



Rethinking graduated citizenship: Contemporary public housing in Singapore



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ABSTRACT

The ways in which citizenship and housing are implicated in states' global city aspirations demonstrate significant path dependency and local contingency. This paper serves to broaden the literature that has been dominated by the Western neoliberal context. First, I argue that The Pinnacle@Duxton – a one-of-a-kind public housing project in Singapore – represents the developmental state's attempt to graduate its homogeneous public housing landscape, providing for and subsidizing the aspirations of a segment of its increasingly affluent middle class to buy into the ideology of the global city. Second, I show how the graduation of public housing coupled with the exaggerated demand for such exclusive projects validates consumer preference pricing in contemporary public housing. This results in a geographical graduation of citizenship, where the bulk of the population is relegated to lesser options on the edges on the island, unable to fulfil their aspirations for global living. In so doing, I make two contributions to extant literature on housing and citizenship in the global city. One, graduating citizenship is not always a case of states realigning their relationship with their citizens to fit the terms of the market. Two, the denial of citizenship to the global city does not always manifest in terms of substantive rights. Appreciating the unique histories and ideologies underpinning housing policies in global cities is instrumental if the variegated meanings of global cities and the citizenships within are to be elucidated.

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1. Introduction

In 2009, The Pinnacle@Duxton, the world's tallest and most expensive public housing project was completed, occupying a distinctive space within the city centre of Singapore. This unprecedented achievement in the nation-state's public housing history – according to the government – marks its continued progress as a global city housing equally aspirational and successful global citizens. Such a change in the urban fabric of Singapore is emblematic of a wider trend of respatialization and resocialization of housing in cities that accompany states' global city aspirations. This geographical phenomenon can be analyzed through what Ong (2006a) terms graduated citizenship, where differentiated zones of governance are established within the city to administer the population in accordance to their relevance to global capital. The state calls upon its residents to become global citizens – individuals who are financially able to live up to the demands of the market-led regeneration of the global city and disciplines those who are not. This idea of financial responsibility, often explicit in the construction of homeownership and global city discourse and

policy underscores the will to make citizens more productive through consumption (Flint, 2003; Rogers and Bailey, 2013). Citizens are expected to purchase their right to the global city through private homeownership, while those unable to and therefore reliant on state housing are conceptualized as 'flawed' (Bauman, 2004), legitimizing revanchist intervention against them (Aalbers, 2011). For example, Rogers and Darcy (2014) show how the Sydney government invites private developers to construct "Global Sydney", a spectacular variety of residences situated in a specific geographical segment of the metropolitan area. Simultaneously, public housing in Sydney has been reconfigured so that only the neediest are given access. In other contexts, such as the UK and US, the reorientation of housing policy has proceeded along similar lines, where citizen rights to the newly imagined global cities are underpinned by private homeownership.

Extant analyses on the global city, citizenship and housing have been largely framed in the Western neoliberal context and do not lend well to other contexts (an exception is Sassen's (1991) analysis on Tokyo). For instance, Ong (2006b) notes that ethics of citizen productivity in democratic, socialist and authoritarian Asian settings are not linked to the valorization of the market per se, but to social obligations to build the nation and legitimize the state. For example, in the developmental state of Singapore, the global

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citizen is not explicitly called upon as a consumer. Rather, he/she is one who subscribes to the overarching developmental ideology of the state by fulfilling his/her role as productive labour in the global economy and citizen-electorate in the national political circle. Concomitantly, the way in which housing and citizenship are implicated in Singapore's global city development vastly differs from the neoliberal context. This paper shows how the Singapore state graduates its largely homogeneous public housing landscape to ensure its productive citizens remain relevant to its global city ideology. In so doing, it provides new empirical insight to studies on graduated citizenship and housing but more importantly, contributes to a rethinking of graduated citizenship and its implications in non-neoliberal contexts.

Singapore's emergence as a leading global city is understood in the context of the developmental state, where state provisions are leveraged as supporting institutions for a singular economic and political regime (Castells et al., 1990). Public housing is one such provision, and has been a cornerstone for the nation-state's rise in the global economy. As owner, constructor and financier of public housing, the state has enabled 81% of the citizenry to live in public housing, with more than 90% of these owning their homes on 99-year leases. Public housing is a store of personal wealth from which social mobility can be achieved. Through their vested economic interests, citizens are not only locked into a productive cycle with the state but become politically supportive of the overarching rule of the state which has delivered its promise of realizing monetary gains for public homeowners (Chua, 2000). Through this, the state has ably managed its population to suit changing global corporate requirements and maintain national political stability, making Singapore a favourite for global capital investment.

Singapore's success has been accompanied by a unique 'problem'. In Singapore, housing has become an important marker of status and identity. Rising incomes – especially for those who are at the uppermost band of the public housing ladder as well as the newly affluent working class who command strong incomes – have led to commensurate aspirations for private living. Private living – mostly in the form of condominiums – is perceived to be a marker of a global citizen who lives in accordance with the standards of the contemporary global city. In corollary, public living is increasingly seen as a lesser choice for the 'non-global' population (Teo, 2014; Wong and Yap, 2003). While acknowledging the need for providing private living options (Pow, 2009), the state is committed to keeping the bulk of its productive citizens within the public sphere, as it perceives that mass residential mobility from the public to private sphere would affect the instrumentality of the public housing system, leading to unpredictable effects on national productivity and political stability (Wang, 2012). This has been done mainly through the construction of new distinctively-themed public housing deemed by the state to befit the global status and lifestyle pursued by increasingly affluent citizens (Goh, 2001).

One such project is The Pinnacle@Duxton. I argue first, that The Pinnacle represents the state's will to graduate its homogenous public housing landscape to provide its 'sandwiched class' – a segment of the middle class population who are at the very top of the public housing income scale but are unable to make the pricy jump into private housing (Lum, 1997) – with the means to buy into the ideology of the global city. By providing for and subsidizing their aspirations for global living through exclusive public housing, the state retains its productive citizens within the public sphere, maintaining the instrumentality of public housing for its overarching developmental regime. Second, I show how graduating the public housing landscape together with the exaggerated demand for such exclusive projects validates a consumer preference pricing system in public housing. Significant discrepancies emerge in the prices of public housing based on citizens' perception of a project's ability to

provide for global living. This, according to data garnered, is partially implicated by a project's proximity and accessibility to the city centre. This results in a geographical graduation of citizenship, where insofar as the state provides for and subsidizes the aspirations of its sandwiched class for global living, the same aspirations are denied to the rest of the population who are relegated to lesser options on the edge of the island. I combine an analysis of secondary data from relevant official publications, websites, real estate reports, state documents, newspaper articles and interviews with 20 residents of The Pinnacle to support my arguments. The interviews were conducted from October to December 2014.

This paper offers two contributions to studies on the global city, housing and graduated citizenship. First, graduated citizenship is not always an attempt by the state to realign its relationship with its citizens to fit the terms of the market. Rather than rolling back its provision of public housing, the Singapore state has taken on a central role – through providing and subsidizing exclusive public housing – in ensuring that its productive citizens stay relevant to its global city ideology. This is done by fulfilling their aspirations for global living that would otherwise not be met by the market. Second, the denial of citizenship in the global city has not manifest in the denial of substantive citizen rights to participate economically and politically in the global city based on the type of housing they own. Instead, graduating the public housing landscape has led to a geographical graduation of citizenship where the bulk of the population is relegated to lesser residential options on the edges of the island, rendering them unable to fulfil their aspirations for living in accordance with the standards of the global city.

2. Housing and graduated citizenship: Developments and contradictions in the neoliberal global city

Scholars have analyzed the ways in which states have sought to graduate the social and physical spaces of the city so as to enact the demands of their imagined global city on citizens (see Bunnell and Coe, 2005; Rogers, 2014 for detailed case studies). This is a process known by Ong (2006a) as graduated citizenship, where varied techniques of government are employed in different zones of the city to regulate populations in relation to their perceived relevance to global capital. In the realm of housing, Ong (2006a) argues that practices of graduating citizenship have effaced the legacy of social citizenship under the Keynesian welfare state where all citizens had a right to protection in the form of subsidized public housing. States have largely withdrawn from social provisions in public housing, transferring resources instead to facilitate private investment and development of new residences in specific segments of the city. States ensure that a spectacular variety of elite addresses emerge in specifically marked out segments of their cities, providing individuals the freedom to perform their status by exercising their choice to live in the most exclusive parts of the new global city (see Rogers and Darcy, 2014). Citizenship is rationalized through the ability of the individual to create the means of his/her own consumption (Rose, 1999; Isin and Wood, 1999). This takes expression in the exercising of one's ability to own a property in a good location. Following Foucault, scholars such as Flint (2003) and Manzi (2010) have characterized such emergent forms of housing governance in neoliberal economies as being based upon 'technologies of the self'. Power works through developing the personal capacities of subjects to create the means for their own consumption, primarily through gainful employment in the labour market. Citizens are expected to make strategic decisions to invest in their competencies through, for example, undertaking vocational training, further education and furthering personal and corporate networks to promote their human capital to become more productive in the global economy. A distinction emerges between those able to meet their needs and those unable to and thus reliant

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