

Top Down Bottom Up?

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The seeds of the future are always embedded in the folds of the present. Singapore needs to go beyond conventional demographics obsessed with the economics of age dependency. This short essay takes a different perspective by suggesting that there is a possible future that may lie in the seemingly impossible nexus between youthful idealism and angst with aged resignation and faded dreams. It will require an excursion outside of conventional thought though.

Things taken for granted can be shaken by too much wealth or too little. The young grown up in good times are never grateful for what they have. They look for meaning in freedom. Those in retirement where their instincts were grounded in experience oscillate between resignation and unfulfilled dreams they had traded for success. The Internet brings these two perspectives into contact as never before. Viewed from the perspective of orderly administration, this is a problem, but I prefer to see it for its creative potential in making a new narrative of how new capacity can be released. There are spatial implications usually not factored that are being considered here.

The spatial nexus is this: that as people go about the routines of their everyday life, they should affirm old relationships, meet new people, experience new things, get new ideas effortlessly. But this has to be deliberately planned for. As it is, there is no physical network of connections which everyone routinely goes to, like the extensive nervous system of a high-functioning organism. Analogously, where we live, work, study etc., we should experience the currents of everyday life and grow intelligent because of it. The flow and conviviality would then underpin life and generate trust which makes productive social relations all the more productive and possible. But instead of growing such an extensive Nervous System, we have the checker-board zones punctuated by hubs traversed by highways; liveable no doubt, but this spatial arrangement lacks the *synaptic density* any intelligent organism ought to have. Emulating the neural network is therefore the inspiration.

For example, once a synapse occurs in the brain, a connection is made between neurons—information flows across. Many synapses linking many neurons make for high-level complex thought. This is the basis for metaphorical thinking—the basis of creativity. Hubs and zones just don't do this—they may be efficient but are not inherently

intelligent. We can also take full advantage of augmented reality by linking the physical with the virtual neural network—the Internet! This is the new power that few can do but compact Singapore can!

This is therefore the challenge: not shrink away from radical new thinking. Singapore can pioneer intelligence by design, i.e., by building-in *synaptic density* like that of a well-educated and courageous mind and brain. The design challenge is to dare to insert the required nervous system into every housing estate and eventually the whole island. This is the kind of creative destruction that is needed. Thinking of the whole island as a living organism served by an extensive Central Nervous System is the way forward and this requires a change in the design of schools, community centres, shopping centres, offices, cultural and civic centres! Once these form over time the contiguous synergistic network easily accessible by foot or bike near to residences, Singapore becomes the most intelligent city the world has ever seen!

Education is the social glue that has to be future-ready. This means emphasising the 6Cs. Courage then Curiosity then Creativity then Compassion, Collaboration follows and finally Commitment. This requires a total change of education concept to a curriculum that offers balance between core curriculum and free subject choice options by students. But this means that the design and location of schools has to be very different. Spatially, students are above, all the rest below where the action is. This is place-based learning, I call this a web-like Super School; thus such a school becomes a multi-generational learning facility in which book learning is linked to reality learning integrated into the activity of the Central Nervous System of every community. This is the venue where youthful idealism can be finally aligned with the revived dreams of the old and a new society comes into being!¹

A smart brain is a richly interconnected brain and smarts is what Singapore needs. This is what “future ready” should really mean. There can be no debate that Singapore needs to become much, much smarter as a people not just to survive but to go beyond its current conception in a much-changed and turbulent world. And given the plateau of excellence already created, Singapore can now take off into the world unlimited by its smallness if only it dares. Singapore has to have the gumption to be a torch bearer of a new and better world for it to remain relevant and exceptional! This is my hope.

¹ Please see my YouTube video, *Singapore Version 2.0*.