Political tool or quality experience? Urban livability and the Singaporean state’s global city aspirations

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In this article, I argue that the concept of urban livability is used as a political tool by the Singaporean state to further its pursuit of global city status. I show how the state uses neighborhood “upgrading” as a mechanism to inscribe strategic meanings of livability onto Singapore’s residential landscapes with the expectation that residents will align their experiences of livability with the former. I use an embodied approach to analyze state manipulation of two residential landscapes—condominiums and public housing—as an active means of official attempts to create two types of citizen-subjects. By juxtaposing the state’s operationalization of livability against livability as understood in the context of residents’ localized lifeworlds, I show how indeterminate outcomes arise from the state’s livability project.

Keywords: global city; governmentality; housing; livability; place; Singapore

Urban livability in context

The concept of urban livability has recently become a major concern in urban geography and urban policy. Historically, when ideas of “livability” and quality of life were first conceived during the Industrial Revolution, urban livability was understood largely in terms of basic survivability, including sanitation, access to utilities, crime rates, and housing quality (Pacione, 1986). In the last generation, however, planners, states, and researchers have moved to incorporate measures of socio-psychological conditions and more “subjective” evaluations and experiences of city life (Pacione, 2003). This has included quantification and qualification of indicators more associated with the quality of urban life space, including the availability of parking spaces, the number of sheltered walkways, and the general walkability of neighborhoods (Balsas, 2004; Pacione, 2003).

In addition, more recent approaches posit livability as a relative concept whose precise meaning depends on the place, time, and purpose of the assessment and on the value system of the assessor (Pacione, 1990). This view frames urban livability as a behavioral–perceptual function of the human–environment interface, and in the past several decades has formed the basis for the study of emotion and identity in place, encapsulated in the notion of “sense of place” (Zeisel, 1981). That is, researchers now recognize that how people make sense of their environments has a profound impact on their perceptions of livability.

The early 2000s saw a revitalization of Lynch’s (1960) premise that a livable landscape should possess the quality of “imageability,” defined as the ability to evoke strong emotions in an observer. Amidst inter-city competition for human and financial capital,

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states promulgate carefully calculated images of urban livability, envisaged by Florida (2002) as an ideal that offers an urban life packed full of intense, high-quality, and multidimensional experiences in work, living, and play spaces. This approach involves two central claims: first, that urban fortunes turn on a city’s capacity to attract and retain a mobile class of creative individuals whose aggregate efforts have become the driver of economic development in the knowledge-based economy, and second, that a livable city will attract and retain these creatives (Florida, 2002). Florida’s claims build on work suggesting that quality of life has now become an integral factor in modern business location decisions, especially among high technology and knowledge-production firms. This contemporary re-adoption reflects some of the tendencies of the new-regionalist literature in its parochial focus on lifestyle and livability as assets for economic competition (see McCann, 2007). Florida’s claims—and their adoption by cities across the globe—have also been the subject of a great deal of critical debate within urban and economic geography (see, e.g., Leslie & Hunt, 2013; Peck, 2005).

Following Ley (1990) and Pacione (2003), I argue that analyses of urban livability must be placed in a broader context to better elucidate the concept and its implications for cities and their inhabitants. This is especially true if urban research aims to be pragmatic and/or applied in its approach. Bunkšé (1990) identified an absence of literature on urban development’s effect on livability in the context of specific cultures and locations; two decades on, many scholars have addressed this gap in studies of Western cities, but less so in other contexts. I argue that the decontextualized study of urban livability results in its depoliticization, omitting attention to power in such studies. Apart from Ley (1980), who briefly writes of urban livability as an ideological construct supporting urban embourgeoisement and social polarization, subsequent works have tended to deal with power less directly (see Anderson, 1988; Balsas, 2004; Lees & Demeritt, 1998; Southworth, 2003).

Analyzing the relationships between different contexts of livability is crucial, as context has profound impacts on urban realities. In this article, I show how the dynamics between the Singaporean state’s appropriation of livability as a political tool, and residents’ understandings of livability as a unique and embodied experience, result in polarized experiences for different groups of residents. I provide an overview of the relationship between the Singaporean state’s aspirations of maintaining and furthering its status as a global city and its process of attempting to interpolate specific subjects through a state-led livability project, as well as the process of subjectification that ultimately results in outcomes somewhat different from what the state envisages. I first contextualize the concept of livability with respect to the Singaporean state’s global city aspirations. Already considered a leading global city, few cities have been as explicit as Singapore in furthering their aspirations as such (Chang & Huang, 2005). Massive imaging projects have been accompanied by a long-term Concept Plan that promulgates a vision of an economically vibrant and livable city (Soh & Yuen, 2011). In this article, I argue that livability is used as a political tool by the Singaporean state through attempts to inscribe notions of livability, characterized by material consumption, modernity, prestige, and conviviality, onto residential landscapes in Singapore. The state’s goal is to align state-inscribed notions of livability with residents’ individual experiences of neighborhood livability. The mechanism is to manipulate the physical environment—thorough neighborhood “upgrading”—with the aim of engendering a specific “sense of place” in various neighborhoods. This alignment is aimed at engendering a national sense of place and is the basis for the interpolation of two specialized subjects—the “intimate cosmopolitan” and the “self-sacrificing heartlander”—that are expected to enact roles of commitment and sacrifice to ensure the state’s continued prosperity in the global economy.
Second, through juxtaposing the state’s understanding of livability against the conceptualization of livability emerging from specific, localized resident lifeworlds, I show how ambiguous outcomes result from a (mis)alignment between state understandings and the embodied experiences of various groups of residents. This indeterminacy is exacerbated by extraneous factors including migrants’ commitment to their own countries and the state’s patronage of a certain group of residents, both of which lead to variegated outcomes inherent in structure–agency interactions (Archer, 2003). I posit that these outcomes are in fact contradictory to the state’s goal of maintaining and expanding its status as a global city.

Contextualizing livability: global city Singapore

The objective is to develop Singapore into a top-class world city. The globally connected, multi-cultural and cosmopolitan city-State [offers] a conducive environment [for] creative and knowledge-driven industries.

—Economic Development Board, Global Competitiveness Report (2008)

Singapore’s capital-attracting aspirations

Singapore’s global city aspirations are focused on expanding its influence over the organization of global capital flows, such that value created both within and outside of Singapore can be more adroitly captured by the nation-state. That is, the goal is to facilitate capture of a higher share of the profits from global transactions (Henderson, Dicken, Hess, Coe & Yeung, 2002). To achieve this, the state effectively competes with other cities to create the conditions most conducive to capital accumulation (Harvey, 1989a, 1989b). Amongst other means, this involves legitimizing new construction and regeneration projects. The new “Downtown @ Marina Bay,” site of the world-renowned Marina Bay Sands and the Marina Bay Financial Centre (see supplementary Figure 1), has been vaunted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) as the “signature image” of Singapore:

The URA’s master plan for Downtown @ Marina Bay aims to turn Singapore’s international business and financial hub into a distinctive and global location for business, working, and leisure. This is to attract more relevant businesses and talent to invest and grow in Singapore.
(quoted in Li, 2005)

Such spectacularization of the urban landscape is what Wigley (2008, p. 155) calls the “hyper-concentration of image power”—a means to attract the “right” people and their capital in a climate of intensified inter-urban competition (Harvey, 1989b). The state’s developmental stance corresponds with “the contemporary repertoire of post-industrial mega-flagship projects and consumption spaces” (Soh & Yuen, 2011, p. 6), identified as the prerequisite to attract capital in the new economy (Hubbard, 1996).

The remaking of the city to attract talent underlines the state’s entrepreneurial efforts to attract economic growth. In this policy regime, human capital is identified as an essential driver, especially when the in-migration of human capital is expected to be accompanied by an influx of multinational corporations and high-value services. Then-Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s February 2000 speech at Nanyang Technological University encapsulated the rhetoric of human capital-based international competitiveness:
To succeed, Singapore must be a cosmopolitan center, able to attract, retain and absorb talent from all over the world. We have to become a cosmopolitan city that attracts and welcomes talent in business, academia, or performing arts. This will add to Singapore’s vibrancy and secure our place in a global network of cities and excellence. (quoted in Yeoh, 2012, p. 48)

As a corollary to state rhetoric on the significance of foreign talent, programs were initiated by the Ministry of Manpower and the Economic Development Board to help domestic and foreign companies recruit foreign talent, including a company grant scheme to reduce costs of recruitment and relocation and pathways to permanent residence and citizenship for foreign investors and entrepreneurs (Hui, 1997). Generous resources are also poured into training and educating a portion of the local and expatriate populations, with the goal of creating “global cosmopolitan citizens” (Hui, 1997). Increasing emphasis has been placed on the role of local educational institutions in stimulating economic growth through research, technology commercialization, high-tech spin-offs, international talent recruitment, and fostering an “entrepreneurial mindset” among graduates (Wong, Ho & Singh, 2007).

Crafting the “livable” global city

The state has recently launched a program to improve the spaces in which Singapore’s residents live, work, and play (Soh & Yuen, 2011). This focus on livability underlines the state’s effort at “rooting” local and foreign talent within Singapore, an effort that has been ongoing since at least the mid-1990s. In an era of rapid flows across national borders, and as more areas compete for global city status, governments seek to foster urban environments that are locally “distinctive” and will be attractive to hyper-mobile segments of the global population (Appadurai, 1997; Guillen, 2001). Based on this trend, Singapore’s Ministry of National Development promotes a vision of the city-state as “an endearing home and a distinctive global city.” The aim is to further the development of business infrastructure in the city while enhancing living and leisure spaces: the state seeks to cultivate a vibrant global city that will be a commercial draw, also replete with energy, excitement, and entertainment (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2001). This focus on the so-called “holistic” development of Singapore underscores the state’s mission to make the city globally distinctive as a place to work and, most importantly, live.

Housing has consistently been one of the main foci of the state’s livability project. In his 1999 National Day Rally speech, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong explicitly linked Singapore’s global competitiveness with changes in the housing landscape. Now, the state seeks to replicate its municipal livability project at the scale of the neighborhood, as the latter is seen to relate directly to people’s everyday lives (cf., Massey, 2005). In emphasizing progress, modernity, and community—which have been features of official discourse since the 1980s (Wee, 1993)—the state promotes a contemporary narrative of livability that manifests in rapid construction of private condominiums and “upgrading” of public housing run by the state Housing Development Board (HDB).¹

²Housing is increasingly associated with consumption-based lifestyle aspirations of Singaporeans (Wong & Yap, 2003). The cosmopolitan population of Singapore—constituted by a disproportionate number of people with high levels of disposable income—calls for more private housing, which is generally perceived as superior to public housing. Meanwhile, those who cannot afford private housing push for an enhanced living experience in HDB neighborhoods. The state’s response to these demands is related to its developmental aspirations and goals of legitimating the single-party political system
(Wong & Yap, 2003). Thus, housing becomes a crucial political issue—one through which demands for improvements to public and private spaces are negotiated and simultaneously intermix with the state attempts to influence Singaporeans’ perceptions of the government. The latter effort has crystalized around the state’s efforts to inscribe a “sense of place” in Singapore’s neighborhoods.

**Crafting resident experiences of Singapore’s neighborhoods**

Place identity is often a political target. Friedmann (2010) notes that efforts to concretize a certain experience of place-identity often involve selective representation of particular images of a place. State governments aim to inscribe a sense of place with the hope that populations will develop shared emotional involvement and a self-identification that aligns with the state’s vision (Pratt, 1998). Based on Zeisel’s (1981) understanding of livability as a marker for sense of place, I argue below that the Singaporean state exploits specific notions of livability in its strategic efforts to craft a sense of place that supports the aforementioned global city ambitions. For condominium neighborhoods, material consumption is used as a marker of a privileged, prestigious, and modern lifestyle. Similar notions of progress and modernity are projected in HDB neighborhoods based on material improvements. The state attempts to create unique identities in every HDB neighborhood (Teo & Huang, 1996) based on the notion that this will create communities that collectively identify with and develop an attachment to their living environment.

In recent years, the state has increased its emphasis on livability within HDB neighborhoods (see supplementary Figure 2). Resident interaction and use of spaces outside the home are encouraged. Amenities like upgraded lifts, sheltered walkways, playgrounds, and parks have been added (Yuen, 2004). Construction of areas for social activity (e.g., pavilions and void decks) is intended to nurture a sense of place (Ooi & Tan, 1992). The state aims to transform each neighborhood into a “field of care” (Tuan, 1974), where residents experience “existential insideness”—a subliminal association with their neighborhood (Relph, 1976).

Although upgrading is costly and inconveniences residents, these attempts to render public housing synonymous with middle-class luxury are instrumental in state attempts to manage what Pow (2009a) has called the “politics of envy.” That is, housing upgrading is a state strategy intended to manage Singaporeans’ growing lifestyle aspirations and to foreclose perceptions of unequal status between private and public housing (Teo & Kong, 1997). In doing so, the state works to perpetuate its political legitimacy by crafting a national sense of place, one that focuses on the universal availability of quality living environments.

Private condominiums, which have exclusive associations similar to gated communities, have become a ubiquitous fixture of the Singaporean skyline (see supplementary Figure 3). Condominium developments are encompassed by walls, fences, or earth banks covered with bushes and shrubs, with a secured entrance (Low, 2003). As crime rates are low in Singapore, condominium gates serve as symbolic capital, representing the prestigious lifestyle of condominium owners rather than fortifying against the perceived and real dangers of public streets (Blakely & Snyder, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984). The prestige encapsulated by such neighborhoods stems from the networks fostered within an exclusive community of members sharing similar social and class statuses (Low, 2004), a communal experience of what Pow and Kong (2007) call the attainment of “the good life.” In sum, the state exerts significant influence in public–private partnerships that facilitate condominium
development and its estheticization, as well as the marketing of the lifestyle associated with condominium living (Pow, 2009b; Raposo, 2006).

The creation of cosmopolitan subjects

If housing is the canvas onto which livability is inscribed, the goal of the Singaporean state is the creation of two subjects slated to play a complementary role in ensuring the continued success of Singapore’s global city aspirations. In this section, I deploy Foucault’s concept of governmentality—the array of techniques and procedures deployed in governing “the conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1991, 2000, 2007) and the creation of self-governing subjects that produce and reproduce the “norms” of society (Rose, 1996)—to understand this process. Fundamental to governmentality is the discursive-material construction of space (Ettlinger, 2011). Space is rendered visible and governable to produce what Foucault terms “technologies of the self” (Ettlinger, 2011)—the collective self-mastery of bodies to serve the ends of state power. Following Ettlinger and Foucault, I analyze state manipulation of two residential landscapes—condominiums and HDB flats—as an active means of official attempts to create two types of citizen-subjects. The first is the “intimate cosmopolitan,” a participant in the global economy, ensuring high levels of productivity and consumerism while remaining sentimentally rooted in Singapore. The intimate cosmopolitan is

...able to plug and play into the global economy... familiar with global trends and lifestyles and feels comfortable working and living in Singapore as well as overseas. (Singapore 21 Committee, 1999, n.p.)

The second subject is the “self-sacrificing heartlander,” one who exemplifies self-sacrifice by prioritizing state interests at the expense of personal interests:

The heartlander is parochial in interest and orientation, makes his/her living within the country and plays a major role in maintaining core values and social stability. (Goh, 1999, n.p.)

I argue that the state’s goal is for these two types of subjects to align their experiences of livability, encapsulated in a specific neighborhood’s “sense of place,” with state- inscribed notions of livability—that is, for residents to “raise lived perceptions to the percept and lived affectations to the affect” (Rose, 1999, p. 32). This national sense of place is the means through which the fulfillment of the roles of commitment and sacrifice, essential to the state’s global city aspirations, are inscribed. This entails both local and expatriate cosmopolitan subjects identifying with and using their creativity to achieve state goals of economic development and global influence in the knowledge-based economy, even at the expense of personal time and freedom (Olds & Yeung, 2004). In particular, the ideal heartlander subjects place state objectives above their own as an act of self-sacrifice, acceptance, and compromise while inhibiting the development of political resistance (Hubbard, 1995), maintaining the social harmony essential for continued foreign investment, and maintaining a beneficial environment for the in-migration of cosmopolitan expatriates.

Contextualizing livability: lifeworlds and sense of place

Pacione’s (1990) review of the urban livability literature highlights the subjective nature of the concept, urging planners to consider the city not only in its form and function, but
in the mind. He enumerates urban impact theories that are focused on the concept of cognitive mapping. The ability to cognitively navigate one’s environment (Ittelson, Proshansky, Rivlin & Winkel, 1974) holds significance for issues of urban legibility (Lynch, 1960), where cities contain individual structures and whole areas that are clearly interconnected in ways that citizens can appreciate (Pacione, 1990, p. 11). The subjective livability that Pacione describes—the relationship between self and environment—is thus a function of both mind and body. A strong sense of place, felt viscerally through the senses (Sell, Taylor & Zube, 1984), lays the foundation for a quality experience of livability; it is the Singaporean state’s goal to align these corporeal experiences to its material inscriptions of livability in the built environment.

The idea that a “sense of place” is a form of embodied knowing, while not detracting from the influence of a state-inscribed sense of place, shows that it cannot be reduced to such. Rather, each individual body creates a unique sense of place, continually in dialogue with senses of place promoted by various power structures. Embodied sense of place may thus be aligned with, irrelevant to, or deployed as active resistance against such inscriptions (Walmsley, 2005). This (mis)alignment is a cursor for the indeterminate outcomes, as shown in Figure 1, from state attempts to elicit an alignment between individuals’ embodied experiences of place and a national representation of livability in residential neighborhoods.

Methodology
I juxtapose the two aforementioned contextualizations of livability through investigating the nature of alignment between a state-inscribed sense of place and an embodied sense of place for three different groups of residents: local cosmopolitans, expatriate cosmopolitans and heartlanders. Additionally, I investigate the extent to which this alignment appears to engender the national sense of place envisioned by the state. To achieve this, I utilize a two-pronged approach. First, I disseminated 120 questionnaires to residents of three study neighborhoods. The questions—both closed- and open-ended—aimed to garner insight on residents’ feelings for their neighborhoods and the nation in general. I also canvassed neighborhoods for opinions related to national issues like inter-cultural dynamics. I visited two condominium neighborhoods, both similar with regards to property value. One neighborhood is differentiated by its high concentration of expatriate residents. The two HDB estates I visited were chosen to epitomize the contemporary public housing landscape of Singapore—one a mature neighborhood that has been newly upgraded and the other a younger neighborhood populated by couples.

In my fieldwork, I adopted Kusenbach’s (2003) “go-along” methodology to investigate how residents make sense of their immediate neighborhoods, “going along” with one selected resident in each neighborhood. A hybrid between participant observation and interviewing, go-alongs occur when fieldworkers accompany informants on their daily activities while asking questions that relate to these activities (Kusenbach, 2003). This allowed me to observe residents’ spatial practices in situ while they reported their sensory experiences and interpretations. By “going along” with three residents from different neighborhoods, I was able to better understand their unique “senses of place.” And, through asking questions, I drew connections between how this sense of place related to my participants’ feelings for the nation of Singapore. This methodology reflects an ontological starting point that landscapes are both constructed and lived, as sociopolitical structures are fleshed out in the everyday context of human practice.
In addition, I inquire whether such an alignment will indeed develop a national sense of place. I measure this by mapping data garnered against Shamai’s (1991) sense of place scale (Table 1). This hermeneutic scale is significant in that it helps determine how well different groups fulfill their roles of commitment and sacrifice based on a numerical measurement that denotes particular characteristics and actions that result from different extents of sense of place. This affords us an understanding of the extent to which state aims have been fulfilled by the subjects called forth through the state’s livability schemes.

Figure 1. A summary of the paper’s argument.
Using Shamai’s sense of place scale as a hermeneutic guide, I roughly place the state’s expectations of cosmopolitan subjects’ national sense of place at level five. They are expected to take an active role in the national economy because of their commitment to the nation (Canter, 1977, p. 178). This implies investment of human resources like talent, time, or money—the very creativity, industry, and entrepreneurialism of the creative class upon which the state’s global city aspirations hinge. The heartlander subjects are expected to be at level six; the state assumes that a national sense of place will induce a readiness to give up personal interests for the greater good of the nation, entailing the sacrifice of important values like prosperity and freedom (Shamai, 1991). This is essential for the sustained national harmony and political legitimacy on which the desired influx of global capital is understood to depend.

Findings and discussion

This section summarizes my “go-alongs” with residents from each of the three types of neighborhoods. Each resident generously accompanied me through his neighborhood and I recorded their sensory experiences as these were shared with me.

**Lukas**: private condominium resident (local cosmopolitan)

Asked to describe his sensory experiences as he goes about daily activities in his neighborhood, it emerges that Lukas’ embodied experience is largely based upon his condominium’s facilities and landscape. Manicured greenery, poolside fountains, sinuous walking paths, swimming pools, the gym, and the football court are all touchstones through which his embodied sense of place is developed. Lukas also comments on how his “clean” and “odorless” neighborhood embellishes his experience. The deodorized spaces of the condominium neighborhood, together with its shiny surfaces present a distinctively odorless *mis-en-scène* (el-Khoury, 1996) that reflects modern capital; a utopian living environment clearly distinguished from public housing. The embodied

| Level | Sense of place | Description |
|-------|----------------|-------------|
| 0     | Not having any sense of place | It cannot be taken for granted that everyone senses his or her place |
| 1     | Knowledge of being located in a place | Recognition that they live in a place, but do not have any kinds of feeling that binds them to this place |
| 2     | Belonging to a place | Rudimentary feeling of belonging to a place |
| 3     | Attachment to a place | Emotional attachment at a higher level; place becomes the centre of a personal and collective experience |
| 4     | Identifying with place goals | People recognize the goals of the place and are in conformity with them |
| 5     | Involvement in a place | The resident takes an active role in the community because of a commitment to a place. It implies investment of human resources like time, talent, or money |
| 6     | Sacrifice for a place | Ultimate stage of sense of place. Involves deep commitment and sacrifice of important attributes and values such as prosperity and freedom. There is a readiness to give up personal interests for the sake of the larger interest of the place. |

Table 1. Shamai’s sense of place scale (1991).
experience of local condominium residents aligns with the state-inscribed sense of place—a brand of livability characterized by a modern, prestigious, and exclusive lifestyle, which is due in part to the agglomeration of amenities and the symbolic capital that a condominium accords its residents (Table 2).

Eighty-nine per cent of the local cosmopolitans living in condominiums surveyed exhibit what I classify as a strong national sense of place. A significant 61% are willing to make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the nation, because, in the words of one respondent, “such commitments benefit the nation, which in turn benefit [cosmopolitans].” This alignment can be attributed in part to the perceived success of the livability project. First, local cosmopolitans identify their condominiums as emblems of their (and the state’s) success. To them, to own a condominium is to achieve a certain measure of livability in the objective and symbolic sense. That the state is able to live up to their demands and expectations elicits a significant acceptance of the state by this particular group of residents (Wong & Yap, 2003). One survey participant sums it up as follows:

To own a private condominium shows that you have made it. Condominiums are considered a lifestyle choice; if not, they are seen as a platform for greater things. That the government can facilitate development of such housing to fulfill demand shows its strength on the economic front, and that it appreciates those who can help it further its economic objectives.

Second, and related, local cosmopolitans’ experience of livability in their neighborhoods reinforces a sense of place for these neighborhoods and, concomitantly, for the nation. This becomes a sort of feedback loop that entails residents embracing the state’s global city aspirations to a significant extent, even if this loyalty is based upon the belief that it will eventually benefit themselves and their families. Put another way, these residents are committed to the state because they are able to attribute their privileged living and working conditions to the successful symbiotic relationship they share with the state. A survey participant states that:

Table 2. Lukas’ sensory experiences of his neighborhood.

| Sense  | Activity |
|--------|----------|
| Sight | This condo[minimum] has a lot of trees, flowers, and greenery. I quite like to look at the greenery and relax my eyes. They say Singapore is a clean and green country, and somehow I think this condo reflects that. It is a joy to walk around and see no litter or dog [excrement]. |
| Hearing | I like to sit by the pool, next to the two little turtle fountains. It is a good place to read because it is quiet, with soft sounds of the fountains. Sometimes I sit by the pool and watch children play. I like to hear kids screaming and running and shouting. Reminds me of my own children. |
| Smell | I don’t really like the smell of food, especially when your neighbor cooks very strong-smelling dishes, like curry. Somehow the smells here are very well insulated! It always smells fresh here. |
| Touch | I go to the gym a lot; we need not put up with the stares of public users. Less crowded is also good, imagine touching the sweaty bodies of others or lying on the sweaty equipment. I like to sit by the poolside. The breeze can get really strong at night and the feeling is just great. I always fall asleep [by the pool]. We go swimming right after football—the feeling of jumping into the cool swimming pool right after a hot and challenging game of football is indescribable. |
I think most of us in the creative sectors are willing to sacrifice time and freedom to ensure that we do a job. We should take advantage of the globally connected working environment the government has built for us. Better productivity from us [professionals] will lead to a more robust development of our economy, which in turn will open more doors for us, as well as our loved ones.

According to Shamai’s scale, then, the local cosmopolitan body scores a five or six. The livability project has successfully created a group of (inadvertently or otherwise) self-governing intimate cosmopolitans—willing to make sacrifices to ensure a high level of productivity toward achieving state goals while remaining sentimentally anchored to Singapore. These are considered the ideal citizen subject—the product of the modern state (Nair, 1993). This group corroborates the positive correlation between the alignment of embodied neighborhood sense of place with state-inscribed neighborhood sense of place and the ability of this combination to engender a national sense of place.

Scott: private condominium resident (expatriate cosmopolitan)

The go-along with Scott is significant because of the culturally inflected nature of his embodied experiences (Table 3). For example, the desires to sunbathe (topless), hold potluck parties, and walk around topless and without footwear all partially stem from Scott’s cultural background. Enjoying such activities help Scott develop a strong embodied sense of place in his neighborhood. However, these, as with Lukas, are likely to occur due to the condominium’s material and symbolic luxuries. Without the array of facilities, the aforementioned activities could not occur. Equally essential is the micro-culture of the condominium. There is no public space in Singapore where residents can engage in such activities freely and without censure. An expatriate survey participant adds:

Table 3. Scott’s sensory experiences of his neighborhood.

| Sense          | Activity                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sight          | There are so many well-dressed people. It’s a sight for sore eyes... just shows how much Singaporeans, in this neighborhood at least, value their appearance. ... nothing wrong with that. |
| Touch          | Love the sun here! I could just lay by the pool and get a good tan. The feel of sunlight on your skin is magical, [isn’t it]? Where I come from, there is no good sun[light]. So I make the most of it. The place is clean and really nice to walk around [in]. We (wife and he) like to walk around barefooted and I think our neighborhood makes that easy. |
| Hearing/Smell/Taste | In the United Kingdom, we do potluck dinners for traditional holidays. I love how we sit by the pool and gather everyone, chat, have a beer, smell the roast and enjoy the delicious food. Just like home, maybe even better? |
| Miscellaneous  | We love to take walks around the condo. This neighborhood is just so expansive. You see something different every day; you never get sick of walking around here. My missus [wife] loves to sunbathe topless, and I love to walk around the neighborhood topless. We can’t help it if we love the sun. I’ve heard from colleagues that Singapore is strict, so I guess we’d be in with the authorities pretty much if we [did this] in public housing. |
There is an unspoken acceptance of multiculturalism in that residents who experience something new to them embrace [it] rather than complain about it. As long as nobody acts in an offensive manner, everyone is cool [with it].

Such a micro-culture, together with the material affordances of the condominium, allows expatriate residents to experience their neighborhood on the ground (Ingold, 2004). This can take place in the form of the “wayfare” (Ingold, 2000), where walking as a means of pleasure helps residents to develop a peripatetic sense of place for their neighborhood, the variety of embodied sensations that form the basis of a close connection to place (Adams, 2001). As Scott remarks, “you’ll never get sick of walking around [this place].”

Another catalyst to Scott’s embodied sense of place is what Walmsley (2005) terms the sensory experiences of sight, sound, and taste in conviviality through commensality that create lines of difference and belonging. The sounds of revelry, the aromas and the tastes and textures of food enjoyed at a potluck dinner by the pool culminate in a sensory phantasmagoria that performs an exclusive identity of privilege and belonging (Law, 2001).

Like their local counterparts, the embodied experiences of cosmopolitan expatriates align fairly tightly with the state inscriptions of livability and sense of place:

When you come to Southeast Asia, you’d have certain reservations about the place… but I must say Singapore is really modern. In particular, this condominium, I think it’s more modern than our apartments back home.

This match should not be attributed completely to the state, as it had not directly planned for condominiums to cater to the cultural specificities of expatriates. However, the design of the condominium creates a space of possibility for the activities Scott describes. This fortuitous match forms the basis of the alignment between expatriate residents’ embodied neighborhood sense of place and the state-inscribed sense of place.

Only 17% of expatriates surveyed claim a national sense of place, while 83% claim a sense of place in their condominium. To 86% of the expatriates surveyed, their condominiums function as encapsulated, self-sufficient living environments. Evidently, an alignment between represented and embodied neighborhood sense of place does not automatically engender a national sense of place. The spaces beyond their condominium and workplace represent foreign waters, as Scott puts bluntly:

I do feel out of place whenever I venture beyond the familiar sites of Orchard Road, Shenton Way or my condominium. Singapore is actually very different from the UK.

All but two expatriate respondents agree that they feel a stronger sense of place for their country of origin than for Singapore. Because the state disallows a policy of dual-citizenship, expatriates who are offered permanent residency/citizenship are compelled to forego that of their home nation. Faced with such a situation, 92% of respondents would not forsake their original citizenship. Transnational mobility, it appears, may ironically strengthen national loyalty (Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000).

Generally, expatriates score a maximum of four for national sense of place. While go-along responses show that their embodied neighborhood sense of place is well-aligned with state inscriptions, it follows that such an alignment may not result in the state’s intended national sense of place, especially when extraneous factors are considered. Expatriates embody what Kumar (1979) terms “bonds without bondage”—an ability to identify with
national goals and the image of modernity (Shamai, 1991), but still asserting one’s own national identity and transnational mobility, unwilling to become “bondaged” to the host nation. Since its inception, the state has been perennially proactive in seeking and retaining expatriate talent to drive global economic development (Beaverstock, 2011). While this group features strongly in the state’s efforts at subject formation, then, these subjects are not ideal insofar as they are “not intimate”—that is, they are likely to gravitate to wherever benefits are better. The volatility in supply of expatriate talent means that these subjects cannot be relied upon to provide a consistent supply of “creative production.”

Lim: HDB resident (the heartlander)

My go-along with Lim shows how everyday experience transcends the “here and now,” as people weave previous knowledge and biography into immediate situated action (Kusenbach, 2003). Overwhelming use of “last time” in his responses suggests past experiences impact Lim’s experience of the present. Such nostalgia stems from the emotional affliction incurred by the fragmentation and eradication of familiar places, community networks, and solidarities (Soh & Yuen, 2011). The loss of familiar sensory experiences has fundamentally altered Lim’s sense of place for his neighborhood; “that feeling” he once had “becomes different.” Such changes are an inevitable function of neighborhood “upgrading,” leading residents to contemplate a balance between an increased material livability and decreased intangibles like friendship, neighborliness, and nostalgia (Peh & Lin, 2007), all of which constitute a dynamic sense of place for their neighborhood. Lim says:

I know Singapore wants to be a global city, but I don’t care [for it]. I am just happy to have my “kopi-o” and chat with my friends here. I think everything was best the way it was.

To generalize, heartlanders as defined by the state are often parochial in interest and orientation and tend to play out their lives within the confines of their neighborhoods and the nation (Goh, 1999). The fundamental paradox is then one of “past vs. future”—situated in the conflict between heartlanders’ embodied nostalgia and State-inscriptions of progress and modernity. State attempts to redraw HDB neighborhoods along modernist lines are thus lost on such heartlanders, who are unable to align their lifeworlds to that envisioned as emblematic of contemporary Singapore. Lim says:

There really isn’t anywhere nice to go and hang out other than here [at the coffeeshop]. We feel out of place in Orchard [Road], with all the youngsters and ang mohs.

Scholars have argued that the politics of space involves a “power geometry” that affects the abilities of certain individuals and social groups to negotiate their spatialities and invoke a sense of place (Massey, 1998; Tuan, 1980). To evoke Lynch’s concept of urban legibility mentioned above (1960), heartlanders’ marginalization from the state’s global city aspirations manifests in the form of restrained spatialities, where residents feel out of place not only in certain parts of their upgraded neighborhood, but experience increasing difficulty in navigating and connecting with the larger structures and spaces of the nation. This ultimately leads to alienation from contemporary Singapore, and consequently, a diminishing national sense of belonging (Table 4).

It is undeniable that upgrading initiatives in HDB estates have significantly increased material livability for residents. Public housing in Singapore is considered the exemplar
for the modern world. With upgrading works continually undertaken, and with private
designers and developers hired to create distinctive communal identities distinguished by
geographical location (Goh, 2005), the state has hardly been prudent in improving public
housing. A survey participant states that:

Upgrading has had some benefits. The place is much cleaner, brighter, and not so smelly
anymore. But I don’t understand why they have to take away all the places that we love and
replace them with designs that look the same as everywhere else. And with them all my
memories go.

Yet, while 100% of the residents surveyed agreed that upgrading works had made their
neighborhoods a better living space, only 20% of these exalted their neighborhoods as the
ideal living environment. Aspirations of heartlanders change accordingly as the nation-
state globalizes. As such, basic upgrades (e.g., sheltered walkways and constant paintjobs)
are taken as a given rather than a luxury. The success of the built environment in
providing functional livability remains inadequate in compensating for the eradication
of a quality experience of livability imposed by renovation projects. This inhibits their
development of a sense of place for their neighborhood, and concomitantly, the nation.

Specifically, there are three contentious issues related to the livability project. First,
residents feel that the unique architectural features purported to be delivered by the state
are but cheap replicas of designs found in other parts of the world and serve scant purpose
stylistically or functionally. A survey participant states that:

They like to build these outdoor stages (amphitheatres) and squares. Looks European but they
must understand that this is Singapore. I appreciate the effort but to be honest they (facilities)
are mostly empty. The terraced steps are not comfortable to sit and chat and the weather is so
hot. Waste [of] money.

Stylistically, these architectural imports from Europe and the Americas do not evoke a
relevant vernacular or cultural tradition the way the classicism of Hutcheon’s Piazza
gestures to the ancestral roots of New Orleans’ residents. Additionally, 80% of residents surveyed were unable to identify any unique markers in their estates, as they felt that most HDB estates were largely similar in terms of design and facilities available.

Second, upgrading has disabled opportunities for conviviality. As instantiated above, many long-time residents feel out of place and alienated from one another in newly upgraded HDB neighborhoods, as familiar sites of memory and interaction have been removed. Newer residents (who increasingly make up a more significant share of the resident population, especially in new neighborhoods) share the same sentiments, albeit for different reasons. One states that:

I don’t allow my children to go downstairs without myself or my [domestic helper] supervising them. The last time that happened my son fractured his wrist after he tripped over the metal scaffolding [for construction]. I don’t feel comfortable when they go down by themselves.

While HDB flats are espoused to cater to the heteronormative nuclear family, this form of housing is often considered by academics to be undesirable for families with children (McDonald & Brownlee, 1993). In Singapore, these spaces are invariably surrounded by upgrading infrastructure, making it hard for children to play safely by themselves, meaning that play spaces in HDB estates are only sporadically utilized. This inhibits the formation of convivial relations between children as they rarely get a chance to interact spontaneously. It is these bonds developed from youth that form the cornerstone of strong convivial relations and a sense of place.

Third, and most essentially, residents believe that the livability project represents political patronage by the state. While in some estates residents get to vote on upgrading, they are rarely consulted on the mechanics or design of their neighborhood spaces. A HDB resident states that:

I went with some of my friends to see our MP (Member of Parliament) regarding building a nice community garden. He asked me to communicate with him through e-mail. He only replied to me once, and so far nothing has been done.

This might be seen as the state’s token attempt to create an impression of public involvement but in reality forestall a more vociferous public engagement (or altercation) with issues of space and housing policy (Goh, 2005). A resident:

Upgrading is a waste of money because the government builds things that most residents don’t use. It is the residents who should decide what exactly the money should be used for. Sometimes when I look around my neighborhood I feel that the government is trying to [patronize] us.

Not only does this prove counterproductive in engendering a quality living experience for heartlander residents, it also inhibits any development of national sense of place precisely because residents feel that the state’s “altruistic” attempts at making their environments more livable is patronizing and injurious to their status as citizens.

For the heartlander, there is generally a misalignment between state inscriptions of modern livability and people’s embodied sense of place for their neighborhood, which often revolves around conviviality, nostalgia, and memory. A majority of the respondents said they could not identify with state inscriptions of modernity in their neighborhood (70%) and with larger spaces of the nation (54%). Many also expressed little or no
national sense of place (60%). Heartlanders score at best a three in national sense of place. In sum, this group of residents feels less connected to the nation-state for two reasons. First, state aspirations have had a directly negative impact on their neighborhood and national living experience. Second, state efforts at upgrading have been perceived as political patronage to forestall any substantial involvement in issues of neighborhood and public space, while considerable resources and agency are given to the cosmopolitan group.

Juxtaposing livability: the indeterminacy factor

Juxtaposing the two different contextualizations of livability established in this article has allowed me to explain the indeterminate outcomes of the state’s livability project, which result from a misalignment between two perceptions of livability. On the one hand, livability is perceived by the state as an objective and symbolic measure that can be bestowed upon residents through manipulation of residential landscapes. On the other hand, livability is a unique experiential quality that is consumed and performed corporeally and cannot be unproblematically aligned with the state’s blanket representations. To further complicate matters, the continued success of the state’s global city aspirations leads the state to privilege the cosmopolitans while patronizing the heartlanders. The livability project reflects this political stance, creating landscapes of privilege (manifesting as condominiums) while adopting a livability project in piece-meal fashion in HDB neighborhoods as part of a realpolitik (Chua, 1991) to maintain political legitimacy. This contradiction culminates in the aforementioned indeterminacy of state attempts to create two specialized subjects through its livability project. The state is unable to pre-empt unforeseen externalities that result from its planning ideologies; these unintended effects may eventually prove inimical to the state’s global city aspirations.

On the ground, the livability project has not neatly produced the two specific subjects the state envisages. Admittedly, the subjectification process of local cosmopolitans has been straightforward and has generally proceeded according to state expectations, rendering the former ideal subjects for the state’s global city aspirations. Expatriates, however, while recognized as a driver for furthering competitiveness in the global economy (Beaverstock, 2007), cannot be entirely depended on for continuity or stability with regards to the long-term success of the nation-state’s developmental aspirations. The reason is two-fold. First, despite their attachment to their residential environments, they embody little national attachment and are generally footloose. Second, in relation to the livability project, expatriates are becoming an increasing source of conflict in Singapore. Many heartlanders resent the successful remaking of the city into the ideal place to live, work, and play (Eisinger, 2000)—for expatriates. One survey participant states that:

There were many public fields used for recreational sport and cheap places to hang out, which have now been occupied by condominiums and expat malls. Locals don’t go there anymore. It feels like almost everywhere in and around town is built for the foreigner these days.

The rapid “expatriatization” of Singapore has led to the virtual privatization of many places (Chang, 1995), insofar as the general public are disinclined to visit such places. These include, among others, gated residential landscapes and popular retail spaces like Clarke Quay, Holland Village, Rochester Park, and even the Orchard Road District. Such spaces have generally been reconfigured to serve the interests of the expatriate (and local
cosmopolitan) class. In its determination to root cosmopolitan talent through ensuring a quality living experience for these people, the state has overlooked important elements of neighborhood and (equally important) municipal livability for the heartlanders. Adopting an approach to HDB upgrading deemed patronizing by the heartlanders only exacerbates the resentment by the former for the state as well as expatriates.

The state’s livability project has thus split the spaces of the nation into an urban-cosmopolitan and suburb-heartland divide (Champion & Hugo, 2004; Howkins, 2001). Condominiums and the abovementioned retail areas become places of confluence for cosmopolitan locals and expatriates, while HDB neighborhoods and suburb malls become places of common domesticity and local practices, purported to represent the core of the nation (Soh & Yuen, 2011). While according to the state the distinction between “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” represents a typology of residents based on social and spatial characteristics, it emerges that this distinction is in reality one based on class.

To instantiate, “heartlander” is a label coined to describe a group possessing vernacular language fluency and corresponding educational background and a traditionalism that represents parochial interest and orientation. They are slated to live within the confines of their HDB neighborhoods and the nation (Goh, 1999). Based on state aspirations documented in this article, it is clear that the vision for Singapore is a cosmopolitan one (Yeoh, 2004). It follows then that the heartlander is rendered “second-class” juxtaposed against the cosmopolitan equipped with transnational sensibilities, creative skillsets and self-improvement sensibilities—the very subjectivity that contributes to the state’s desired governance outcomes (Oakes, 2006)—as well as the ability to thrive in Singapore’s modernized residential and municipal environments. Because of the state’s purposeful implementation of the livability project, heartlanders who make up the vernacular population are increasingly estranged from their “progressively livable” living environments as well as the larger spaces of the nation, which become increasingly emblematic of state aspirations.

Further, the associations of modernity and prestige attached to private housing within the national discourse of global competition allow its use as the most important marker of social elevation. By virtue of its position outside of the vernacular heartland space, its close association with influential local and expatriate cosmopolitans, and its high speculative and profiteering potential, private housing becomes the ultimate symbol of class identity (Goh, 2005). This is in addition to condominiums marketed by the state as harbingers of “the good life.” Clearly, the distinction between “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” is one largely based on class, in terms of wealth as well as access to neoliberalized spaces in the city.

Potentially fractious futures may thus emerge as the livability project has only succeeded in instilling resentment in the heartlander population, running counter to the qualities of national sense of place and self-sacrifice initially envisaged by the state. Despite the influence of the authoritarian state, the uncertainty of heartlander sentiment is worrying because future trends become hard to predict and manage. The fluctuating dominance of the People’s Action Party, Singapore’s leading political party (and synecdoche for the state) in the recent 2011 General Election (Chang, 2011), together with burgeoning support for opposition political parties serves a reliable preview of the growing disgruntlement in the heartlander population that by virtue of their strength in numbers have a huge hand to play in legitimizing a state assembled by democratic vote. The potential for decline of popular support or at worst open conflict between the heartlanders and the local and expatriate cosmopolitans suggests that the livability project in its current configuration may not be the ideal handmaiden to the state’s long-term global city aspirations.
Conclusions: livability in global cities

The hallmark of livability in global cities is viability and vitality (Balsas, 2004). This means that the livable global city must be both viable, continually attracting investment and creating value in the global economy, and vital, socially vibrant and enjoyable for all its residents. The case of Singapore instantiates a parochial interpretation of livability implemented in residential areas. The state foregrounds interpretations of livability that can be purposefully utilized to serve its partial developmental aspirations, and in doing so, forecloses alternative interpretations of livability. It is immensely challenging for a livability project to enact both viability and vitality for all in a global city.

In this article, I have shown how livability is appropriated as a political tool to the end of fulfilling particular global city aspirations, as well as the nature of indeterminate outcomes that occur as a result. This is especially true in the context of an indeterminacy that is at times inimical to the state’s global city aspirations. Clarity of the above can help inform policy making to ensure that the viability of Singapore as a livable global city—its ability to continuously attract and retain local and expatriate talent—is not compromised. On the other hand, improving the livability in neighborhoods for heartlander residents that are not deemed to contribute essentially and directly to the state’s global city aspirations is in fact fundamental to improving the nation-state’s viability as a livable global city. The increasing unrest from a resident population that forms the majority is unsettling for a state legitimized by popular vote. For the state to retain power and further its global city aspirations, it must display substantive effort undertaken toward facilitating a quality living experience for the heartlanders, beyond the patronage which forms current consensus. Further, open conflict between heartlanders and local and expatriate cosmopolitans would create a landscape of resentment, discomfort, and fear for a highly mobile local and expatriate cosmopolitan population that could easily move somewhere “better.” This would dent the state’s chances of retaining such talent essential to its viability as a livable global city.

Nevertheless, the inherent value of vitality in the global city is not to be disdained. As Harvey (2003, p. 939) writes, “the right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire.” In all global cities, there are those who may not view urban living primarily as progress and prosperity (Crace, 1992), but rather as a common ground for communication, play, and relaxation (Carr, 1992)—to enjoy the “pure sociability” of city life (Peattie, 1998, p. 248). As seen above, many of the heartlander residents prioritize memories, convivial relations, and enjoyment over material and symbolic prosperity. Only through addressing this can Singapore work towards becoming a livable global city in a holistic sense.

My hope is for this article to act as a starting point for research and planning that not only fully appreciates the contexts and politics of urban aspirations and livability in global cities, but is purposefully defined in operational terms. The older and less prosperous environments in global cities should provide an experience of livability just as rewarding as those in the most affluent environments. There is a symbiotic relationship between viability and vitality in global cities that must be better understood and exploited. Future research will help to generate a more robust engagement with the interpenetrations of urban aspirations and livability.

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Supplemental material
Supplementary figures 1-3 can be accessed here: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2014.924233

Notes
1. HDB Flats refer to public housing built by the HDB, the state arm for public housing provision in Singapore. The state sells these apartments at a subsidized rate to residents who meet certain demographic and financial criteria.
2. Void decks are typically found on the ground floor of HDB apartment blocks, where accommodation units begin on the second floor. These are sheltered spaces that have been deliberately left empty to encourage mingling amongst residents living in the block. They are often used for functions and gatherings (Goh, 2005).
3. Pseudonyms have been used for all respondents to protect their privacy.
4. According to the Singapore state, cosmopolitanism is a quality— one who is familiar with global trends and lifestyles and feels comfortable working and living in Singapore as well as overseas (Singapore 21 Committee). There is then a need to distinguish between local and expatriate people who exhibit elements of cosmopolitanism.
5. Local slang for coffee without milk.
6. Singapore’s prime shopping and entertainment district.
7. Local slang for Caucasian foreigners.
8. While research findings have indicated the emergence of three different subjects, such a categorization can only be used as a heuristic to instantiate the indeterminate outcomes of the State’s livability project. These categories are by no means fixed; not every single Singaporean resident must fall into one of the categories.
9. This dichotomy is generally witnessed in Singapore, but is unable to fully account for the fluidity and layers of physical and metaphorical spaces that exist in reality, and is more a civilizational than topographical issue. For instance, members with a “cosmopolitan” profile may choose to inhabit and frolic in heartland spaces, and vice-versa (Soh & Yuen, 2011).

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