHRFRITZ AND SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP

WHEN AMERICA'S Lucasfilm Animation wanted to open its first foreign studio in 2004, a handful of countries tried to lure them. All touted their efficiency, deep labor pools and low costs, yet Singapore—a city somewhat infamous for its lack of creativity—won the contest hands down, thanks in part to an attribute entirely off the spreadsheet: trees. “You can hike above the tropical rain forest in the morning, kayak in the warm ocean waters at lunch and walk through the botanical gardens at midnight without having to be afraid you will get mugged,” says Christian Kubsch, general manager of the Singapore studio.

Casting itself as Asia's model suburbia has long been part of Singapore's plan. Since independence, in fact, the city-state has sought to fashion itself into something other than a concrete jungle, on the logic that bougainvillea-festooned parks and

terfronts is welling up from the grass roots. Politicians like Seoul Mayor Lee Myung Bak, who successfully championed the rehabilitation of an ancient downtown stream, have won accolades; thanks to his clean-up efforts, Lee is now a strong presidential contender. In contrast, Hong Kong's unchecked harbor development has triggered a powerful backlash against Chief Executive Donald Tsang. “In Asia, we're seeing a growing understanding that waterfronts are the most highly exposed development sites and provide opportunities for cities to showcase what their ambitions are,” says Richard Marshall, regional director for the urban-design and planning firm EDAA.

Singapore was the first Asian city to brand itself by its outward appearance. In the 1960s, founding leader Lee Kuan Yew set about making the former British trading post into a “garden city” replete with flowering trees and manicured parks. He dispatched officials to import hundreds of plant species from as far away as Africa and the Caribbean, fertilized public lands and imposed building codes that limited

TAKING BACK THE WATERFRONT

SHORELINES HAVE ALWAYS CONSTITUTED PRIME REAL ESTATE IN ASIA. NOW THE REGION'S CITY PLANNERS—LED BY SINGAPORE—ARE SEEING THE VALUE IN BEING GREEN.



banyan-lined thoroughfares would be “far more impressive and convincing than any sales pitch by a minister,” as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong once put it. Next week the city will further advance its goal when it officially unveils its own version of New York's Central Park, a massive green belt called Marina Bay. The master plan features a botanical garden, a beach and a giant conservatory—all linked by a grand promenade. “It will seamlessly extend the Central Business District, making the most of our assets as a lush tropical island,” says urban-development chief Cheong-Chua Koon Hean.

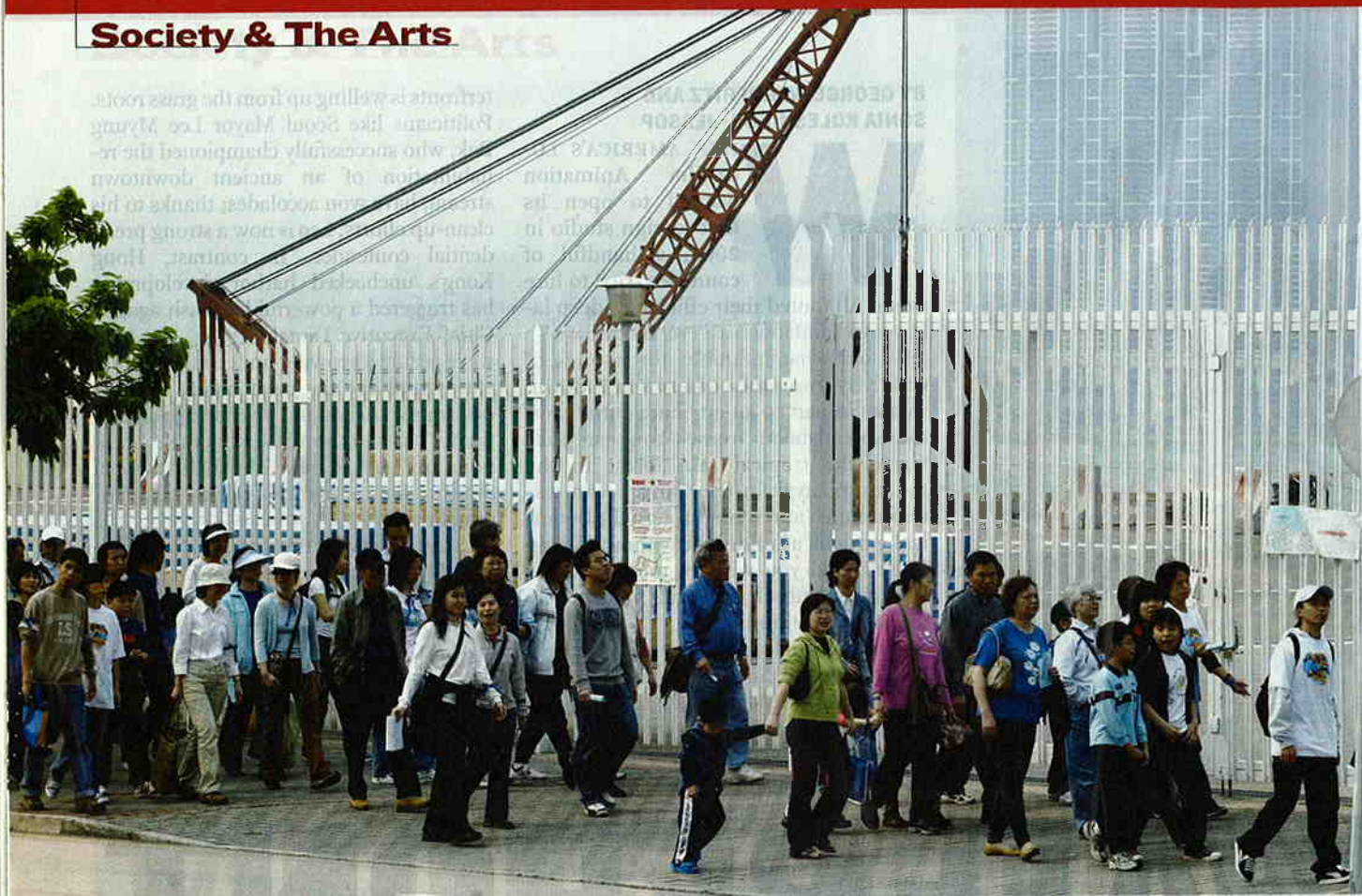
Singapore's neighbors are turning green, too—and not just with envy. From Busan to Bangalore, urban planners are beginning to rethink cityscapes that have grown haphazardly to the point of dysfunction. The aim isn't solely to attract foreign investors; homegrown opposition to unchecked construction, environmental degradation and destruction of historical wa-

skyscraper construction and promoted development of tree-lined residential areas. The unabashedly paternalistic model once earned Singapore the reputation as a “nanny state” in a region known for its all-night neon. Yet with many Asian cities now gridlocked and mired in pollution, the costs of laissez-faire development are more and more apparent—making Singapore's centralized approach increasingly appealing. “It has a top-down policy, and it has been very effective,” says Russell Arthur Smith, an urban-planning expert who has advised governments across Asia.

Hong Kong exemplifies what can go awry in a city without a coherent plan. During 150 years of colonial rule, it grew from a village into one of the world's busiest trading centers by gradually encroaching on its harbor, steadily narrowing the gap between

Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula to the north. Land revenues, a major source of government funding, encouraged development by the highest bidder. Today, Victoria

BAY WATCH: The proposed project would transform Singapore



Harbor is less than half its original size, and at its pinch-point the width has been reduced from 2,300 meters to just 900; the waterfront is lined with skyscrapers, elevated roadways and shopping malls.

A coalition of NGOs, politicians and key business leaders, backed by most residents, is now mobilizing to save Hong Kong's harbor. Last month legislators passed a nonbinding resolution to shelve an office complex planned for the last open waterfront space in the central financial district. "Development on the business-as-usual approach has gone far enough," says former legislator Christine Loh, founder of the think tank Civic Exchange. "The irony is that Hong Kong has the best natural endowment—a harbor set by mountains on both sides—but the worst urban planning."

Last year concerned bankers and industrialists formed the **Harbor Business Forum** to lobby the government for a coherent strategy. One of the group's fears is that rampant construction could actually undermine Hong Kong's fortunes by making it less attractive to foreign investors, a concept, says Marshall, which reflects Singapore's "broader understanding of eco-



nomics." In response, the government has empaneled the Harbour-front Enhancement Committee to draw up a master plan for the city. "The problem is that the government can't or won't get its head around delegating authority to a single agency," says Nicholas Brooke, a committee member. But is Hong Kong too far gone to be saved? "We're on the edge," says Brooke. "The danger now is inertia."

Hong Kong can find plenty of inspiration elsewhere in Asia. In Seoul, Mayor Lee championed complex projects by slashing through red tape. In just three years, he oversaw the removal of a seven-kilometer-long highway, the scouring of

the exposed streambed and the rebuilding of several historical footbridges. In Kaohsiung, Taiwan's southern port city, the once befouled Love River has been made over into what officials describe as a cultural basin complete with museums, a concert hall and a botanical garden. In China, efforts are underway to create public space along waterways in Shanghai; Tianjin, a port city southeast of Beijing, is undergoing a major face-lift, as are the waterfronts in Bangbu (Anhui province), Panyu (Guangdong) and Quanzhou (Fujian). "All of this is based on the same realization that improving a city's environment can improve its economics," says Marshall.

Still, Singapore is setting the pace. Its 10-year plan is to link scores of green patches in a contiguous ribbon of parks, gardens and landscaped paths that would allow joggers and bikers to traverse the city-state. The scheme calls for the creation of an additional 1,000 hectares of parkland by 2015—and even a modification to Singapore's "garden city" moniker. The new one, explains one official, is "a city within a garden." In a region increasingly identified with urban sprawl, it should be an easy sell.

SAVE OUR CITIES:
Protesters in Hong Kong (top), pre-makeover Seoul

With B. J. LEE in Seoul and JONATHAN ADAMS in Taipei