

BY INVITATION

Building the Singapore cathedral

Just as cathedrals are known for their stained-glass windows, so Singapore should come to be known as a place of beauty.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

A favourite story used by management consultants to explain how workers can be motivated to perform better is the story of three bricklayers. When the first bricklayer is asked "What are you doing?", he replies, in a somewhat grumpy fashion, "Can't you see what I am doing? I am taking one brick, I put some cement on it, and then I lay another brick on this cement."

The second bricklayer looks a bit happier. When he is asked the same question, he also describes what he is doing. But he adds that all these bricks will eventually form a sturdy wall. The third bricklayer obviously looks the happiest. Indeed, he is whistling away while he is working. When he is asked the same question, he gives the same answer as the second bricklayer. But he adds one more line. He says that eventually all the walls they build will rise to become a great cathedral.

Clearly, if you can see the cathedral you are building, you will become a happier worker. The metaphor of a cathedral is also a useful one to use to understand where Singapore is in the process of its nation-building. Clearly, we have laid strong foundations, we have built sturdy walls and we have also built a strong roof to protect us from the elements. We have put virtually all the essential pieces in place.

Yet we also know that no cathedral can be called a cathedral if it doesn't have beautiful window panes. Indeed, it is the quality of the window panes (and other decorative items) that separates the great cathedrals from the ordinary cathedrals. This is where Singapore has a mixed record. We have built some beautiful window panes for our nation. Sadly, we have also destroyed some beautiful panes. And clearly we can do a lot better in the next 50 years in adding beauty to our nation.

The most beautiful window pane we have built for the Singapore nation is the garden city we have created. Few cities can boast an environment as green as that of Singapore. Indeed, few cities have retained botanic gardens on land that is as expensive as the land next to Tanglin Road. Certainly, no other city has built a new garden as beautiful as Gardens by the Bay on new and extremely expensive reclaimed land. A lot of this is the result of the amazing commitment of Mr Lee Kuan Yew to build a green city. This is the most shining aspect of the metaphorical Singapore cathedral.

Yet, we have also destroyed window panes. The most precious window pane we destroyed was the old National Library in Stamford Road, as the souls of many Singaporeans were deeply attached to that building. We destroyed it then because we worshipped roads more than cultural icons. To save the average Singapore motorist a few minutes of driving time, we tore down a valuable piece of Singapore history.

I bring up this story not for the sake of opening old wounds. I bring up this story because if we are going to continue succeeding in building a great Singapore nation over the next 50 years, we have to give No. 1 priority to injecting more beauty into Singapore. To build the great Singapore cathedral, we need to build more beautiful window panes - and preserve those we still have.

Another wise decision we made was to convert the old City Hall and the old Singapore Supreme Court into shining new museums. Like many of my fellow Singaporeans, I can hardly wait for the new museum to open. For me, it will be particularly poignant to walk into the refurbished City Hall, for that's where I began my first job in 1971. I cannot think of a better use for the City Hall.

Yet, it would be a strategic mistake to inject beauty only into old, expensive buildings. We must inject it into the daily lives of all Singaporeans, especially into the corners we go to every day. Let me give an example. New York and London are the two great global cities, yet most of their underground subway stations are grimy and often depressing. By contrast, the most beautiful subway stop I have encountered was in Moscow. Similarly, Paris and Tokyo have some truly beautiful subway stations. We can and should do the same in Singapore.

Let me also make a more radical suggestion. The quintessential Singapore location is the hawker centre. Virtually all Singaporeans go to these hawker centres. We have designed them to be spartan and utilitarian. The main reason for this was costs. To provide low rentals which would then mean lower food prices, we decided to make all our hawker centres look like plain budget terminals.

The time has come to make our hawker centres look more like Changi Airport Terminal 3 (or perhaps Terminal 5). Some readers, especially Singapore civil servants, reading this would balk at this suggestion as I seem to be suggesting that we should build hawker centres that look like expensive monuments.

Yet, beauty need not be expensive. A graceful and iconic hawker centre that represents Singaporeans and their first love - food - can be a thing of beauty and a joy forever. The East Coast hawker centre, with its fabulous sea view, is a joy to visit and experience.

We have developed a strong and thriving community of artists in Singapore. They include painters and sculptors, potters and designers. They are clearly short of spaces to exhibit their works. It won't take an architectural genius to find spaces within hawker centres to exhibit some of our local artistic wares. We can also inject potted plants and orchids to make our hawker centres more beautiful.

Most readers of this essay will by now probably be nodding their heads in approval and agreeing that beauty will be a nice luxury to have in Singapore. But that is not my argument. My argument is that at the present stage of Singapore's development, beauty is not a luxury. Beauty is a necessity. In a society of almost full employment, with 90 per cent living in homes they own, and with virtually all citizens enjoying good access to good education, health and other essential facilities, we have met most of the basic conditions a society needs.

Yet we still have a somewhat unhappy population. Why? The simple answer is that we have met all the basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We have taken good care of the first two levels of "physiological" and "safety" needs. We now have to move up his ladder and take care of the next three levels of "love and belonging", "esteem" and "self-actualisation" needs. To achieve this, we need to find more meaning and fulfilment in our lives. No activity can be more meaningful than participating in building a beautiful nation. Then, like the third bricklayer in the opening story, we will be happier as we go about our daily tasks.

The joy of nation-building may seem a little exotic to many Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans. But it is not considered exotic in other countries. One key reason young people in China, India and Indonesia feel happier than young people in Singapore is that they can feel that their nations are becoming stronger and more respected globally. This sense of national well-being also enhances their sense of personal well-being.

In China, this sense of participating in building a great nation can be found even among the poorest. In 2011, my youngest son went to intern in a kitchen of a small and cheap restaurant in Shanghai. He did the cutting and cleaning with very poorly paid migrant workers.

They led hard, grimy lives, smoking away to cope with daily drudgery. Yet, even they would say that they felt happy because they could feel that China was once again becoming a strong and respected nation.

Can we inject the same joy of nation-building among all Singaporeans? Yes, we can. If Singaporeans can see that we are building a cathedral of a nation, the joy will return. Let's make beauty our No. 1 priority.

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