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Envisioning the Future,  
Conceptualising Public Space

Hanoi and Singapore Negotiating  
Spaces for Negotiation

  
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# Envisioning the Future, Conceptualising Public Space

## Hanoi and Singapore Negotiating Spaces for Negotiation

Anna-Katharina Hornidge and Sandra Kurfürst

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## Abstract

Southeast Asia, former battleground of opposing ideologies, is increasingly turning to market liberalisation; in Vietnam the vision of a 'socialist-oriented market economy', in Singapore of a 'knowledge society' is pursued.

This paper assesses these visions' influence on the local conceptualisations of public space. On Ba Dinh Square/Hanoi, official space is transformed into concrete public space through citizens' negotiation. In Singapore's libraries, the aim to foster knowledge production and creativity results in the construction of spaces for collaborative learning and discussions. Consequently this paper studies the political balancing act between tolerating the voicing of public opinions and upholding authoritarian governance practices by focussing on the conceptualisations of physical and institutional public space and their role in redefining social order.

Keywords:

Vietnam, Singapore, Public Space, Knowledge-based Economy, Socialist-oriented Modernisation

# 1 Introduction

In the past centuries, several opposing political ideologies passed through Southeast Asia, ranging from communist/socialist to market liberal/capitalist concepts, authoritarian dictatorships, one-/multi-party democracies. Today, market liberalization according to capitalist principles is increasingly taking hold. Together with the political system in each country, it leads to different, unique political and economic arrangements. The search for country-specific paths towards political stability and economic growth is until today often accompanied with a dominant state vision of a better future.

Vietnam, still classified as developing country, aims at becoming an industrialized country until 2020. The one-party state aims to realize this vision by developing a so-called "socialist-oriented market economy". The emphasis is put on an export-oriented economy with the main products being crude oil, sea food, textiles and shoes. By offering inexpensive wage labor, Vietnam increasingly takes over China's role as a strategic location for Foreign Direct Investment. However, despite Vietnam's global integration and economic liberalisation initiated through the reform policy of Doi Moi in 1986, the political monopoly still rests with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). After a short period of political relaxation previous to the APEC summit in 2006 and the WTO accession in 2007, the party-state has returned to its policy of undermining any oppositional activities. Recent attempts of pro-democracy activists to challenge the socialist path to modernization have harshly been suppressed by the government. In Singapore, the global hype towards 'knowledge society' (sometimes also termed 'knowledge-based economy' or 'information society') led to immense government action taken towards developing the information and communication technological infrastructure, research and development centres, knowledge diffusing institutions as well as the arts, theatres and museums. The current program fostering Singapore's development into a knowledge society envisions Singapore as 'Intelligent Nation 2015' (IN 2015). IN 2015 aims "to navigate Singapore's exhilarating transition into a global city, universally recognised as an enviable synthesis of technology, infrastructure, enterprise and manpower" as stated on the government website.

This paper assesses the influence of these dominant state visions on the urban landscapes<sup>1</sup> of the cities Hanoi and Singapore. This is done by discussing Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square and Singapore's library system as examples for the changing conceptualisations of public space in both cities. Common to both units of analysis is their role as the capital cities of two, as authoritarian classified, states in Southeast Asia to propagate and demonstrate the dominant state vision of the future to the nation and the international community. Although the economic performance of Singapore with its emphasis on knowledge society highly differs from Vietnam's route of export-oriented industrialization, it becomes obvious that the ongoing economic developments also influence the design, function as well as the practices of public space. The search for an 'Asian' path to modernisation with the right balance between Western influence while at the same time upholding local values<sup>2</sup> is in both countries repeatedly discussed. Singapore's authoritarian path to modernization was identified as a role model path by the Vietnamese government and is followed in its own attempt to create a "civilized and modern capital"<sup>3</sup>. In order to reduce criminality, prostitution and gambling on public space, both countries regard control over public space, including karaoke bars, necessary. Additionally, public space is in both countries heavily employed for the purpose of educating citizens. Billboards, prohibition signs as well as symbolic architecture are used to

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'landscape' is to denote both the physical environment, and the symbolic representation of social practices. Practices of power and resistance form a social microcosm that is the 'landscape' (Zukin, 1991, p. 16 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> The most prominent debate on this matter is the 'Asian Value' debate, led by Lee Kwan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore and his Malaysian counterpart Mahathir.

<sup>3</sup> In the mid 1990s Vietnam, this anticipated Westernisation resulted in the adoption of the "foreign social evils campaign" (Logan, 2000, p. 254). However, with growing reliance on foreign investment, the adjective "foreign" was crossed off the official language.

educate the public and communicate the dominant state vision.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, drive for government defined urban renewal resulted in both cities in an almost too late recognition of cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup>

The paper comprises three main parts. In the first part, the conceptual basis for assessing public space and its shaping under two dominant state visions is outlined and discussed. Based on this, two empirical parts, one on Hanoi and one on Singapore, follow. Here Ba Dinh Square/Hanoi and the library system of Singapore are discussed as two case studies regarding the influence of the two dominant state visions on the reconceptualisation of public space. The cases illustrate how the visions influence their conception as well as suggest that this process of reconceptualising public space under the influence of these two visions develops its own dynamism. The existing public spaces invite processes of negotiating the conceptualisations of these spaces. Thus the simple reshaping of the functions, meaning and usage of the spaces paves the way for public negotiations on the matter. This will then be discussed in the final part of the paper.

Methodologically this paper is based on qualitative field research (participatory observation, expert and narrative interviews, focus group discussions), in Hanoi in 2007/2008 as well as in Singapore in 2005. Subsequent research on government programmes, newspaper articles, press statements and secondary literature was conducted in early 2009.

## 2 Dominant State Visions and the Conceptualisations of Public Space

Rapid economic development as experienced by Singapore since the 1960s and Vietnam since the 1990s was initiated through a general demand for modernization. Modernization was regarded the key to innovation, economic growth and higher living standards, and hence the promise for a better life. Within the authoritarian states of Vietnam and Singapore, the state was dominant in defining the way of how to reach the objective of modernization. In Singapore the state vision of modernity shifted from export-oriented industrialisation in the early years of economic development towards the erection of a knowledge-based economy. In Vietnam after having anticipated that the socialist path to modernization with a command economy at its focus had failed, the party-state introduced the transformation towards a market economy. Here, shifts in state visions already become apparent.

In this paper however, we understand these dominant state visions of the future with reference to Eisenstadt's (2002, p. 3) thoughts on "multiple modernities". He here discusses modernity as a dynamic process of "contested institutionalization" and argues that in the cultural program of modernity premises of the established social, ontological and political order as well as the legitimation of that order were challenged. It was believed that society could be actively formed by conscious human agency. Besides agency Eisenstadt points out reflexivity in the modern program. This reflexivity concentrated upon the "possibility of different interpretations of core transcendental visions and basic ontological conceptions prevalent in a particular society or civilization; it came to question the very givenness of such visions and the institutional patterns related to them" (Eisenstadt, 2002, p. 4). Hence, the dominant vision, which in this paper is the state vision of each country, can be continuously contested, negotiated and redefined. Each state vision as discussed in this paper is consequently, just as modernity according to Eisenstadt, "characterized by a number of possibilities realizable through autonomous human agency".

The term 'public space' entails a number of different foci and definitions, ranging from physical (public gardens and squares) to institutional (public libraries, schools), virtual (mass media) and digital (internet) spheres, accessible to the public. Amongst the most commonly discussed criteria are aspects of

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<sup>4</sup> With respect to Soviet societies, Rittersporn et al. (2003, p. 14) declare that the dominance of the one-party state in public space is for one part expressed through propaganda. Accordingly, the state's power of controlling public discourse is made explicit.

<sup>5</sup> While in the first decades of economic growth, historic edifices were sacrificed to make space for urban planning projects, in the late 1980s in Singapore and since the mid 1990s also in Hanoi, a turn towards a positive reception took place. Both governments came to appreciate the value of traditional shop houses and villas as icons of national identity and as tourist attractions (Perry, Kong and Yeoh, 1999, p. 262, 266 ff.; Logan, 2000, p. 1 f.).

ownership (public vs. private), openness and accessibility. Yet, a publicly owned building might be closed to the public and vice versa, which argues that these are not the sole criteria. The same holds true in the case of virtual public spaces.<sup>6</sup> The idea of the birth place of democracy, the market square (Agora) north of the Akropolis in Athen, Greece, to offer a space open to the public (here: male citizens) participating in political discussion and decision-making, was basically transferred into today's societal context and scales. Hannah Arendt was most concerned with the ancient public space of the Greek polis. Habermas (1987) followed Arendt's "agonistic view" and focused on the rise and decline of the bourgeois public sphere of 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, thereby developing a "discursive public space" model (Benhabib, 1992, p. 73). He therefore defined 'public sphere' as a realm of conversation and discussion by private individuals on matters of public interest (Habermas, 1974). Albeit being criticized for its universalism, eurocentrism and andocentrism (Howell, 1993, p. 311), Habermas' notion of the public sphere is commonly referred to when talking of a sphere of will formation, where private individuals debate deliberately. This realm could exist in a public city square or park as well as in a privately owned home or an internet platform. Consequently, a public place is not necessarily a public space synonymous for public sphere but only becomes 'concrete', develops from a public place (öffentliche Fläche) to a public space (öffentlicher Raum) when being used by individuals to meet and interact. Consequently social theorists stress the constructed character of public space.

Here 'space' is defined by the relations between objects inside the space at hand. This relational concept of space stands in contrast to the absolute notion of space, considering space to be an empty container, which can be filled with objects (Schroer 2006, p. 44 f.). In Hanoi, just as in Singapore, both states shape and plan spaces for assemblage according to their respective vision (Evers and Korff 2001). Yet at the same time citizens (increasingly) contest, redefine and appropriate these spaces. While in Hanoi the official space of Ba Dinh Square is gradually turned into a public space, in Singapore institutional space created by the government bears the potential to lead to the creation of physical and digital public spaces for counter-discourses. Thus, both authoritarian state governments, in accordance with their state visions have created spaces, which themselves are capable of contributing to a slow process of political liberalisation. Accordingly, we contend that the conceptualisations of public space are highly determined by the negotiation processes between citizens and state and therewith are socially constructed. Henri Lefebvre in "The Production of Space" (1991) understands space as a production that is constituted by political agents and shaped by social processes. Consequently, every society or in Lefebvre's terms every "mode of production" creates its own specific space. He presents a tripartite system of spatiality by differentiating between three spatial moments: (1) spatial practice; (2) representations of space; and (3) spaces of representations.

1. Spatial practice refers to the economic production and social reproduction of spatial relations between objects and products.
2. Representations of space, such as signs, symbols, codes that make the spatial production of space understandable and "are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations" (1991, p. 33).
3. Representational Space designates dominated and experienced spaces. It is distinct from the other two spaces, of the real and imagined, though at the same time encompassing them. Embodying symbolism it is moreover closely linked to the clandestine of social life and to art. It refers to space that is experienced through the accompanying images and symbols (Soja, 1996, p. 68).

"Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42).

All of the three spatial moments presented above are shaped by the workings of power (Soja, 1996, p. 87). More generally the constitution of space is always accompanied by a parallel process of negotiation

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<sup>6</sup> There are publicly owned websites offering limited space for open participation while some privately especially encourage open and diverse participation and vice versa.

of power relations. Space is constituted by action (Löw, 2001, p. 190 ff). Speaking of the “social construction” of space thus requires looking at space in its relationship with types of behaviour, action, styles and expectations. Transferring this argument to public space it is a necessary precondition to correlate the concrete public space to the abstract term of “public space”. Only then it is possible to talk of “socially constructed space”. The concrete object needs to be assessed in relation to the specific practices, attitudes and interactions immanent to it (Koenen, 2003, p. 157 f.).

Consequently, in times where social theory is preoccupied with the dissolution of space and spatial dispersal, an assessment of concrete space is rendered even more necessary. It is the paper's objective to reemphasize the relevance of physical, institutional and digital space as location of the public sphere. These diverse spaces offer members of society topic-related local and global communities of practice and the required fora to meet and interact.

Citizens' usage of public space is highly determined by its materiality as well as its accessibility. The design and outline of public space act as instruments of power to regulate and delimit people's movements and interactions (Allen, 2006, p. 445). Urban public spaces are crucial material facts serving the aim of nation-building, and the continuation of political legitimacy. Notably in national capitals, monuments, squares and statues, representing the nation's history and legends, are located in public space. Lefebvre (1990) adds to this, that states tend to represent themselves in the city via emptiness. In Hanoi, 'Ba Dinh Square', characterised by its vast outline, poses an adequate example of this expression of state power. In Singapore, the public library system illustrates how institutional public space as well as the usage of this aims are contributing to knowledge production and therewith to economic growth. Knowledge enriched social interaction is hoped to lead to social capital building and raised creative capacities for the creation of inventions and innovations.

### 3 From Command Economy to Socialist-oriented Modernisation

Already shortly after gaining independence from colonial rule, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam constantly curtailed any private sector activities. In the 1950s it introduced the collectivisation of trade and agriculture as well as the socialisation of industries. Finally, in 1976 with the foundation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the redistributive system of command economy was extended to the whole country. At the end of the 1970s the country was struck by natural disasters. As a consequence many people died of hunger, not least due to the insufficient economic system, and as it became obvious that the Socialist path to modernization failed to deliver the promised goods, this dominant vision of the future got openly disputed. People's awareness of the prospect of multiple ideas of the future made citizens challenge the current order and embrace their own vision of a better life through autonomous human agency. One initial step of this autonomous human agency was the infiltration of the collectivized system by rural households which resulted in an informal contract system. In reaction to these developments, the Communist Party, anticipating the shortcomings of the current order, passed the economic reform program of Doi Moi in 1986. That way Vietnam's transition from planned to market economy was introduced. The renovation process had a considerable impact on Vietnam's economic performance. Since the 1990s annual GDP growth rates of 7-8% were achieved. In addition to that it fostered Vietnam's global integration. In January 2007 Vietnam became the 150th member of the WTO. Nonetheless, economic reforms were not accompanied by political liberalisation. The Communist Party of Vietnam still is the ruling party and does not allow for any party pluralism. That the premise of preserving the political status quo is still retained, while at the same time economic development is fostered, is exemplified in the latest national Socio-Economic Development Plan 2006-2010. The first page of the plan clearly states that the development objective is to “continue the implementation of the strategy of accelerating the process of socialist-oriented industrialization and modernization of the country for Vietnam to basically become an industrialized nation by 2020” (MPI, 2006, p. 1).

In the overall goal of the full development of socialism a “socialist-oriented market economy” is seen as just a transitional phase (Weggel, 2001, p. 398, 404). The term “Market-Leninism” further demonstrates the co-existence of two diverging ideologies within one state vision (Logan, 2000, p. 254). In the field of



economy liberalisation and the building up of a multi-sector economy are acknowledged as necessary preconditions for the full evolution of socialism, while in the political realm still the ideology of Market-Leninism is pursued. This means that no political liberalisation is aimed at.

Nonetheless the state is not able to completely regulate the public sphere any longer. Economic liberalisation has rendered scope to processes of negotiation between citizens and state capable of modifying existing state-society relations.

### 3.1 Making Visions of the Future Concrete – the Urban Landscape of Hanoi

Due to Hanoi's role as national as well as political centre of the country, the government attempts to exert direct control over the city's physical environment. Hanoi is one of the five municipalities, which are under immediate command of the national government. In addition to that its long history – in 2010 the city is to celebrate its 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary – contributes to its outstanding position in the national urban system. It is for this reason that the party-state tries to maintain its dominant role in the definition of the urban landscape of Hanoi. In the process of nation-building the state determined the commemorative project, and thereby its manifestation in concrete space. Ho Tai (1995, p. 273) notes that the party-state has full control over the material structures, nurturing the collective memory. In contrast to more democratic countries, where public monuments are often the outcome of negotiation between official agendas and local communities, the Vietnamese state dominates the design, location and budget of public space in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

Diagram 1: Lenin Statue with flower decoration "Congratulating the Party"



Private Photo, 2008.

Conclusively, public space is seen here as the physical expression of the state's "vision of the future" in terms of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Rather than being public space, squares and monuments are official spaces controlled by the state and often not freely accessible. To comprehend the domination of one group in giving meaning to urban objects, Kong and Law refer to Gramsci's (1973) concept of 'ideological hegemony'. The ruling group presents ideas and values which are perceived to be 'natural' or 'commonsense' by the rest of society. Landscapes then have the power to institutionalise the given order, "thus contributing to the social constructedness of reality" (Kong and Law, 2002, p. 1505). Yet these dominant ideas can be contested. According to Zukin (1991, p. 16, 18ff.) the landscape is formed by practices of both domination and resistance. That is what makes the social microcosm.

Crucial to the continuity and maintenance of domination is according to Scott (1990, p. 45) the demonstration and symbolisation of power. In order to manifest the hierarchical order, symbolic gestures are required. In particular, authoritarian states have a propensity to utilise public space for staged political performances. These performances are to demonstrate the state's symbolic power.

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<sup>7</sup> Evers (1977, 1997, 2007) assesses asian symbolism with regard to public space conceptualisations in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Diagram 2: Police training at Bac Son Street



Private Photo, 2007.

“Parades, inaugurations, processions, coronations, funerals provide ruling groups with the occasion to make a spectacle of themselves in a manner largely of their own choosing” (Scott, 1990, p. 58).

Celebrations in the form of military parades organized on the occasion of National Independence Day or Ho Chi Minh’s birthday are instruments of the state to mobilise the masses.

However, global integration as well as private sector development increasingly poses a challenge to the state’s defining power. With the introduction of market economy a multitude of spatial producers has evolved, each of them leaving their imprints in the city’s landscape. Multinational and domestic enterprises design the built environment according to their visions of the future, thereby creating new public spaces like shopping malls, amusement parks etc. In addition to that, citizens make makeshift improvements of their houses, also known as “popular housing”<sup>8</sup>. In the frame of these house expansions often public spaces like streets and pavements and even sacred spaces such as pagodas and temples are illegally occupied. What is more economic liberalisation resulted in a diversification of life-styles leading to an increasing employment of former official spaces by Hanoi’s citizens for leisure and social activities. The following chapter is to present the Vietnamese state’s conceptualization of public space and its contestation by citizens. Thus, the example of Ba Dinh Square is chosen to exemplify the negotiation of “visions of the future” between citizens and state.

### 3.2 Ba Dinh Square – the Negotiation of Visions

Spaces like Ba Dinh Square are a rather new phenomenon to Vietnam. Until the introduction of urban public spaces in the form of squares and parks by French urban planners, these structures were not an integral part of the emic conceptualization of space. Instead, sacred spaces are emically considered to be public spaces. Pagodas, temples and, in particular, the communal house are the traditional places where the village community mingled and the common good was defined.<sup>9</sup> Against this background, Ba Dinh Square is considered an “implant”, imported from the Soviet Union. In the process of nation-building the capital of the Socialist government required a space, symbolizing and demonstrating its power. Following the role model of the Red Square in Moscow, a place with the capacity to accommodate up to 100,000 people was built.

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<sup>8</sup> Following Evertsz (2000, p. 24) “popular housing” comprises all housing activities that are the outcome of individual decisions and self-initiatives of mainly low-income groups. These activities are not subject to official planning and control.

<sup>9</sup> However, it is noteworthy that these spaces never were open to all societal groups of the village, but that accessibility was granted according to class and gender.

Diagram 3: Ba Dinh Square



Private Photo, 2007.

To apprehend the role that Ba Dinh Square plays as national symbol, a preoccupation with the square's history is essential. Its history is closely linked to the country's gaining independence from the French colonial regime in 1945. It was on Ba Dinh Square, where Ho Chi Minh on September the 2<sup>nd</sup> announced the Declaration of Independence in front of the Vietnamese people.

From a perspective of Urban Symbolism, the "symbolic ecology", which denominates the spatial distribution of symbols in the urban landscape, instantly catches the observer's eye. Although until 1945 the Square was only an uncultivated land plot, important buildings of the French administration like the Résidence Gouverneur Général were located at its rim. The declaration of independence in the immediate centre of colonial power is a clear case of "counter symbolism" as stipulated by Nas (1993, p. 16). The flag pole of French Indochina was redefined by the hoisting of the flag of the Viet Minh. By doing so an official symbol was used to state a "counter symbolism" to the current order. Hence, the Declaration of Independence was the major act to determine Ba Dinh Square's symbolism. From an idle land plot it was turned into an icon of national independence, commemorating the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Once the identification of the concrete space of Ba Dinh with national independence had been established, the party strategically employed this symbolism. The reference to independence and the nation's first president Ho Chi Minh provided the basis of the party's legitimacy. Therefore the manifestation of this reference into concrete became an integral part of nation-building. In addition the party<sup>10</sup> succeeded in the creation of a sacred space through the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Every day numbers of Vietnamese visitors come to pay worship to the nation's first president. By locating the mausoleum in the West of the square, opposite to the later built National Assembly in the East<sup>11</sup> the party-state superimposed the Socialist vision of modernity onto the physical environment of the city, thus redefining the urban landscape.

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<sup>10</sup> Already in 1965, when Ho Chi Minh was still alive, the highest institution of the party, the politburo, decided the long-term preservation of Ho's body (Ba Ngoc, 2006, p. 1).

<sup>11</sup> The National Assembly was demolished in 2008.

Diagram 4 and 5: Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and National Assembly



Private Photos, 2007.

Further steps in this process of redefining space were the occupancy of the surrounding buildings of the colonial administration with agencies of the Socialist government as well as the construction of new Socialist style buildings around the square. In addition to that streets were renamed after Vietnamese revolutionary heroes attempting to eradicate the colonial past from the collective memory (Logan, 2000, p. 216 f.)

“As with Moscow for the Soviets, the North Vietnamese government wanted its capital city to encapsulate the vision of the new Vietnamese socialist state. Hanoi’s role was to be inspirational both in ideological and economic terms” (Logan, 2000, p. 186).

The state vision is also reflected in the architecture of Ba Dinh Square. The construction of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum was completed in 1975 with the assistance of the Soviet architect Grigorievich Isakovich, who also designed the Cultural Palace as well as the Ho Chi Minh Museum. Its outer appearance reminds of the Lenin-Mausoleum in Moscow, hence symbolizing the power of the Communist Party (Logan, 1994, p. 60; Logan, 2000, p. 193). Considering the square’s vast outline and emptiness, its primary function was to assemble the masses. More specifically, particularly in the early years of the Socialist State it served as an arena for military parades and state performances. Due to its official and symbolic function, the state exerted strict control over its accessibility. Citizens being only allowed to access the square for the purpose of paying tribute to Ho Chi Minh or the attendance of state festivities, indicate the state’s strong hold on this national symbol.

However, recent developments observed on the square show an alteration of the square’s function and usage, thereby reflecting a shift in state-society relations. Since the beginning of economic liberalisation introduced by Doi Moi policy in 1986, Ba Dinh Square is increasingly occupied by citizens for social activities like meeting friends or doing sports. In reaction to citizens’ rising demand for public spaces to conduct leisure activities, the state made the square accessible for recreational and social activities in the early morning and evening hours. Ba Dinh Square has come to denote an open space within the densely settled city. It is a space where urban dwellers go to in their free time. Yet, it remains highly controlled and supervised. Political activities like demonstrations are prevented from taking place on this symbolic space. As a consequence, although the official meaning still is apparent, it has come to additionally connote a public space. Of course, it needs to be remarked that the space is only accessible at specific times of the day, which are fixed by the party-state. It is therefore difficult to speak of a “public” space. Yet, what the term implies is that citizens are more and more attracted to the square through publicly self-organized activities rather than staged performances of the state. Evidence to the transformation is the state’s growing incapability of attracting the masses. Thomas (2002, p. 1614) states that the crowd “has had a huge semantic shift since the 1940s”. Popular events like the visit of Microsoft Director Bill Gates or the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games tend to assemble more people than festivities of the official sphere. Ho Chi Minh’s birthday is one of the few official celebrations that still gain the citizens’ attention. A further proof of the growing self-organization of the public is the

attendance of the funerals of the founders of opposition parties such as the Democratic Party and "Bloc 8406" by hundreds of activists (The Economist, 26 April 2008, p. 14).

On the one hand the self-organization of the public poses a challenge to the Socialist state and its instruments of control and supervision. On the other hand, the state acknowledges this shift and continuously withdraws from the public sphere, thereby creating a separated official sphere. One example for this is the festival organized on the eve of the Liberation Day of Hanoi of the year 1954, on the 10th of October 2007. Although the celebration took place on Ba Dinh Square in the evening hours, when it is usually opened to Hanoi's citizens, it was not accessible to the public. The square was so well sealed off with guards and fences, that the public was withheld from participation. Citizens, who come to Ba Dinh Square regularly in the evening, were surprised to find themselves excluded from participation.

Similarly, other state orchestrations in the past nowadays present themselves in a new texture. As examples we would like to refer to the festivities on the occasion of the National Independence Day or Liberation Day, the fall of Saigon in 1975. In the past the annual celebrations were accompanied by military parades and fireworks. Today, only every fifth year big official celebrations of these days are taking place on Ba Dinh Square. In 2008, the party-state celebrated both days in the Vietnamese-Soviet Friendship Palace behind closed doors. On Ba Dinh Square only a small ceremony was held, which comprised the obligatory visit of the members of the party's and state's leadership, and the central committee of the Fatherland's Front to the mausoleum. However, in order to convey participatory elements, besides the "comrades of the party's leadership, the state," also "the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, comrades of the revolution, the mothers of Vietnam's heroes as well as representatives of all classes of the capital's citizens" were allowed to attend the festivities (ANTD, 03.09.08). The only evidence of a national holiday on Ba Dinh Square was displayed by red flags with the yellow sickle, hoisted on the left side of the mausoleum, and national flags hoisted on its right side. The citizens themselves are well aware of the changes in the modes of celebration. Interviewees explained that the days of the Liberation of Saigon and International Labour Day have turned from national holidays into days free for leisure. Asked about what she did on these days, Nhuyen reports: "I went to Ha Long Bay with my family. Nowadays Hanoians leave the city to go to the sea or visit foreign countries like Thailand, Singapore and Campuchia, while the people from the countryside that always work hard come to Hanoi on their holiday to visit uncle Ho's Mausoleum. (...) No one stays in the city if he has so many days off".

### 3.3 Discussion

Albeit not intended by the political elite, economic liberalisation initiated through Doi Moi fosters social change. Making use of the newly gained possibilities, citizens embrace their own ideas of a better life, disputing the socialist route to modernization. The result is the negotiation of diverse visions of the future between citizens and state as represented in urban public space. The occupation of Ba Dinh Square, the icon of national independence, by Hanoi's residents for social activities like sports and meeting friends is part of this negotiation process. We understand the state's fading potential to attract the masses with spectacles like military parades and processions as a sign that the state vision has lost its unifying appeal. Instead, the public increasingly organizes itself by participating in popular events like football games and concerts, or by appropriating spaces like Ba Dinh Square for private activities. In return, the state retreats into an enclosed official sphere for the celebration of state festivities. Here, a clear shift of visions is taking place. Brought forward through economic liberalisation, private individuals have attained more freedom in making individual decisions like where to work, live and how to spend their free time. The diversification of lifestyles, especially noticeable in the city, argues for the existence of multiple visions of the future. This multiplicity argues for a slow abandonment of the former stress on the collective and a continuous transition towards a more individualized society.

In conclusion, concrete public space is only recently being constructed in Hanoi. Citizens' encroachment on Ba Dinh Square gradually transforms this most official space into a public space. However, since rules of accessibility are prescribed by the state and their implementation is constantly subject to state control, its potential to serve as a public space in Habermas' sense remains rather restricted. Political

demonstrations for example are prevented from taking place on this symbolic space. State control over spaces that at first glance appear to be “public” is not only evident in physical space, but furthermore in digital public space. In the last years, digital space has been intensively used as forum of public discourse to voice claims for democracy and a multi-party system. Most prominent is the “Manifesto for Freedom and Democracy” signed on the 8th of April 2006 – also known as Bloc 8406 (Radio Free Asia, 08.09.2009). However, that the state is not willing to tolerate any positions diverging from its vision is demonstrated in the passing of Decree No. 97/2008/ND-CP in August 2008 and its amendment in 2008 (Ministry of Information and Communication Vietnam 2008). The decree seeks to curtail any activities on the internet that could harm national security. Additionally, the recent crack-down on pro-democracy activists employing virtual weblogs and chat rooms to voice their political opinion or on the human-rights lawyer Le Cong Dinh (BBC, 14 September 2009), show the harsh control over emerging digital public spaces and therewith question the above outlined signs for liberalising tendencies with regard to public spaces. It therefore remains to be seen whether the assessed changes in the conceptualisation of physical public space, illustrated above with reference to Ba Dinh Square, as well as the negotiation processes surrounding it will, as small seedlings of liberalisation, continue to grow.

## 4 From Service Provision to Knowledge-driven Autonomy

In the late 1970s, Singapore’s government identified the development of the information and communication technology (ICT) industry as well as the building of the island-wide technological infrastructure for data, information and knowledge transmission as promising areas to ensure future economic growth (Tan, 1980; Hornidge, 2007, p. 241ff). The idea of Singapore to develop itself into a knowledge society, a society saturated with knowledge consumption and especially production in all sectors of social, professional and economic life, was formulated as Singapore’s government aim (National IT Plan Working Committee, 1985). From the early 1980s to the 1990s, the Singaporean government consequently indulged into the building of an ICT infrastructure in conjunction with an appropriate legal infrastructure. This primary focus on ICT and legal infrastructure was complemented by the application of ICTs in the public administration. The actual shift towards the widespread application of ICTs in Singapore’s society only took place in the late 1990s. Here programmes were launched, heavily emphasising the application of ICTs in private and professional life, educational facilities and the public service. Also from the early 1990s onwards, these ICT focused definitions of knowledge society were challenged by an increased awareness of the importance of local knowledge production for social and economic development. The national research environment was heavily expanded and the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*STAR) overlooking 12 biomedical and engineering research institutes was founded. In the mid 1990s, this was further amended by the realisation that a knowledge society requires the potential of every citizen. With the building of a vast library scene through government programmes such as ‘Library 2000’ and ‘Library 2010’, the Singaporean government aimed to allow every citizen to participate in the usage of ICTs, knowledge creation and transmission. Finally, primarily from 2000 onwards, the rich potential of creativity, the arts and culture, as well as the development of creative industries moved into the center of the government’s attention. It led to the formulation of documents such as ‘Singapore: Global City of the Arts’ in 1995, the ‘Renaissance City Plan: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore’ in 2000 (followed up by Renaissance City Plan II in 2005 and III in 2008) and the ‘Creative Industries Development Strategy’ in 2002 (Hornidge, 2010).

Overall, this aim to develop Singapore’s economy towards predominantly being based on knowledge-intensive sectors and therefore as society as a whole to develop into a knowledge society led to the building of the respective infrastructure (buildings, streets, places and information and telecommunication lines) as well as the institutional set-up. In the following, we redraw the creation of public space for the transfer, communication and creation of knowledge and ideas by focusing on Singapore’s library system as institutional public space for collaborative learning.

## 4.1 Singapore's Library System - the Construction of Institutional Space

Following a suggestion by Sir Stamford Raffles, the foundation stone for Singapore's first public library, the „Hullett Memorial Library“, was laid in 1823 and opened in 1837 together with Singapore's first major educational institution, The Singapore Institution. It was open to students and staff. Members of the general public were charged 25 cents a month for usage. In 1874, a small museum on Malayan history was attached to the library and was renamed into „The Raffles Library and Museum“. It consisted of a reference library, a lending library and a reading room. In 1875, over 4000 visitors were received ranging from naval officers in transit to locals (NL, 2009). Two weeks before Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, the British and Australian forces occupied the library as a Regimental Aid Station. During the following three and a half years of Japanese occupation the library was closed, except on 29 April 1942, for the occasion of the birthday of the Japanese Emperor. Differently to some libraries in Malaya, the Singaporean library merely suffered little destruction, with only 500 reference books lost.

Diagram 6: The National Library Building at Stamford Road



Source: NL, 2009.

On 1 December 1945, the library was reopened under British Administration. In the 1950s it heavily expanded and a Branch Library Scheme was established. On 15 August 1957, the first foundation stone for a new National Library building was laid by Lee Kong Chian at Stamford Road. The library moved in November 1960, under the first Singaporean Director of the National Library, Ms. Hedwig Anuar, to the new building. On 12 November 1960, the Raffles Library was renamed into National Library and re-opened in its new building. On 01 April 1958, the Raffles National Library Ordinance (No. 31 of 1957) came into effect, enabling the National Library to provide free public service for all residents of Singapore. Furthermore, the ordinance assigned the library to act as depository for all publications printed and published in Singapore, a function that was re-confirmed by the National Library Board Act in 1995 (NL, 2009).

## 4.2 Making the Vision concrete, Expanding the Library System

Diagram 7: Network of National, Regional & Community Libraries in Singapore<sup>12</sup>



Source: NLB, 2008.

In the early 1990s, the government of Singapore identified the need to raise the general level of education and creativity of society. The improvement of the nation's educational and library system became government priority. From June 1992, a comprehensive review of the Singaporean library was undertaken by the Library 2000 Review Committee, chaired by Dr. Tan Chin Nam. The conclusion drawn by this review was to position libraries as an integral part of the national system supporting Singapore as a learning nation and knowledge society in the Straits of Malacca region. On 15 February 1994, the Library 2000 Review Committee submitted its report to the Minister for Information and the Arts, entitled "Library 2000: Investing in a Learning Nation (L2000)" (Library 2000 Review Committee, 1994). In the letter of submission from the committee to the Minister for Information and the Arts the committee argued for the future role of libraries as follows:

"We must expand Singapore's capacity to learn faster and apply the knowledge better than other nations. This differential lead in our learning capacity will be crucial to our long-term national competitiveness in the global economy where both nations as well as firms compete with each other on the basis of information and knowledge" (Library 2000 Review Committee to Minister for Information and the Arts, 15 February 1994).

On 16 March 1995, the Parliament of Singapore passed the bill to establish the National Library Board (NLB) from 01 September 1995 onwards. The board immediately started with the implementation of "Library 2000", conceptualised by the Library 2000 Review Committee in 1994.

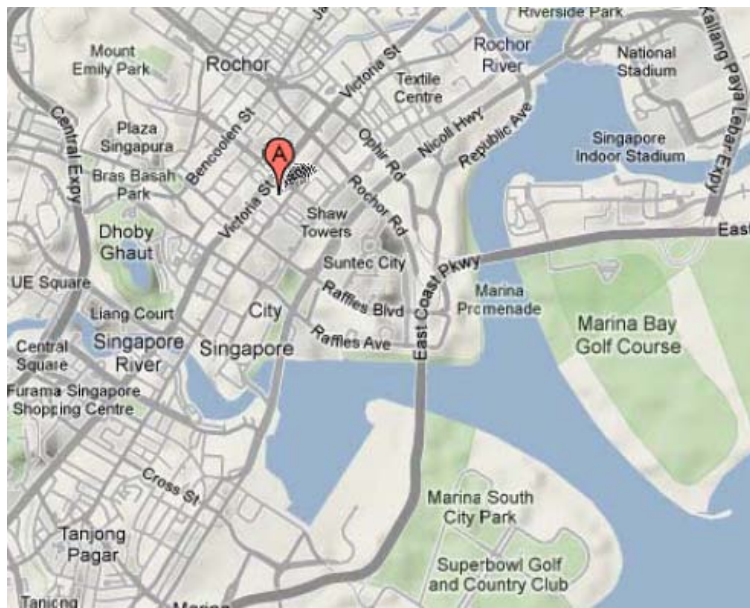
On 31 March 2004, six years after the government's announcement that the red-bricked National Library building would be demolished for urban redevelopment, it closed its doors for the last time and made way for the new National Library building at Victoria Street, following principles of green design.

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<sup>12</sup> Additionally to the twenty two national (1), regional (3) and community libraries (18) illustrated above, exist another ten community children libraries as well as libraries of educational facilities.



Diagram 8: The National Library



Source: google maps, 2009.

The new building of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library<sup>13</sup>, the National Library of Singapore opened on 22 July 2005, 1.2 km or a 15 min foot walk north of „The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay“. It is therefore located in walking distance to the arts, cultural and museums district, the creativity hub, of Singapore.

Diagram 9: The New National Library Building at Victoria Street



Source: NL, 2009.

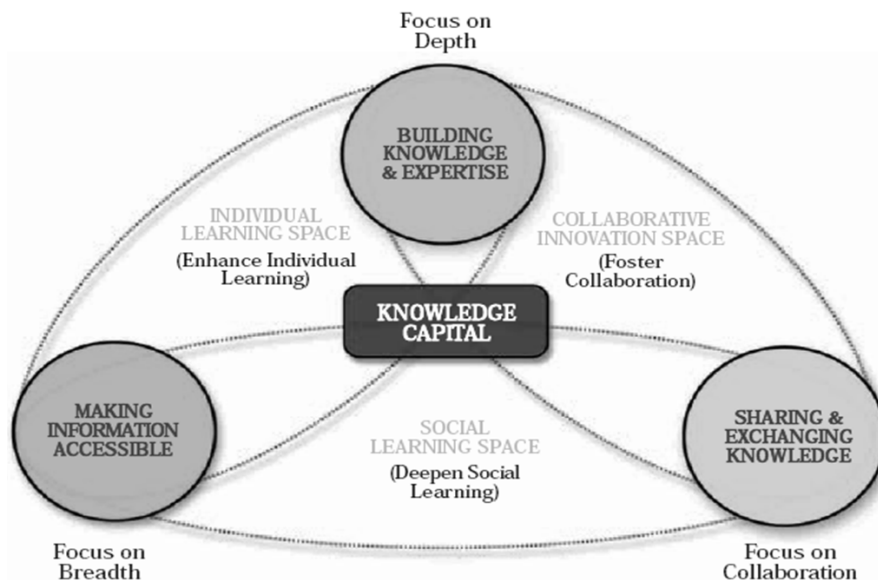
<sup>13</sup> Named after its main donor, Lee Kong Chian with a SGD\$60 million dollar contribution.

The National Library Board on its website describes the new National Library building as „a knowledge icon located in the heart of the arts, cultural, entertainment and civic district of Singapore“. The symbolism attached to the “prominent landmark” is outlined further on: “it embodies the nation’s unflinching pursuit of excellence and its people’s lifelong passion for knowledge and learning. [...] the building symbolizes the nation’s aspirations to be a global centre for information, knowledge and technology and also invigorates the imagination of the people with the creative possibilities of good design” (NLB, 2009b). An interesting parallel can here be drawn to Malaysian and Indonesian symbolism and public space conceptualisations as done by Evers (1977; 2007). The building houses the Central Lending Library, the National Arts Council Drama Centre, the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, an Exhibition Floor as well as two computer programming spots. As such, it aims to represent the convergence of arts, knowledge and research and information and communication technologies (Paul, 2006, p. 2). It aims at creating space for the convergence of these different forms and stocks of knowledge to take place.

### 4.3 From ‘Libraries’ to ‘Spaces of Collaborative Learning’

In order to integrate libraries as centres of knowledge sharing and creativity into the lives of the citizens, in May 2005 NLB published “Library 2010” (L2010). Here, NLB states its mission as expanding “the learning capacity of the nation as to enhance national competitiveness and to promote a gracious society” (NLB, 2005:1). The report stresses the need for a knowledge framework which entails (a) making information accessible; (b) building knowledge and expertise; and (c) sharing and exchanging knowledge. Therefore, the library system of Singapore aims to (a) enhance individual learning; (b) foster collaboration; and (c) deepen social learning (NLB, 2005: 16). These aims are based on the assumption that three main means exist, by which people gain and use knowledge in society: (a) information – knowledge embedded in information or knowledge artifacts, such as books, websites and databases; (b) knowledge & expertise – knowledge embedded in people, in their competencies, skills and experience; and (c) shared knowledge – knowledge held in common, such as the ability of a team to solve problems quickly and effectively (NLB 2005, 16).

Diagram 1: L2010 – Building Knowledge Capital



Source: NLB, 2005, p. 21.

The government programme ‘Library 2010’, released in 2005, aims at (a) enhancing individual learning; (b) fostering collaborative innovations; and (c) deepening social learning by providing the respective physical and digital spaces, as well as information, knowledge and expertise as illustrated in the diagram above (NLB, 2005, p. 16). Based on the assumption that “making information readily accessible, building

content, sharing and exchanging knowledge, will help create knowledge capital" (NLB, 2005, p. 21), public libraries shall no longer merely be centres of knowledge transfer, but instead emerge as centres of discussion, interaction, cooperation; centres of social capital production (NLB, 2005, p. 23). On its website, the board states: "Beyond expanding the learning capacity of the nation, we will now create the collaborative space and environment that builds social capital and deliver knowledge dividends to Singapore" (NLB, 2009a). In an internal review report composed in 2009 by the National Library Board, the increased provision of physical social interaction space in libraries to facilitate learning in groups is listed as future requirement. Especially also with regard to young people, NLB regards the role of libraries to act as "generator of social capital through promotion of active volunteerism at the libraries, facilitate collaborative and experiential learning and nurture/support communities of practice" (NLB, 2009c, p. 129). To facilitate NLB-internal innovations and service improvement, thinking spaces for group discussions (i.e. Library Innovation Centre, Knowledge-Bank and Discussion Corner) and brainstorming sessions were introduced (NLB, 2009c, p. 38, 47).

Furthermore, digital public space in the form of library blogs (i.e. library@orchard, library@esplanade) has been created to facilitate the exchange of views, ideas and personal stories regarding library related topics. Here the idea is to effectively engage the target audience and achieve online word-of-mouth marketing. The blog 'library@esplanade' especially aims to engage library users interested in the performing arts via the online space. Here topics such as the relationship of classical music and mathematics or the anti-clockwise direction of ballroom dances are discussed by interested bloggers (library@esplanade, 2009). Therefore the digital public space is actively created and used to facilitate knowledge exchange on topics that were identified as relevant for Singapore's development into a knowledge society by the state government.

Here, social capital is identified by the Singaporean government as the key to innovation. It is called "the hidden potential of society" in the Library 2010 report (NLB, 2005, p. 23). That social capital is closely connected to critical thinking, and innovation to change, seems to be taken into account and accepted as long as it leads to economic, and with regard to the People's Action Party (PAP) political, survival. However the legal environment with, for example, the Internal Security Act enabling the government to attain citizens without trial which contributes to an exceptionally high level of self-censorship has so far not been adjusted to the aim to foster critical thinking (thinking out of the box) and free knowledge development (Yap, 2000; Ooi, 2000; Jeyaretnam, 2000; Gomez, 2000).

#### 4.4 Discussion

The library system of Singapore rapidly expanded with the release of the government programmes 'Library 2000 – Investing in a Learning Nation' in 1994 and 'Library 2010' in 2005. Systematically, institutional, physical as well as subsequently digital public space was created for the facilitation of knowledge diffusion, exchange and finally the production of new knowledge.

Data on the library usage from 1994 onwards show a clear correlation of "Library 2000" and the rapid expansion of Singapore's library system. Membership increased from 972,522 in 1994 to 1,318.8 thousand in 1997 to 2,092.1 thousand in 2002 (NLB, 1998; SingStat, 2008, p. 286). The book collection was expanded from 3,700.2 thousand in 1995 to 4,846.2 thousand in 1997 and 7,771.4 thousand in 2002. To a similar degree the loans of library materials increased from 10,077.4 in 1994 to 22, 500.1 thousand in 1997 to 30,128.0 thousand in 2002. After 2002, the numbers remained basically the same with slight fluctuations. In 2007, 1,948.8 thousand people were active members (slight decrease compared to 2002), the book collection comprised 8,219.0 thousand books (slight increase) and 28,768.7 thousand loans (slight decrease to 2002) were given out.<sup>14</sup> It can therefore be argued that Library 2000 rapidly expanded the library system and increased the degree to which libraries are used by Singapore's citizens. Library 2010 nevertheless – as launched in 2005 – by 2007 had not led to a further increase in numbers and usage. The explicitly formulated aim of making Singapore's libraries into the third most

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<sup>14</sup> These numbers compare to the stock of library material and number of loans in the public libraries of the city of Berlin (a city with 1.4 million inhabitants less than Singapore). In 2007, the library material amounted to 7,538 thousand, the loans to 22,537 thousand borrowings (State Statistical Institute Berlin-Brandenburg, 2008, p. 17).

important place, besides home and work, in the life of Singapore's citizens could so far only be achieved for the parts of society who already actively used Singapore's libraries. For those users nevertheless, Library 2010 explicitly aims at the qualitative improvement and refinement of the library services and spaces offered. Creating and fostering the use of spaces for interaction, the exchange of ideas and knowledge, discussions and brainstorming session is systematically followed up. By offering spaces for collaborative learning, for social interaction and discussion (i.e. cafes, group learning spaces, discussion corners, etc.) individual, group and experiential learning shall be facilitated. Consequently the institutional space was strengthened, the physical public library space expanded, as well as subsequently digital public spaces for citizens to meet and interact created. The conceptual idea behind and design of the creation and strengthening of these forms of public space therefore remind us of Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere' where individuals interact on matters of public interest.

With the aim to secure Singapore's position in an age in which, to say it with the words of Peter F. Drucker, "the central wealth-creating activities will be neither the allocation of capital to productive uses, not "labour"...Value is now created by "productivity" and "innovation", both applications of knowledge to work" (Drucker, 1994, p. 8), Singapore's government embarks on creating public space which allows for knowledge diffusion, exchange and creation. The restrictive legal infrastructure nevertheless which in effect disproportionately protects the position of the government and less the position of the individual, so far remains. The public spaces created consequently offer the space but not the freedom to openly interact.

## 5 Conclusion

Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi, Vietnam and the spaces for collaborative learning in Singapore's libraries exemplify the influence of dominant state visions on the construction and conceptualisation of public space by looking at physical as well as institutional, little digital public space. Each of the two visions of the future, the industrialised society of Vietnam and the knowledge society of Singapore, lead to government programs as well as social initiatives that define and re-define the conceptualisation of public space. The example of Ba Dinh Square illustrates the negotiation processes between the state and the citizens regarding the meaning, design and usage of the public space. Economic liberalisation, with reducing stress on the collective and increasing tendencies of individualisation, leads to a diversification of lifestyles. Increasingly citizens use sport or cultural events as meeting grounds and public space. At the same time Ba Dinh Square, symbol of Vietnam's independence, is increasingly used for private purposes, while the symbolic spectacles to celebrate the nation take place less often and attract decreasing numbers of spectators. The vision of developing Vietnam into a socialist-oriented market economy and industrialised society by 2020 therefore comes with concomitant effects, which are observable in the use and negotiated conceptualisation of public space as illustrated above. The example of the rapid expansion and increasing qualitative refinement of Singapore's library system discusses the influence of the idea of knowledge being the decisive determinant for economic growth, cultural and social development of the future, which forms the basis for Singapore's vision to develop itself into a knowledge society on the creation of institutional, physical as well as later digital public space. In the aim to provide space (as well as the required 'food for thought') for knowledge creation and exchange, for creativity to take place and ideas to be developed, the library system rapidly expanded since the mid 1990s. For doing so, rapidly institutional space was created. Since the mid 2000s, the National Library Board is increasingly looking at steps of qualitative improvement in terms of making libraries not only accessible and efficient, well equipped and staffed but furthermore attractive places to spend time, discuss, have ideas and experiment. This influences the design and usage of physical (new National Library Building) as well as digital library space (library blogs), which are open to and aim at being used by the public. Yet the rapid increase in user numbers in the 1990s which slowed down in the 2000s, together with the lacking legal backing for free, independent and potentially critical discussions in the public sphere along the lines of Habermas, lead us to argue that the constructed institutional, physical and digital space cannot overcome deeply engrained tendencies of self-censorship of a rather apolitical society. Consequently, the missing legal space for critical minds but at the same time possible innovators hampers the use of the institutional, physical and digital public space.

In each of the two discussed cases we look at a dominant state vision and its effects on the conceptualisation and use of public space in the context of an authoritarian regime. We argue that both visions of the future influence the design and practices of public space and lead to processes of negotiation between state and citizens on the existing order, changing lifestyles and power relations. They are manifested by defining and redefining public space but expressed via a number of ways. In the case of Ba Dinh Square by simply employing the square increasingly for leisure and private activities and decreasingly for the celebration of the nation. In the case of Singapore's library system by not using the provided spaces for collaborative learning but instead continuing to study individually. These forms of renegotiating the provided space are in our view expressions of slow but steady, liberalising change.

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