

Producing and Contesting Meanings of Participation in Planning

The Case of Singapore (1985-2020)

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Participation is a malleable concept that is shaped by political dynamics.

We investigated how “participation” has been constructed by state and nonstate actors in the planning of Singapore.

Mobilising strategic-relational institutionalist planning and cultural political economy

Analyzing 312 documents from state and nonstate sources over 35 years (mid-1980s to 2020), on the national planning agency’s (URA) participatory practices and civil society counter-initiatives

Our aim was to understand if/how these constructions have contributed to democratising urban planning and governance.

We concluded that spaces and moments for more democratic planning and governance were injected, through back-and-forth attempts to depoliticize and repoliticise “participation”.

State-led actor coalitions framed participation to support the government’s political dominance

Nonstate-led actor coalitions challenged this dominance through conflictual notions of participation

Episode 1

Mid-1980s to late 1990s

Private-sector participation as an instrument of economic development



Industry dialogue (source: URA, 1991)

Episode 2

Late 1990s to late 2000s

Public consultation as a means of building national identity and belonging



Focus group session (source: URA, 2000)

Episode 3

Late 2000s to 2020

“Co-creation” and “ground-up” initiatives as ways to strengthen economic competitiveness and identity (and manage activism)



Streets for People (source: Today, 2015)

▲ State-led constructions of participation in planning ▲

▼ Nonstate-led constructions of participation in planning ▼

Civil society involvement as predated state-led participatory mechanisms

Here yesterday, gone today
Enough is not enough

Eu Court, the subject of much public debate and pleading on the part of the Society, is no more. The building was torn down earlier this year to make way for the widening of Hill Street.



Heritage conservation campaign (source: Singapore Heritage Society, 1993)

Singapore, a cursed corner building, which

Civil society participation as a way to influence planning decisions and national interests



Guided tour of Chek Jawa wetlands (source: National Parks Board)

Activism and advocacy as legitimate forms of participation in planning



Blog for “Save Our Bukit Brown” (source: SOS Bukit Brown, 2023)

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