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When the ‘inclusive turn’ fuels the entrepreneurial city: Critical perspectives from Singapore

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The rise of the notion of ‘inclusion’ in urban planning, seen in phrases like inclusive city, calls for a critical analysis of its evolving meaning and its spatial, social and political implications. Paradoxically, the meaning of urban inclusion has narrowed such that it now primarily refers to accessibility for people with disabilities. At the intersection of urban studies and critical disability studies, our article investigates the conceptions, criteria and modes of production underlying the implementation of urban inclusion in Singapore’s ‘Enabling Village’, a purportedly inclusive space opened in 2015. We use a mixed-methods approach, analysing official narratives and conducting site visits to understand the site as both an appropriated and a branded space. We show that, in Singapore, the inclusion agenda interacts with the city-state’s distinctive approach to planning and governance, where social issues are ‘engineered’ and give rise to replicable operational models. Our hypothesis is that implementing the inclusive city through the production and promotion of ‘inclusive’ urban projects such as the Enabling Village fuels the expansion of Singapore as a state-led ‘entrepreneurial city’ (Harvey, Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography 1989; 71(1):3–17). In particular, operationalising ‘urban inclusion’ in this way allows for the reinvention of Singapore as a global urban model.

Keywords: ageing societies, disabilities, entrepreneurial city, inclusive city, Singapore, urban model

Introduction

The notion of ‘inclusion’ is rife today in the vocabulary of ‘good practices’ in urban planning, both in the academic literature (Hills, 2001; Potts, 2003; Calavita and Mallach, 2010; Clément and Valegeas, 2017) and in the publications of international institutions (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019). In the wake of reflections on how to design ‘livable’ cities, inclusion has emerged as a new global *leitmotiv* and as a possible response to urban challenges. It refers to both a process and its result: ‘the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure’ (Lexico Dictionary, 2019). According to the economist and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (cited

in O’Grady, 2013: 28), ‘inclusion is characterized by a society’s widely shared social experience and active participation, by a broad equality of opportunities and life chances for individuals and by the achievement of a basic level of well-being for all citizens’ [Correction added on 29 October 2024, after first online publication: Nobel Prize Winner Amartya Sen’s name has been inserted in this sentence.]. Applied to the urban environment and appropriated by city makers, the notion of inclusion has given rise to an emergent urban model: the ‘inclusive city’. This term has gradually become a highly desirable label that shapes urban aspirations in the context of a globalised world (Clément and Valegeas, 2017). To date, it has been explored by researchers investigating urban issues such as segregation (Espino, 2017), social inequality (Zuberi and Taylor, 2017) and gender issues (Whitzman *et al.*, 2013). The rise over the last decade of the notion of inclusion calls for a critical analysis of its evolving meaning and its spatial, social and political implications.

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The present study is situated at the intersection of urban and critical disability studies. It investigates how ‘urban inclusion’ is implemented and performed through urban planning in a neoliberal era, where cities have become entrepreneurial in the sense described by Harvey (1989). As neoliberal policies are enacted through context-specific strategies, they should be analysed in diverse local contexts (Brenner *et al.*, 2010). Our article thus seeks to broaden the understanding of the theoretical framework of the ‘entrepreneurial city’ (Harvey, 1989) through its focus on Singapore. This Southeast Asian city-state combines the status of a global city with an authoritarian political context; it also has a strong reputation in policy transfer and positions itself as a world leader in the area of urban inclusion. Specifically, we investigate the implementation of urban inclusion in the form of the ‘Enabling Village’, opened in Singapore in 2015. The case study shows how the city-state interprets ‘inclusion’ as it sees fit in order to tackle metropolitan challenges, such as an ageing society and associated mobility issues as well as the integration of people with disabilities (Zhuang, 2016, 2020; Poon and Wong, 2017; Huijun and Chia, 2020; Zhuang *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, we show how the Enabling Village prototype has been designed as a transferable urban model to be promoted abroad. It reinforces the image of Singapore as a site of best practice from which other cities can learn (Chua, 2011; Pow, 2014, 2018); moreover, it serves as a means of reinventing Singapore as an urban model. We hypothesise that implementing the inclusive city through the production and promotion of the Enabling Village fuels the expansion of Singapore as a State-led ‘entrepreneurial city’ (Harvey, 1989).

The case study employs a mixed-methods approach involving (i) an analysis of official narratives through a close reading of various types of documentation, and (ii) repeated site visits over several months in 2018 and in May 2022 to gain insight into the Enabling Village and its surroundings as both real and branded spaces. Our primary objective is to examine what urban inclusion means in practice in Singapore by investigating the local, everyday functioning and appropriation of the Enabling Village in view of its stated purposes and accompanying narratives.

The second section sets out our theoretical framework around the notion of ‘urban inclusion’. We first unpack the genealogy of this shifting notion and show how it has become, over time, less politically engaged. We also consider urban inclusion through the lens of critical disability studies. Next, the third section presents our research methodology. The fourth section examines the conceptualisation of an ‘inclusive city’ in the Singaporean context and its implementation through public policies and the creation of the Enabling Village. The fifth section investigates the Enabling Village in practice. Finally, the sixth section sets out the theoretical avenues opened up by the research, focusing on the entrepreneurial nature of the Singaporean state as it tackles the challenge of urban inclusion.

Unpacking the genealogy of ‘urban inclusion’

Competing forms of ‘inclusion’ and conceptual narrowing

The notion of ‘inclusion’ was first described by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1984), who sought to describe the dynamic process through which individuals are included in or excluded from different social circles. The notion was subsequently taken up in the field of medicine, followed by social work, before entering the sphere of urban planning. Clément and Valegeas (2017) underline the role of urban governance experiments in Brazilian cities in the spread of the notion of urban inclusion and its gradual operationalisation as an urban model (Sintomer *et al.*, 2012). In Brazil, the inclusive city model stemmed from a radical democratisation movement based on the active participation of all inhabitants in production of the city. As a consequence, the notion acquired a strong political and militant dimension.¹ This initial political dimension was highlighted in the report presented at the Fourth International Forum on Urban Poverty in 2001, where the inclusive city was hailed as a ‘political project’ towards a fairer city incorporating the notion of ‘spatial justice’ (ATD Fourth World, 2001). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial and territorial crisis, the emergence of new forms of collective action heralded ‘a new model of

globalisation built around inclusion, solidarity and ecology' (Roy and Klein, 2013: back cover). The European Commission officially defines 'active inclusion' as a comprehensive tool 'to tackle [...] poverty, social exclusion, in-work poverty, labour market segmentation, long-term unemployment, [and] gender inequalities' (European Commission, 2019: online).

If the term *inclusion* initially began to spread in the 2000s, from 2010 onwards it expanded into a diverse range of spheres. It is now associated with interests such as 'inclusive growth' (OECD, 2019) and 'inclusive development' (World Economic Forum, 2018), blurring the meaning of an already fuzzy notion. In the South African context, the inclusive city refers to the implementation of a non-racial urbanism (Swilling, 2014); elsewhere, inclusion is intended to bring about a 'cohesive city' (Gerometta *et al.*, 2005) or innovation in civic governance (Hambleton, 2015). International organisations such as the global network Cities for All² have seized on the notion of inclusion and its derivatives, while UN-Habitat played a crucial role in its dissemination by including *inclusivity* in its New Urban Agenda (2017).

The more frequent the references to the idea of an inclusive city, the less radical the notion becomes as more controversial meanings are progressively pushed aside. Morange and Spire (2017: 4) describe how the notion of the inclusive city has encroached on the 'the right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968), a more political and critical concept that, as initially envisaged, does not shy away from urban conflict.

Some G8 countries argued in favor of a vague political and scholarly formula, the 'inclusive city' [...], against the positions of the organization United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the international network of the Global Platform on the Right to the City, which only briefly mentioned the notion of the right to the city, the latter being considered too radical. (translation by the authors)

Indeed, the phrase 'the right to the city' appears only once in UN-Habitat's, 2017 New Urban Agenda before giving way to the exclusive use of the terms 'inclusion' and 'inclusivity'. In this way, far from fulfilling radical visions of urban design and management, inclusion has become

a softer – and thus more easily appropriated – motto for the international institutions that shape and disseminate global urban discourses and norms.

In parallel, the scope of the notion of the inclusive city gradually became more operational and restricted to the idea of a disability-friendly, accessible city. Notably, Habitat III³ engendered not only the New Urban Agenda but also the Global Network on Disability Inclusive and Accessible Urban Development (DIAUD). This network campaigns for greater attention to be paid to people with disabilities in urban planning; its *Key Recommendations for an Inclusive Urban Agenda* took the form of a 40-page report entitled 'The inclusion imperative: Towards disability-inclusive and accessible urban development' (DIAUD, 2016). This narrow understanding was reinforced by the Madrid Declaration, adopted during the European Disability Forum in 2002 and buttressed by the development in Canada of initiatives to improve access to urban infrastructure, resources and services for people with disabilities. It was also reflected in an academic summit in Laval in November 2016 that subscribed to this more restricted reading of the inclusive city (Ville Inclusive, 2016).

The place of 'inclusion' in critical disability studies

As the scope of inclusion was narrowing, a focus on disability and ageing in urban development emerged (Zegras *et al.*, 2012; Cockain, 2014; Hall and Wilton, 2017; Lord and Piché, 2018; Addlakha, 2020; Jaffe, 2020). Recent research calls for a shift away from the usual rights-based policies towards a more comprehensive and critical understanding of 'disability within capitalism' (Gleeson, 2001; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Bezmez, 2013; Humphry, 2023). These authors centre the ways in which disabled people contest the limited understanding of their abilities and the restrictions imposed upon them (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Hande, 2019), while challenging broad-brush calls for greater 'inclusion'.

Humphry (2023: 163) argues 'that disabled people are not simply worthy of "inclusion"' but should be 'integral to and at the forefront of [...] struggles' involving anti-capitalist and

urban resistance. Building on the work of Hande (2019), Humphry (2023: 184) also presents inclusion as a ‘traditional disability struggle’, whereas more radical disability activism focuses on ‘the breaking down of bodies through the violences of capitalism’. In their recent edited volume on disability and inclusion in Singapore, *Not Without Us*, Zhuang *et al.* (2023: 18) call for ‘a critical re-thinking and re-examination of the ways in which we research, analyse and think about disability [...], with deep roots in activism that challenge societal norms and grounded upon the disabled ontologies and lives’.

In short, even as inclusion remains a debated notion in academia, it has morphed into an operational tool for creating accessible cities in the field of urban planning. This article shows how Singapore has operationalised the notion in its own city-making process.

Methods

Our approach combined discourse analysis on the one hand, and site visits, observations, and qualitative interviews in the Enabling Village on the other. The Village serves as both a branded space and a site of everyday use. We aimed to better understand how these two functions overlap and where they come into conflict.

We began with a close reading and analysis of the official narratives (through public roadmaps, reports and websites) and academic documentation surrounding Singaporean disability policies to gain insight into the Village’s stated purposes, its accompanying narrative, and the urban marketing vision it conveys. Our documentation also included reports by international institutions such as the United Nations, local and international newspaper articles, the Village’s website and social network posts, plus interviews. To complement the textual analyses, we conducted a visual analysis of hundreds of photographs of the Village, revealing which parts and features were showcased by its management team and what visitors come for or engage with on site.

Our first site visits took place between January and April 2018, around three years after the opening of the Enabling Village (December 2015), with a follow-up visit in 2022 after the

COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to general site observations (including a guided tour with a Village manager), we performed 15 structured observation sessions ranging from a couple of hours to an entire day. During these sessions, we photographed various locales in the Village at different times of the day and took detailed ethnographic notes. We also visited the surrounding neighbourhood repeatedly to investigate the integration of the Village in its district and how it is used and perceived by residents and visitors. Drawing on this empirical data, we produced photographic plates and maps to allow for a socio-spatial analysis.

Finally, we conducted a total of 34 structured interviews with Singaporean disability experts and official stakeholders of Singapore and the Village (15 interviews) and visitors and nearby residents (19 interviews). Ten interviewees were male and 9 female (2 children/teenagers, 11 adults, 6 elderly people). Only two had disabilities, which can be explained by the fact that disabilities are not necessarily always visible; moreover, the Village management monitored our contacts with local organisations and prohibited us from interviewing all entities offering support, training etc. for disabled people on-site. This tight control underlines the importance the Village places on its image. Those interviews we were able to conduct form a rich and valuable component of our dataset, shedding light on the interviewees’ perceptions of and interactions with the Village.

Singapore: Operationalising and branding the inclusive city model

Local issues at stake: A multi-ethnic society growing old

The creation of the Enabling Village must be examined in relation not only to global discourses on urban inclusion, but also to the unique Singaporean context. Singapore gained its independence in 1965. In this relatively young nation, cohesion between different populations remains a key issue. According to the latest official census, ethnic Chinese account for 74%, Malays for 13.5% and Indians for 9% of the population (plus 3.5% ‘others’; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010).

Rising inequality⁴ and ethnic tensions came to the fore during the 2013 riots in Little India.⁵ Maintaining social order and forging a national identity in a multi-ethnic population are thus ongoing issues for the government. These issues are, however, not foregrounded when inclusion is addressed in local public policy discourse, which instead favours notions of 'unity' or 'harmony' (interview with a prominent policymaker, May 2022).

In the coming years, Singapore will also face the 'silver tsunami' (Chattopadhyay, 2016) of a rapidly ageing society (Huijun and Chia, 2020). People over 65 represented 6% of the population in 1990, rising to 9% in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). By 2030, one in five people are projected to be over 60 in Singapore (Chattopadhyay, 2016), which has one of the highest life expectancies in the world (over 83 years old). This raises the question of elderly people's exclusion from the city due to health problems. Cities can turn out to be 'hostile environments' in which to grow old (Pain, 2001; Skinner *et al.*, 2015). With 'a low birth rate, rising divorce rate and estranged familial relations' (Tai, 2015), the proportion of elderly people experiencing isolation rose from 7.5% in 2000 to 11.9% in 2014 (Ng *et al.*, 2020).

The Singaporean authorities have, both discursively and in terms of public policies, conflated the challenge of caring for people with disabilities and that of an ageing population. Both necessitate the creation of a more accessible and thus inclusive city. Additionally, disabilities are proportionally more common among older citizens: disability prevalence rates in Singapore are 13.3% for citizens aged 50 and older, compared to 3.4% for people aged between 18 and 49 (Steering Committee of the Enabling Masterplan, 2017: 3; Subramaniam *et al.*, 2021).

As disability has become more prominent in the public debate, Singaporean researchers have produced a growing body of academic literature seeking to better understand local prevalence rates and the socio-demographic profiles of people with disabilities (Ng *et al.*, 2020; Subramaniam *et al.*, 2021), to identify ways of improving health and social care (Sajith *et al.*, 2017; Yeung and Hu, 2018) and to refine the corresponding public policies

(Jeevanandam, 2009). Prospective work has also focused on the intersection of disability and social isolation in older people with a view to long-term policy planning (Huijun and Chia, 2020; Ng *et al.*, 2020).

Disability policies in Singapore: From charity to inclusion

Singapore's disability policies evolved in line with the island's economic growth: from a focus on charitable services in the 1940s and 1950s, to special education in the 1960s and 1970s, to employment programmes for adults with disabilities in the 1980s and 1990s (Poon and Wong, 2017). Accessibility, too, was identified early on as a core lever of action for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Mobility problems are now expressly accounted for in planning schemes. The Land Transport Authority (LTA) has created 'silver zones' where rumble strips, speed limits, chicanes and narrower roads slow traffic down, and 'rest points' in the middle of the road that allow older and slower people in general to cross the street more safely (Fig. 1). The LTA aims to introduce 50 silver zones by 2025. Accessibility thus serves as a recurrent *leitmotiv* of what an inclusive city entails in Singapore: barrier-free spaces.

According to Stanley, a former principal of a vocational institute in his 1980s living in Redhill, 'the government started by making public transportation accessible, but its initiatives are becoming more and more diversified, and it shows through the Enabling Village project'. This was confirmed by a social scientist from the National University of Singapore, who told us that 'as associations for disabled people received more support, the government embraced universal design and communicated about it on social media'.

When it comes to public policies on disability, 'a culture of inclusion now pervades Singapore' (Zhuang, 2020). Following Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's seminal speech on Singapore as 'an inclusive society' in 2004 (Lee *et al.*, 2017), a number of policies aiming to promote inclusion were introduced (Zhuang and Lee, 2017). In 2007, the Singaporean authorities launched their first Enabling Masterplan (2007–2011). This masterplan was followed by three others (2012–2016, 2017–



Figure 1. Photograph of Lengkok Bahru's Silver Zone.
Source: S. Cosatto, 2018 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

2021 and 2022–2030), each seeking to ‘build a more inclusive society where persons with disabilities are empowered’ (Steering Committee of the Enabling Masterplan, 2017: 10). While the documents prioritise different goals, they share key themes and discourses related to building an ‘inclusive society’ and promoting ‘empowerment’. However, by referring to elderly and disabled people only, the plans *de facto* exclude other marginalised populations (e.g. migrant workers), even as they enhance Singapore’s status as a pioneer in the area of disabilities management in a metropolitan context.

Through the publication of the Enabling Masterplans, the Singaporean authorities placed their stamp on the notion of inclusion and paved the way for its operationalisation. Recurrent themes in the masterplans include early detection and intervention, education, employment, family empowerment, habitat and assistive technologies, the latter being linked to the Smart Nation initiative.⁶ The masterplans also set out how disability services are to be provided in Singapore through the ‘Public–Private–

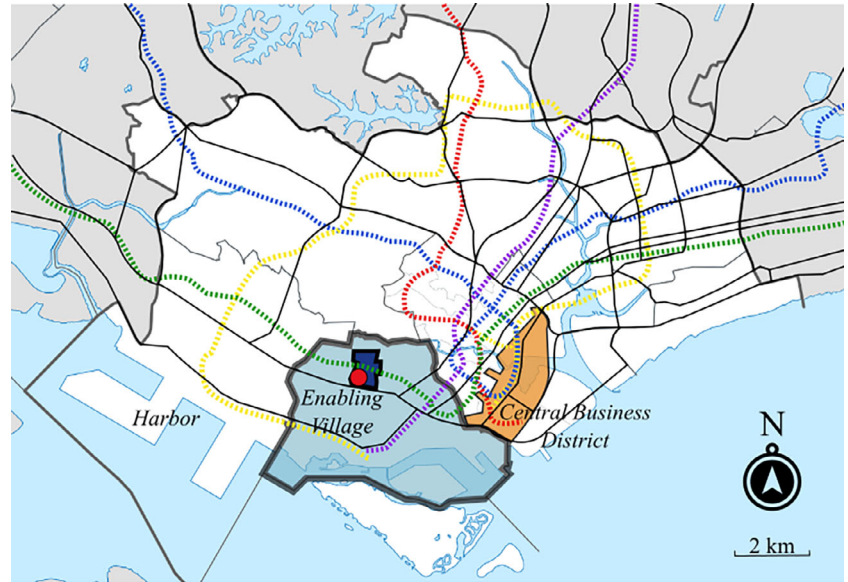
People Partnership model’ (Zhuang, 2016), according to which the responsibility for caring for disabled people falls on the individuals themselves and their carers, but also the State, public agencies and private companies. In this respect, the opening of the Enabling Village in 2015 is consistent with the ‘official’ operationalisation of urban inclusion in Singapore.

The Enabling Village as a prototype of an inclusive site in Singapore

The Enabling Village project was introduced in the third Enabling Masterplan. It is located in the southernmost area of central Singapore, Bukit Merah, in the historic Redhill neighbourhood (Fig. 2). By 2015, 12% of people living in Redhill were over 65 years old, and certain streets officially became ‘silver zones’ in 2014. To attract new and younger visitors and residents, Redhill has been subject to various redevelopment initiatives, one of which is the Enabling Village. This prototype of the urban inclusion model is intended to help transform an ageing housing estate into a cutting-edge experimental zone that improves inclusion for elderly and disabled people and is accessible to all.

The Enabling Village, which cost \$25 million to build, is a registered charity and public institution created in 2013 by the Ministry of Social and Family Development and run by an agency called SG Enable. The Village was thus founded by a public – rather than urban – authority and was sponsored by both public and private organisations, reflecting the blurred line between the two spheres typical of the Singaporean context.

According to the Enabling Village website, ‘founding donors’ include the Lee Foundation, Lien Foundation, SBF Foundation, Standard Chartered Bank, Sunray Woodcraft Construction Pte Ltd., United Overseas Bank Ltd., and WOHA (private enterprises), Singapore Technologies Engineering Ltd. and Singapore Telecommunications Ltd. (government-affiliated companies), plus the Tote Board and Community Chest (Care & Share Movement SG50), as well as two other sponsors (Infocomm Media Development Authority and the Singapore Workforce Development Agency).



Landmarks

- Regions' boundaries
- Planning areas boundaries
- Central Area's constituent planning areas boundaries
- Bukit Merah Planning Area
- Central Business District
- Downtown Core Planning Area
- Redhill
- Subzone of Bukit Merah Planning Area
- Enabling Village

Transportation

- Main highways
- MRT Lines**
- East West Line
- Circle Line
- North South Line
- Downtown Line
- North East Line

Figure 2. Location of Redhill and the Enabling Village in Singapore. Production: S. Cosatto, 2019 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Approximately three hectares in size, the Enabling Village was intended to serve as a public space where different populations could meet and mingle. On the basis of official documents, however, its exact nature is unclear. The word *village* suggests a place of belonging and residence, but the Enabling Village does not offer housing. The official website describes it as 'both a community and a space' and as a showcase of state-of-the-art assistive technologies and product/service design (Enabling Village website, n.d.). It offers green space for shared walks, with long, covered alleyways, benches and ponds, as well as services offered by 19 tenants in 4 categories (Food, Beverage & Retail; Offices; Services; Training &

Employment; Enabling Village website, n.d.). In sum, it can best be described as a multi-functional space, with offices, disability and care services, businesses with a social mission (mainly focused on assistive technologies), a clinic, a rehabilitation centre for stroke patients, three restaurants, a retail art gallery paired with a café (The Art Faculty), another café, a tea shop, an inclusive gym, a preschool, a fitness corner, a playground, an amphitheatre, an auditorium, training and work spaces, a creative studio, a supermarket and ATMs (Fig. 3). The work and training services are important features, considered as they are to be preconditions for the inclusion of disabled people in Singaporean society.

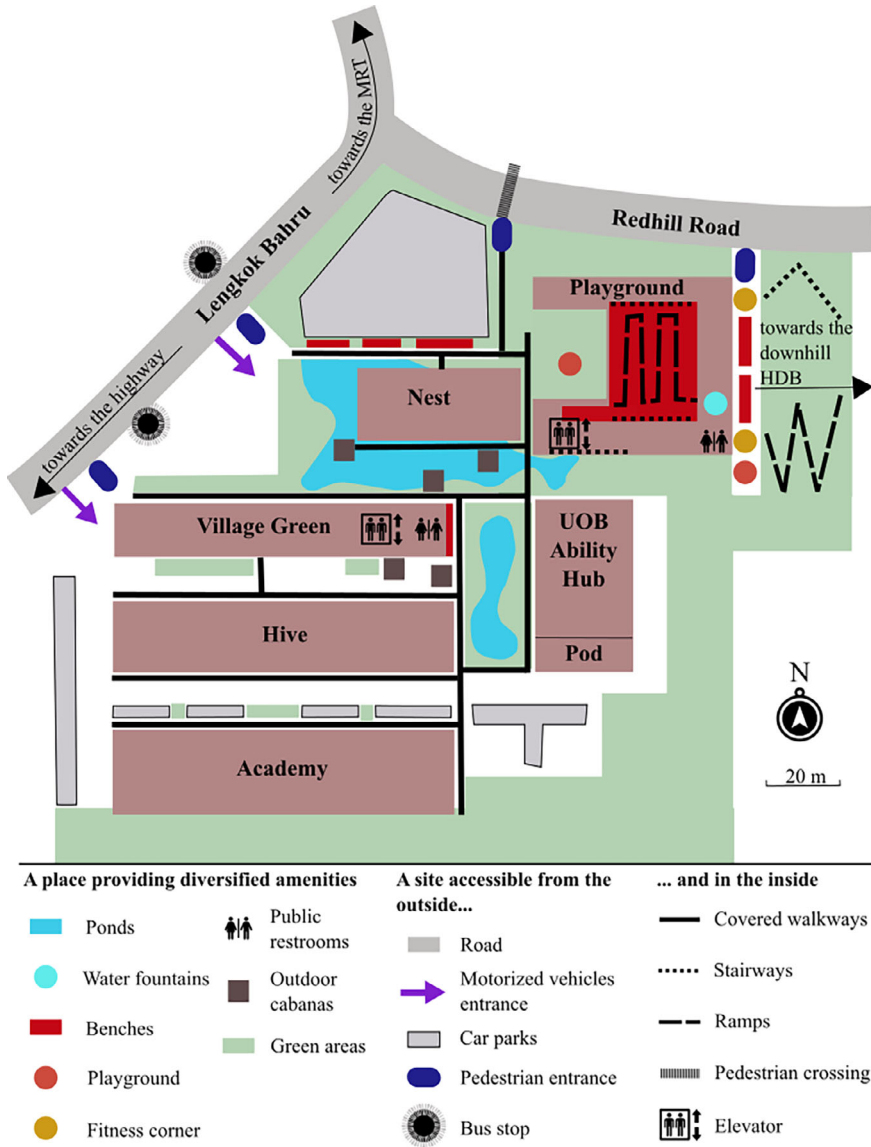


Figure 3. Map of the Enabling Village and its surroundings. Credits: Official map of the Enabling Village, fieldwork observations; Production: S. Cosatto, 2019 [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Another key feature of the Village is its focus on accessibility. Universal design, for instance, can be seen in the presence of elevators, ramps, induction loops, braille labels and ground guidance devices (Fig. 4). A shuttle bus runs from Redhill Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station on weekdays from 8:15 am to 6:30 pm to facilitate those who cannot walk up to the hill to the Village. A call-on-demand service is also available on weekdays from 10:00 am to 12:00 noon and 1:30 to 4:30 pm.

Singapore's Enabling Village in practice

A typical day in the Enabling Village

Despite its profile as a multi-functional space, the Enabling Village primarily functions as a thoroughfare for the Redhill area. Numerous alleyways connect the east of the Village to the west, from the low-lying to the higher part of Redhill: people use it as a shortcut that allows them to avoid the busier main roads, its green



Figure 4. Photographs of accessibility-related features in the Enabling Village. Source: S. Cosatto, 2019 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

spaces and water features making it an aesthetically appealing route (Fig. 5). Our interviews confirmed that the Enabling Village is seen as a quiet, green space in a bustling city. Andrew, a 40-year-old man who did not live in the neighbourhood, said he visited regularly and enjoys the peaceful atmosphere: 'I come here to drop my kids at the preschool, and I'm quite fond of this place and its quietness'. Kelly and Felicia, a fitness trainer and her client, train in the Village 'because it's more intimate than other, more crowded places in the city center'. However, not everybody appreciated the quiet atmosphere: one elderly couple said 'this is not a popular and truly successful place. As older people, we look for a warm and welcoming atmosphere, but here we feel separate from the rest of the city'.

Social activity in the Village mostly revolves around smartphones and virtual social networks. Isha, a 55-year-old man, and Kelvin, Raul, and Felix, young teenagers, all non-

disabled residents of Redhill, acknowledged that they come to the Village exclusively to enjoy its free Wifi and use their smartphones (Fig. 6). Felix, a student at the Gan Eng Primary School, said: 'I live in Redhill, next to the Bukit Merah Secondary School. I come here every day after school to play games on my phone because the Wi-Fi network is free. It's why I like coming here'. People also use their devices to take pictures. As two students explained, 'We know the Enabling Village because I volunteer here. I asked my friend to come so we could take some nice photos together, in front of the beautiful murals'. This is officially encouraged; the Enabling Village's website itself highlights, for example, '7 highly Instagrammable spots in the Enabling Village' (Enabling Village website, 2018). Most pictures on this webpage show sophisticated compositions or close-ups of green areas or specific architectural features. The majority also depicted empty spaces, as opposed to appropriated or shared space,



Figure 5. Photographs of daily practices: the Enabling Village as a thoroughfare. Production: S. Cosatto, 2018 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

reinforcing the impression of the Enabling Village as a type of showcase which, paradoxically, falls short of offering a welcoming, communal atmosphere.

Through on-site interviews and observations, we identified three types of populations among the relatively limited 100 to 200 daily users of the Village: people who work there, in the various businesses, shops and institutions; people who come to use the public facilities (mainly families with children); and elderly people who primarily come to rest and to attend medical appointments at the local clinics. Most live in the surrounding areas. One couple told us that they ‘only come here to shop because it’s close. Otherwise, we wouldn’t bother’. Our follow-up visits in May 2022 showed no change in this regard, or in the number of daily visitors.

The fieldwork also reveals other limitations of the Enabling Village as a place of inclusion. First, it is not integrated seamlessly with its local surroundings, especially on its western side.

Some interviewees reported that they initially thought the Village was a private space due to the very visible presence of wardens, fences and barbed wire near its western entrance. As one elderly woman said, ‘The information boards don’t indicate clearly what the Enabling Village has to offer local residents; they only show logos’. Strikingly, the Village is not accessible to everyone, as it is located at the top of a relatively steep hill and the shuttle bus serving it works on a limited schedule. In addition, design flaws within the Village limit its accessibility and its capacity to foster a welcoming bodily experience. An occupational therapist we interviewed noted that some handles are too high, preventing disabled people from reaching certain areas, and pointed out the absence of ground strips for blind and visually impaired people in some parts of the Village. Signs in braille are scarce and the ramps to the amphitheatre may not be wide enough to allow for easy passage by people in wheelchairs.

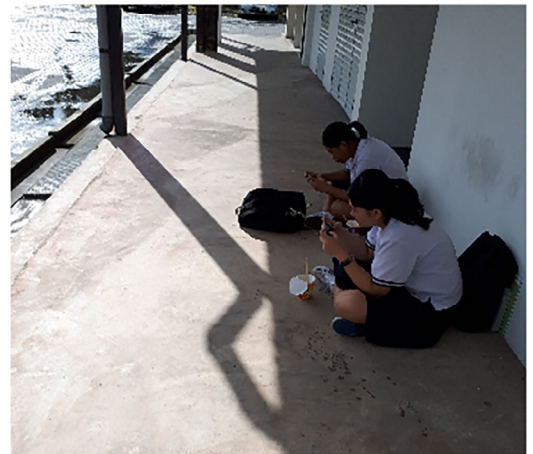


Figure 6. Photographs of recreational and digital practices in the Enabling Village. Production: S. Cosatto, 2018 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Furthermore, access to the site is further limited because it is closed by guards no later than 10:30 pm, precluding the possibility of night life in the Village. This not only means it lacks the full range of amenities that may be expected of an urban neighbourhood in a global city, but also reveals a limited vision of disabled people and their urban needs.

The Enabling Village as a communication tool for Singapore

Though it suffers from various shortcomings as a prototype of an inclusive space, the Enabling Village has nevertheless become a central communication tool for Singapore. Prime Minister

Lee Hsien Loong personally delivered a speech at the grand opening on 2 December 2015, and his wife, during her state visit to the White House on 4 August 2016, wore a pouch designed by a young autistic girl trained in the Enabling Village (BBC News, 2016). The Village has also received broad coverage in local newspapers and lifestyle magazines (e.g. *The Straits Times*, *Singapore Home&Décor*) and on television (notably the Chinese network CCTV).

Designed by the renowned Singaporean architectural firm WOHA, the Enabling Village has won multiple accolades in Singapore, such as the platinum Universal Design Mark Award by the Building and Construction Authority, the SIA Architectural Design Award and the

President's Design Award 2016. The Village was also nominated for the Asia Design Awards. It is showcased by means of guided tours, with prominent visitors including Sólrún Løkke Rasmussen, wife of the former Prime Minister of Denmark. Visitor target groups range from officials and urban planners to students, from Singaporeans to visitors from Vietnam, Cambodia, New Zealand, Australia and Japan. For example, the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) made 'a learning expedition' to the Enabling Village on 27 April 2019 'to understand human resources best practices, key trends and innovative ideas from [one of] Singapore's most exciting organizations and institutions' (SHRI website, 2019). WiT (Web in Travel, a subsidiary of Northstar Travel Group) recently advertised 'the first inclusive/accessible tour [of the Enabling Village] guided by people with disabilities'. These customised tours have been run for corporate and school groups since August 2023. As an employee of the Art Faculty café explained, 'the Village has received good exposure and serves as an example that is likely to spread in Asia and around the world'.

In short, even as urban innovations such as the Enabling Village are conceived of to solve urban challenges, they also serve as marketing tools for broader ambitions. The Village not only functions as a showcase for a new approach to urban inclusion, contributing to the image of 'Singapore as a model' (Chua, 2011: 33) but also reaffirming its nature as a 'developmental state' in a globalising arena (Olds and Yeung, 2004: 492).

The inclusive city model as fuel for Singaporean entrepreneurialism: Towards a promising research agenda

Our research shows how the Singaporean authorities have confined the creation of an inclusive city to urban projects – notably the Enabling Village – that are both spatially and socially contained. The Village illustrates how the inclusion agenda interacts with Singapore's particular approach to planning and governance. As a global city in which the State is heavily involved in urban production and governance (Miao and Phelps, 2019), Singapore seeks to 'engineer' the management of its social

issues (as reported by a policymaker interviewed in May 2022). Through concrete interventions in urban planning, the State asserts the values, orders and norms of its idealised society. This is clearly reflected in the Enabling Masterplans on the inclusion of people with disabilities. The creation of the Enabling Village goes even further, illustrating Singapore's 'Public–Private–People Partnership model' (Zhuang, 2016). Our study of the Enabling Village allows us to re-examine the State-led entrepreneurial nature of Singapore as it addresses the challenge of urban inclusion. Based on this initial research, we suggest that the operationalisation of the inclusive city by the Singaporean authorities fuels its State-led entrepreneurialism in four ways, which are addressed below in turn.

Project-based, compartmentalised urbanism

First, the implementation of the Enabling Village illustrates the compartmentalising of challenges in Singapore's urban management. This so-called 'village' reveals a conception of inclusion that is aimed at a certain target group rather than being universal. Moreover, it confines people with disabilities to a specific area: consider the title of Priscilla Goy's, 2015 article in *The Straits Times*, 'Disabled get their own *one-stop village*' (italics added). Such project-based urbanism is a typical mode of city production in times of entrepreneurialism (Peck, 2014): it assigns different categories of citizens to designated spaces. In this respect, the very name of the project is misleading. The Enabling Village deals in no way with the issue of housing for older or disabled people. Instead, it is a multi-functional public space, coupled with disabled-friendly places for professional training and specific healthcare provisions. It is not a neighbourhood with actual residents and has nothing of the affective dimension inherent in the notion of a neighbourhood (Friedmann, 2009: 5). Moreover, its operations reveal an understanding of the aspirations of older and disabled people as limited to the technical aspects of accessibility and work opportunities (Jaffe, 2020; Van Holstein, 2020). As a pilot project, however, the Enabling Village has paved the way for related initiatives, such as the 'inclusive playground' at Bishan-Ang Mo

Kio Park, specifically designed for children with disabilities.

Public–private partnerships and Singapore as role model

Second, the creation of the Enabling Village illustrates the reshuffling of the roles of public and private actors in the production of the city-state: the project is designed and run by the government and is privately funded; people with disabilities are not included in the discussion. Specifically, the Enabling Village was initiated by the Singaporean Ministry of Social and Family Development and sponsored by donors and major local firms. This reflects the growth in public–private development arrangements and privately owned public spaces in global metropolises, even as, in Singapore, powerful public authorities remain in charge of land management (Chua, 2011; Haila, 2016). For Evans (1997), Singapore represents a case of ‘high stateness’, given the power of its state bureaucracy in bargaining with multi-national enterprises.

To nurture such public–private partnerships, Singapore has positioned itself as a ‘living laboratory’ in which companies (both domestic and foreign) are encouraged to test and commercialise innovative solutions using its urban infrastructure (Calder, 2016). This enables companies to refine their products before scaling up to global markets. In turn, Singapore benefits from state-of-the-art technologies and a reputation as the ‘showcase’ of the future. Assistive technologies for people with disabilities – a core part of the Enabling Village – are, for instance, now explicitly included in the Smart Nation Program. One of the goals of branding the Village indeed appears to be to enhance Singapore’s competitiveness in appealing to investors, international organisations and other countries, as can be seen in the official site visits organised for foreign delegations. When the Enabling Village won the prestigious 2022 Global Award for Excellence from the Urban Land Institute (ULI), along with five other projects from around the world, the SG Enable website proclaimed that the Village functions

as an innovation lab of new and evolving ideas to support persons with disabilities and

caregivers. [...] In championing inclusive design and cultivating an ecosystem of ideas and improvements, we strive to make an impact beyond Enabling Village. We aim to share our learnings with the world with Enabling Village being a world-class showcase and model of inclusion, and inspire others to take positive actions for inclusion.

As Ku Geok Boon, the CEO of SG Enable, told the Indian newspaper *Udayavani*:

Enabling Village hosts many visitors, both local and international guests, and we want to inspire and show everyone how a society can be more inclusive towards persons with disabilities with universal design, enabling technology, and an inclusive culture. The village has enabled various sectors and community partners to offer innovative services that support inclusion and meet gaps in the disability landscape. These prototypes have catalysed greater disability inclusion efforts beyond Enabling Village – in domains such as early childhood education, sports and wellness, and inclusive training and employment.

The Village was also reviewed positively in the English-language online journal *VietnamNews* (2022), with the telling postscript that

This story came about with the support of the Singapore International Foundation through the Impact Media Fellowship, which is designed to equip participants with the skills and resources to envision and enable positive social change in their communities.

Furthermore, in line with the notion of a ‘role model’ prototype, the Singaporean Ministry for Social and Family Development collaborated with STUCK, a respected design agency in Singapore, to publish its *Design Playbook for Inclusive Spaces* in 2022. This publication refers to the Enabling Village twice, noting that:

The playbook is developed for businesses and establishments looking to make their spaces more inclusive. The principles and ideas in the playbook are distilled from discussions with persons with disabilities, their caregivers and inclusive organisations. Combining their needs and aspirations for inclusive spaces with placemaking qualities, the playbook serves as

an inspiration to realise a vision of inclusion with welcoming spaces and experiences for all.

We thus posit that the Enabling Village, as a prototype of an inclusive city, reinforces the image of Singapore as a model (Pow, 2014, 2018). At the same time, this model ‘has a limited shelf life’ as cities in China and India catch up on urban issues such as public housing (Pow, 2018: 1223). In response, the city-state has already started to reinvent itself as a purveyor of ‘smart urban solutions’; for instance, by exporting innovative eco-planning services and green technologies (Pow, 2018: 1225).

Apolitical, technical approach to city production

Singapore’s effort to reinvent itself as a model by offering new urban solutions goes hand in hand with the depoliticisation of city production (Lefebvre, 1974). Tackling urban inclusion through a technical approach helps to generate consensus while avoiding broad-based debate and potential frictions. It gives rise to an apolitical – even ‘post-political’ (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015) – entrepreneurial city, where economic and social issues are provided with technical (‘smart’) solutions. This is in line with our interviewees’ perception of Singapore as ‘engineering’ the management of social issues, be it multi-ethnicity or the rising prevalence of disabled and older people. Disabled people may be trained in the Enabling Village to work, but this does not give them a voice in the political arena (Legacy *et al.*, 2018). Whether citizen consultation took place during the design and construction of the Enabling Village remains unclear, despite the stated ambition to create an inclusive space. Even after the opening of the Village, its potential uses remain limited by non-negotiable rules: the supposedly inclusive city is not open 24 hours a day and remains strictly supervised. As Quick and Feldman (2011: 272) point out, participation and inclusion are independent dimensions of public engagement: ‘Inclusion continuously creates a community involved in defining and addressing public issues; participation emphasizes public input on the content of programs and policies’. Inclusion in this sense

is not in evidence in either the development or management of the Enabling Village.

Communication and branding

Finally, our study underlines the priority given to communication and branding. The Enabling Village appears to serve as a technical showcase more than as a vibrant locale for visitors. The production of innovative urban models has become a trademark of the city-state, which seeks to provide inspiration for Asia and the rest of the world (Alles, 2016). The publication of the four Enabling Masterplans undoubtedly enhanced Singapore’s status as an innovator in the area of ageing and disabilities management in a metropolitan context. This was evident when ASEAN adopted its own Enabling Masterplan 2025 (‘Mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities’) and the Smart Cities Framework during its 33rd summit (held, significantly, in Singapore) in November 2018. The ASEAN Masterplan reflects its Singaporean predecessors in both structure and content, addressing the inclusion of people with disabilities according to the same themes: accessibility, employment, assistive technologies, education and leisure.

The success of the communication surrounding the Enabling Village can also be seen in the fact that it is hailed as a model for the design of the ‘Universal City’, an inclusive and multi-functional space built for the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris (Lumières de la Ville, 2019). In a lengthy essay (featuring pictures that are notably devoid of people), the French Bouygues Real Estate Corporate Foundation describes the Village as a ‘pioneer in terms of universal design’:

It appears to be a place of experimentation dedicated to inclusivity for people with disabilities through the use of new technologies [...] The village is also home to the Tech Able laboratory, dedicated to assistive technologies. A hybrid facility, it brings together players working on accessibility and innovation. It is a methodical, social and technological showcase for a city accessible to all.

Thus, despite its limited local success, the Enabling Village as a prototype site and technological showcase has proven to be a successful

marketing tool for the promotion a desirable model of urban inclusion, ripe for replication by governments and developers abroad.

Conclusion

The notion of urban inclusion is becoming increasingly widespread as a good practice in urban planning worldwide. As we have shown, however, the meaning of inclusion has progressively narrowed and the population targeted by inclusion has become highly circumscribed. Our empirical analysis of how Singapore has embraced the global 'inclusive turn' in urban planning focused on the Enabling Village, which can be understood as both a local project aimed at the ageing and disabled residents of the Redhill neighbourhood and as a showcase for the Singaporean authorities at the global level. We found that the Village exemplifies a narrow conception of what an 'inclusive city' entails: a primarily operational response to the challenges of an ageing population and the issues faced by people with disabilities in a global metropolis. Moreover, our fieldwork shed light on the paradoxes of a purportedly inclusive village that divides populations, disempowers people with disabilities through no or limited consultation, is not fully accessible and neglects the issue of housing.

On a theoretical level, the case study illustrates the capacity of the entrepreneurial Singaporean city-state to move into new domains and reinvent the models it disseminates globally. As urban models and good practices previously developed in Singapore reached their limits, there was a need to innovate and overhaul its 'aspirational model' (Bunnell and Goh, 2012). The city-state has done so by embracing the inclusive turn in urban planning and, more recently, offering 'smart urban solutions' (Kong and Woods, 2018). This perspective helps to resolve the aforementioned paradoxes: the Enabling Village makes more sense when envisioned as an experimental showcase for Singapore's expertise at the global level.

The limits we observe in the everyday practices of the Enabling Village highlight the need for further research in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the 'disabling city'

(Jaffe, 2020). A deeper understanding of the urban realities of people with disabilities will benefit policymaking. Moreover, it may give rise to opportunities to return to the radical potential of inclusion and to rethink the place of disabled people in contemporary cities more holistically, for example by giving a voice to disabled people themselves.

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Declarations of interest

None.

Notes

- ¹ Despite this militant dimension in urban studies, it worth adding that theorists, from Iris Marion Young (2002) to Sara Ahmed (2012), have nevertheless shown that the notion of 'inclusion' can manifest in different ways and be wielded by quite conservative forces, such as in 'financial inclusion' which leads to indebtedness despite the seemingly benevolent terms that frame enrolment in the financial system.
- ² The global network Cities for All brings together cities, international organisations, universities, companies, and civil society worldwide as signatories of the Global Compact on Inclusive and Accessible Cities declaration.
- ³ The 2016 Habitat III conference was held in Quito and had 30 000 participants from 167 countries.
- ⁴ The Gini Index for Singapore was 0.448 in 2008, rising to 0.458 in 2016 (Central Intelligence Agency website, 2018).
- ⁵ Violence broke out when an Indian worker died after being struck by a private bus driven by a Singaporean national. A violent protest involving 400 foreign workers left approximately 40 people injured, mainly police officers (BBC News, 2013). The event epitomised the class and ethnic tensions between the resident population of the city-state and its migrant workers.
- ⁶ This initiative, launched in November 2014, focuses on accelerating the digital transition in Singapore, both to further develop the country and to make it a world leader in the tech economy.

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