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Culture in New Cities as soft power Acumen

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Soft power is a concept developed by Joseph Nye of Harvard University to describe the ability of organisations or even states to attract and co-opt rather than to coerce (hard power). In a world of global competitiveness soft power has become a smart tool to avoid violent conflicts and promote social values, cultural traditions, sportsmanship, technology and intelligence.

Although the UK, Germany and the USA still lead international soft power rankings, emerging countries have made serious efforts to improve their soft power.

By way of example, culture and art are relevant means to improve soft power.

"The NAC aims to nurture the arts in Singapore and to make it an integral part of the lives of all Singaporeans. We celebrate excellence in the arts and work to make it accessible to all. We believe the arts to be a vital avenue for self-expression, learning and reflection, and are constantly striving to create a sustainable environment within which the arts can thrive. We spur local artists on towards entertaining, enriching and inspiring Singapore and the rest of the world as well."

This mission statement of the Singaporean National Arts Council reflects the quest of an economically and socially successful emerging city-state in the tropics of Asia to become a cultural epicentre for both its own population and for the larger world. In the meantime, statements of this kind could be found in similar wording in the founding documents of many public institutions of emerging countries across the globe.

Despite big public and private investments into art and culture, the development of international co-operations between Western and non-Western arts organisations and an intense collaboration and exchange between cultural workers across the globe it has been seen that establishing a viable eco-system for the arts is a complex and long-term project with many threats to fail.

Cities are the laboratories for the emergence and constant re-formulation of cultural activities, trends, formats and professions. Therefore, it seems important to look into cases representing the development of culture and arts in few cities and understand them as case studies on a resilient art practice.

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It seems as if the history of the city has been taking a dramatic turn for quite some time. The reasons for this turn are the rapid growth of the world's population and an accompanying radical urbanisation of larger territories. Although demographic projections vary depending upon the source, almost all relevant studies suggest that the world's population will rise up to 9 billion people by the year 2100. At the same time, experts assume that all the babies born in one day, that is, a total of 140 000 children, will live in cities in future.

Population distribution by continent is also subject to drastic change. The share of Europeans and North Americans in the world's population will continuously decrease over the next fifty years. In 2050, Europe will make up only 7% of the global population, compared to almost three times as many Africans and eight times as many Asians.

It is hardly surprising, then, that great private and public efforts are being made in the non-Western world to build cities to house the new population. A few years ago, the People's Republic of China announced an urbanisation programme for 300 million people. Cities, however, don't come into existence on a drawing board, nor should we imagine the migration from rural areas to cities as a well-ordered, organised relocation from villages to newly built housing estates. Over the past years, large cities across the world have absorbed considerable numbers of people, in many cases, however, without being prepared for this influx of new inhabitants. Never-ending suburbs and a lack of appropriate infrastructure have emerged, creating a hodgepodge of rural and urban living conditions that eludes any familiar urbanist classification. The term "mega-city" describes a trend toward the super-city, whose reality, however, can no longer be reconciled with the urban-planning experiences of the past.

The culture of a city, the history of its population, and the legends and anecdotes illustrating their specific character all form the substance from which concepts designed to attract tourists or capital can be formulated. At the same time, a city's culture is a delicate and sensitive ecological system, which responds to immigration and emigration, to gentrification and tourism, and to economic downturns and upswings, often with unforeseeable consequences. Due to their economic specifics, their particular demographics, or their climate conditions, some cities exemplify the laboratory-like character of the city of today and tomorrow.
Once again Singapore: 50 years ago, the city-state was a young nation, placed on a vulnerable archipelago, with a small British-oriented elite and an overabundance of penniless fishermen and domestic servants.
Twenty years later, he would have encountered a scene of unprecedented urbanization. Singapore grew both out to sea, and up to the sky. The city's new powerbrokers named their development strategy *Vision 99*, whose success saw people flocking to the small nation from not only the furthest corners of Asia, but eventually also the West. Singapore has emerged as a unique economic – and in many ways social – project. Today, Singapore has the highest investment potential in the world. It is home to some 3 million locals, as well as roughly as many foreigners – a diverse mix of people who enjoy a standard of living that makes even residents of highly-developed Western nations envious. Happy Tropics?

As Western nations struggling with political populism, an aging population, and economic stagnation face the frightening possibility of the demise of their social contract, Singapore is evolving their own way, developing what some call the *Guardian State*. Understanding culture as a mirror of society, instrument of national identification, and site for exchange with other cultures allows us to view it as a litmus test for the resilience of a societal concept. Very likely, Singapore is a (small) soft power on the rise.

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