

City Futures for City Leaders Penang Malaysia

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“If you want to know where any country’s future is heading, look at the main cities - if it cannot manage its cities, it has little hope in imagining its future...How we manage cities will determine the future.” — Datu Anwar Fazal

Why Futures?

Cities have emerged as change agents towards sustainable futures. Discussion about its size, food routes, transportation, health, climate change and community resilience has shifted the way cities are perceived into the future. Questions persist such as: How do we create the inclusive city? How do cities ensure spatial justice and equal access to urban resources and opportunities amidst the impacts of climate change? How do we link strategic foresight to urban governance and strategy development? These are some of the big questions that decision-makers, thought leaders, academics and city dwellers continue to explore.

As the forces of globalization and the ASEAN integration gathers pace, the consequences of diverse policy perspectives and the influence of technologies to the future of cities are many. To better understand these impacts and create the alternative future city, new tools, frameworks and methods have emerged. One of recent innovations is what futurists, architects and urban planners and managers call “city futures”. City futures is an emerging field in urban studies that integrates futures studies, tools and methods, urban planning and governance, sustainability studies and climate change. City futures highlights design urbanism, service delivery, strategic foresight, radical innovation and public management in teaching and learning city governance. The Penang WFSF city futures course is inter-disciplinary, participatory and builds on participants’ experiences to co-create urban and social transformation.

While initially the aim was to introduce futures studies using live teaching and workshops, the WFSF World Futures Learning Lab in Penang evolved and focused on some key imperatives and learnings essential to transforming twenty first century cities. The Penang learning lab would blend insights from actual case studies and foresight, city governance, public policy and social innovation and futures workshop to enhance the capacity of participants to anticipate the future. This pioneering WFSF LEALA project would immerse participants in the Six

Pillars methodology (Inayatullah 2008) of futures thinking and Think City's urban rejuvenation approach and heritage preservation projects.

Futures Thinking for Transforming

Using the six pillars of futures thinking developed by Sohail Inayatullah, the learning lab exposed course participants to futures studies and learned how to apply strategic foresight tools and methods to explore the unknowns and develop strategies that aligns the visions and actions needed to transform the future today. The six pillars framework uses empirical, interpretive, critical and action-learning approaches to map and change the future.

The pillars approach conceptualizes the future through Mapping – the past, present and future is scanned. Here history is crucial in understanding the future. The futures triangle method, shared history and the futures landscapes methods helped city leaders map the dominant and recessive drivers creating change; Anticipating – emerging issues and trend analysis are applied to navigate the seeds of change before they become disruptive; Timing – a deeper understanding to the contours of change is crucial if we were to gain a deeper insight from structures enabling and disabling the future. Theories of macrohistory were applied to ascertain what's possible or not and what could change and transform in the present; Deepening – our ways of knowing the future influences how we create it. The way we construct the future is deconstructed using causal layered analysis (CLA). This allowed participants to unpack the future at different levels and layers of reality – vertical and horizontal and to enter alternative perspectives and cultures. Cross-cultural learning and questioning our assumptions were emphasized in this session; Creating alternatives – the critical drivers were identified and some complex but plausible city scenarios were mapped; Transforming – at this stage, the participants become the creators of the future. The aspired and details of the personal and social visions emerged through visioning (Inayatullah, 2007; 2008).

Setting and Partners

Organized by Think City, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Khazanah National Berhad and the World Futures Studies Federation in collaboration with the Right Livelihood College, the Graduate Institute of Futures Studies – Tamkang University and UNESCO, the course familiarized participants with futures studies and introduced some anticipatory tools and techniques to envision the alternative futures of cities.

Around 35 city leaders and project advisors from different parts of Malaysia including participants from the Philippines, Singapore and Taiwan attended the workshop. Professor Cesar Villanueva of the World Futures Studies Federation and Think City's Dave Duncan directed and supervised the course.

World renowned political scientist and futurist Sohail Inayatullah and TKU professor Meimei Song concurrently acted as resource persons and led the facilitation with Jeanne Hoffman and Shermon Cruz assisting during the breakout sessions.

Heritage Walk Tour and Welcome Dinner

The course began with a heritage walk tour sponsored by Think City. Here, the group learned of Penang's growing "interpretation tourism" sector and blazed the Little India, the World Heritage Site and Sun Yat Sen's heritage trail. Participants got the best of George Town's multi-textured history and were given copies of Think City's latest book and report on urban regeneration entitled *Five Cities Going Green: How Are They Doing It* and *Reflections on Urban Regeneration Projects in Penang 2009-2013*.

In the evening, Cesar welcomed the participants and engaged them in an exciting introductory session before dinner. This gathering mapped participants' purposes and intentions in attending the futures course. Notably their intent was "to see how people use futures studies methods to create alternative futures", "to gain new knowledge, reflect and establish networks" and "to unlearn and relearn". After some lively mingling at the Perdana Banquet, new friendships and networks emerged.

Keynote Speeches

Anwar Fazal of Think City, Anthony Capon of the United Nations University – International Institute for Global Health and Shermon Cruz from the Philippines representing the UNESCO Foresight Global Anticipatory Project opened the futures course with keynote addresses.

An internationally renowned change expert, Fazal spoke of the ten tensions shaping the futures of cities. These tensions like monoculture and biodiversity, materialism and spirituality, globalism versus localism to mention a few are continually influencing people's ways of knowing and understanding the city and its future.

Fazal suggested that civil servants and city leaders must learn and should be wise enough to know how to manage these tensions and to deal with them in constructive ways. Fazal also briefly shared his learnings from the project Sustainable Penang Initiative (SPI) commissioned by the City of Penang and supported by the Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovations Network project two decades ago. The SPI produced new measurements and indicators covering environmental, social, economic, cultural and governance dimensions.

Anthony Capon, a public health expert, discussed the need to incentivize people's initiative and to co-produce knowledge with policy-makers to create new pathways and opportunities for creating healthy cities.

The key here, according to Capon, was to engage and learn from the people on the street and create spaces for communities to shape alternative city futures and this has to occur at different levels of conversations and social engagements.

The rise of non-communicable diseases is an emerging issue according to Capon. Heat waves, storms and climate change and their direct and indirect impacts could also create massive health threats to city dwellers.

At the meso-level, Capon presented some comparative analysis on obesity and their causes, and their possible impacts to the future of health in cities particularly Asia and the South East Asia region.

Following Capon, Shermon Cruz, the Director of the Center for Engaged Foresight (CEF) and a co-proponent of UNESCO's global foresight Philippine city

futures project, shared his vision of narrative foresight and the need to immerse decision-makers, communities and public to a wide-variety of futures experiences, tools and methods. He expressed his views on the urgency to create a more “grounded” foresight approach to expand the public’s capacity to create new visions and stories and to imagine alternative futures.

Cruz recalled that he learned futures studies in Penang and after a series of reflective learnings and engagements with futurists around the world founded the CEF with Jose Ramos and Sohail Inayatullah, Anwar Fazal and Cesar Villanueva as members of the international advisory board. Since its establishment the CEF has partnered and collaborated with some of the best in the futures field and in the spirit of co-creation and collective intelligence co-organized an upcoming city foresight project in the Philippines with Riel Miller of UNESCO Foresight Paris, Virginia Miralao of the United Nations National Commission and Sohail Inayatullah of Metafutures.org on board. This project was the result of the conference on networking to advance knowledge creation and futures literacy held at the Bellagio Center, Bellagio, Italy in 2013.

Futures Thinking and Strategy Transformation

After the keynote addresses, Sohail Inayatullah gave an absorbing and informative overview on futures thinking and strategy development. Inayatullah here imparted some engaging case studies of foresight applied to government and industry and shared some personal experiences on how “reframing”, “understanding different worlds” and “using multiple perspectives” could impact and change people’s lives, their ways of knowing, understanding and transforming the future. Inayatullah articulated well the power of images to inspire, deepen and transform individual’s and organization’s future-visions. Transformative futures thinking according to Inayatullah was “to regain the human agency’s influence and capacity to explore alternative futures and envision the future desired.” Lessons that came out in the lecture includes the power and potential of metaphors and worldviews to change how we interpret and understand data and the contextualization of systems and policies to create new narratives and futures.

Following the morning lecture, participants grouped in breakout sessions to construct the most compelling questions, issues and drivers influencing city futures. Questions such as how did get here (the history of the story)? What do you think the future will be like? What are the assumptions you have made? What do you want the future to be like? How did you get to the preferred? ... such questions were guides for exploration and discussion.

Professor Meimei Song, a faculty at the Graduate Institute of Futures Studies at Tamkang University, continued Sohail’s session in the afternoon as groups deepened their exploration of city futures using the futures triangle, emerging issues analysis and backcasting methods.

Group presented their outputs with sketch comedy, skits and reports.

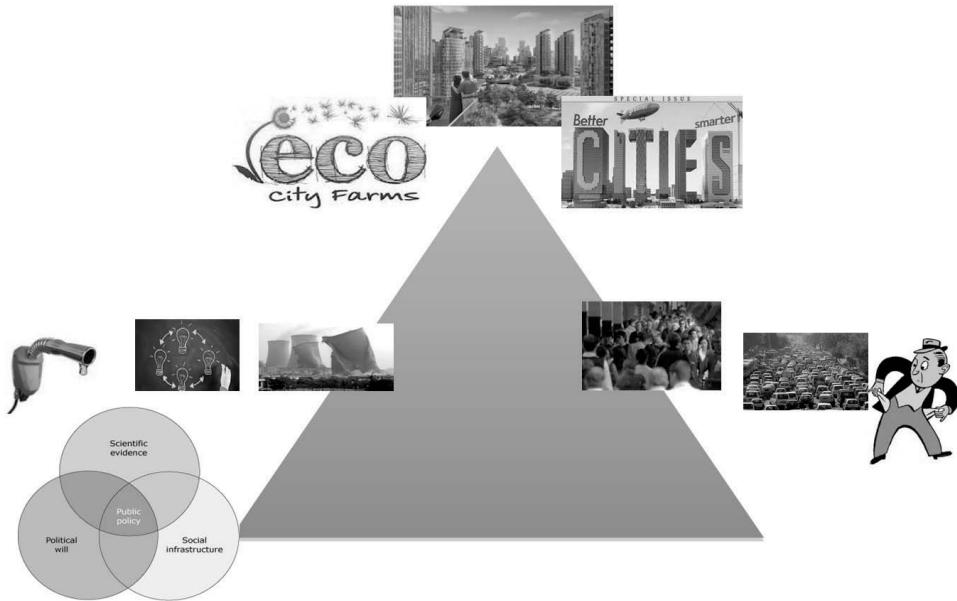


Figure 1. Pulls, Pulls and Weights of City Futures

What might dramatically shift the game?

In the late afternoon session, Inayatullah engaged the group by asking what might disturb the futures triangle map in the next thirty or forty years. Straight out, groups identified the following as disruptive: asteroid hits KL and rethinks public service; too many robots take over; new technologies rewire our brains, cheap energy changes the entire geo-politics of energy, the internet of everything, demographic shifts and climate change.

Groups identified some of them as trends and some as low probability high impact events that could change the trajectories of city futures. Here, a discussion on emerging issues analysis, black swan and weak signals theory ensued. Using the S-Curve framework, participants were previewed with some precursor cities creating and innovating new city trends and systems like Amsterdam, Helsinki, Sydney, Hawaii, etc.

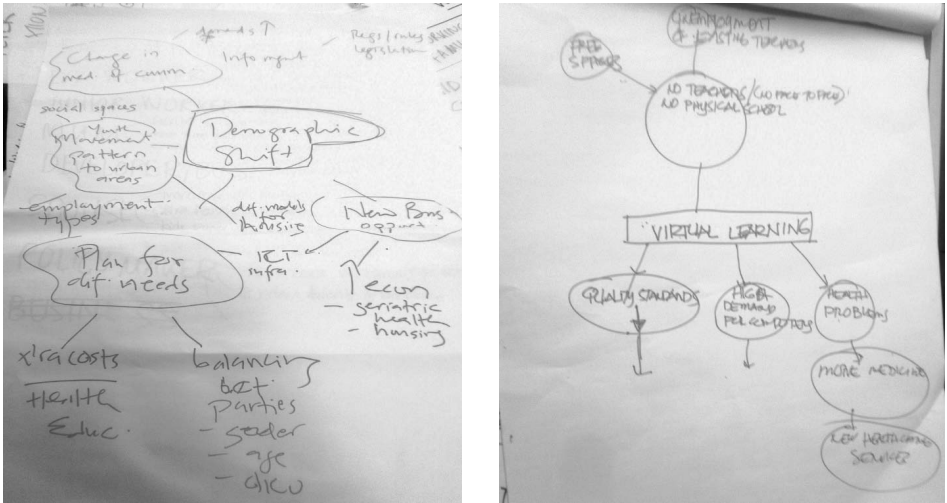


Figure 2. Some emerging issues on city futures and their plausible consequences.

In addition, participants got exposed to the method known as futures wheel analysis to explore weak signals and anticipate some implicit and explicit impacts and their outcomes to city futures.

Key insights and reflections for the first day from the participants were: “*methods are practical*”, “*contents are transforming, challenging and exciting*”, “*future is very frightening and the future is worth thinking about*”, “*I felt stupid and I need to learn more*”, “*adapt or change or change and adapt*”, “*more reflections on how to actually get there*”, “*I found the bubble thing (futures wheel) fascinating*” and “*with 3 minutes we get real insights*”.

Continuity and Mindsets: Why is Change Difficult?

“What do we do in a situation where there are multiple mindsets? How do I or how do you or how do we transform the future? What is the role of the leader in management and implementation and still do the visioning part? What are the deeper questions? Is it the lack of integrated planning? Is it the worldview around cars and roads? Why do people not enjoy buses? Why has traffic emerged? Do I wish to change the story?”

The second day began with a lecture on causal layered analysis (CLA) and on how different layers of analysis and perspectives could reframe our ways of knowing an issue or a problem and the solutions we make for it.

CLA as a theory and method assumes that all levels – data, systems, worldview and myth/metaphors are real and that we can’t change “mindsets” in a day.

Inayatullah ran a lively CLA workshop on the future of work at home.

Groups explored the issue, unpacked the unknown unknowns, anticipated plausible news headlines and debated on a number of systemic issues, worldviews, myths and metaphors that could change and create some alternative futures of work.

Some Insights from the CLA Work-Life Balance Workshop

The context was as we live in a mobile and highly interconnected world and given that more people and mothers are demanding family life and work balance,

the proportion of Asian mums working at home could rise by 50% in the year 2030.

The working suburban “professional” and with college degree housewives that makes the bed, wash the dishes, shops for groceries, cooks for dinner and cares for her children and husband would opt to stay and work at home.

Here, she would demand new policies, advocate and collaborate with the political system in designing pragmatic and responsive labor and workplace policies that would allow her to achieve her corporate and productivity targets efficiently and less costly and make her life more meaningful and less stressful at the same time. The system would understand the unique responsibility of women as wives and mothers and realized that workers were more productive, happier and potentially even more creative when working at home.

In addition, the return on ideas and investments of work-at-home according to the government and industry was quite enormous in that businesses could save a lot in terms of operational and “glamour” costs and office maintenance expenses (as it could afford now to scale down office spaces) and expenses, and the government on traffic (as there will be fewer car trips), environment management, public safety, etc. expenditures. This would also allow the government to re-align budget and increase public spending that supports child-care, parenting, family and health welfare, counseling, education and improvement of community hub and digital parks among others.

The policy-maker, the businessman, the developer, the mum, the spouse, and the employer would support (as everybody needed it) “the work-life balance” narrative and this too should address the problem of “crazy working hours that kills family life and quality time resulting in stress, family breakups, illicit relationships and failed marriages”, “rigid working environment and tyrannical employers” and “high overhead costs”. Positive implication includes “a more caring management”, “women, mother, child and family empowerment”, and “happier worker and happy families”.

Don’t bite off more than you can chew: Will the storm come?

While the positives are many, the participants also acknowledged the difficulty of multitasking like working on the job or a project, managing household, taking care of children and spouses may likely increase tensions and conflicts at home. Mothers tend to become more impatient and irritable as work load and responsibilities gets heavier and complain whenever the husband is away or if she doesn’t get enough sleep and parenting too adds on to the pressure. This among others could really affect performance and relationships at home and work. So will the storm come? Not unless, the husband and wife find the right balance of responsibilities, make time for kids, personal growth, spirituality and other personal activities.

Gaming to Understand the Patterns of the Future

The remainder of the day was spent on macrohistory and the Sarkar game.

As part of the Six Pillars foresight process, Inayatullah used the Sarkar game to move participants to other ways of knowing and gain a “deeper and more personal understanding and appreciation of alternative futures” (Inayatullah, 2014).

While the CLA game revealed different ways of appreciating and understanding the future, macrohistory and the Sarkar game enhanced participants perceptual

capacity to make sense of historical patterns (the last 500 years for example) and the future in the next 100. Developed by Peter Hayward and Joseph Voros (2006), the game was based on Sarkar's theory of social change.

After the game, participants gained new personal insights and reflections on how individuals and collectivities emerge and change their roles and ways of constructing the world and relating with other ways of knowing through time.

Groups gradually became aware on how their "deep scripts" and "dominant psychologies" could limit and/or create opportunities for leadership, negotiation, power, compromise and concession; that understanding complexity or that of unifying diverse social roles or creating a shared vision was far more complex as had been previously assumed by participants.

Post-game insights include: noble ideas and new weaponry inventions and technologies could quell or pacify a warrior's tendency to engage in violence and to preserve the peace. The intellectuals were able to persuade the warriors to end their shooting spree and used their powers to negotiate instead for "enlightenment's" sake. The capitalists in this game were the marginalized as the warriors swiftly exterminated them, but kept only a few to keep the wealth flowing and equitably shared. The laborers kept a wait and see attitude all throughout the game and would only engage when intellectuals and warriors took the upper hand. They would demand that capitalists share their wealth.

The game had participants rethink their leadership and organizational worldviews, roles and functions, power and leadership, self, decision-making, social change and city futures.

Transforming the Future and Next Steps

Professor Meimei Song continued with silent but interactive "personalized visioning" exercises. This was the space in the course where participants could explore, at a personal level, what should be or could be in the now and the future. The purpose was to engage the participant to reflect on the "conscious self" and bring it to a creative process of discovering. It provided the space to experience and realize their innate desire for change and transformation and recognize their importance in strategy formulation. It likewise showed ways to align the inner vision and the strategies and day to day realities to create the preferred future. The aim of the session was to connect the inner and outer selves of being and becoming; of not just imagining what the future would be like but also of "experiencing" what would the future feel like when we revision them or when they are realized. Visioning is a tool used in the field to help decision-makers reconnect with the self, enrich their meanings and to experience clarity in the now.

Visioning is the stage where the "magic happens" and it is where ingenuity, authenticity, innovation, meaningfulness, transformation and self-realization can occur. Since it was a personalized visioning exercise, sharing and presentation was optional for participants.

However, they were shared, perhaps unconsciously, when participants penned their learnings, personal evaluations on the futures course and possible next steps:



Figure 3. Learnings, takeaways and next steps.

Conclusion

Leaders and facilitators from across different cities in South East Asia learned that transforming the future requires having concrete visions of transformational change. These visions must be felt at the existential (from within) and structural levels (systems, societal) of existence. If we want to alter the way we imagine the future of our cities beyond Western, bigger is better informed lifestyles and worldviews and create the preferred Asian city, leadership, culture, family, harnessing our collective experiences, generating fresh insights, trust, co-creation and collaboration, questioning our assumptions, creating prototypes, storytelling and action-learning must be indispensable. Experimenting on a variety of methods and tools, collective intelligence, creativity, arts even music, arts, skits, meditation, open space, case studies, cross-cultural learning, acknowledging the function of cultural heritage, history, climate change studies and sustainability taken in a multi and even trans-disciplinary approach could enrich the processes and experiences of futures learning. The transformative power of futures studies are multiplied when it’s “grounded” and “engaged” and when it’s personal, community and human society and civilization driven.

From an analysis of the experiences of participants, we could draw several conclusions. First, futures literacy according to participants was essential and more of it should happen soon for other to experience futures processes and methods. The challenge is sustainability of the lessons learned and the need for netweaving the different efforts of the participants at futures for collective hindsight and informed foresight.

Second, the course enriched their meaning of “reframing” and exposed many to multiple perspectives and layers of analysis, to borrow the words of a participant in the course, it “tweaked” her previous “theory of world-making” and she was inspired to use the “CLA framework” more in the exploration of alternative and preferred futures. The challenge is how to create a community of people who have

undergone the same experience at futures and will become the incubation of unafraid thinking about futures.

Third, “courage” is required - we need to create more learning spaces for people to question their own – positive and negative – biases about the future. And of course, yes, the participants noted that, despite our epistemic and artificial boundaries, “we are a family” that are always searching for “new narratives” and “new methods” needing “new friends and networks”. We are a family that could “get along well without a fight”, desiring “to start the change somewhere” to transform the future now! The challenged is not how to be imprisoned by the pragmatism of the present that stifles creative imagination and innovation about the future

Finally, to transcend our cities from the business as usual and prevent the worst case scenario from happening we must renew our commitment to exploring and creating alternative pathways of urban leadership and systems and likewise build new social infrastructures that propel people to ethical imaginations that can transform the personal and the structural limitations and baggages of the present. The livability, viability, sustainability and desirability of our cities must be the touchstone of twenty first and twenty second centuries urban planning, development and governance.

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