

A24 Holistic approach to slow car growth

A23 Mursi's mismanagement beggars belief

Seeking social justice in Brazil

THE spontaneous show of anger that has swept Brazil these few weeks appears to defy reason. The nation is after all a force in the making – in economic importance, diplomacy and popular culture. It is primed for the football World Cup, the showcase for a sport that could confidently be said that Brazil "owns". It will be followed by the Olympic Games, which in the political lexicon of international sport is a host country's induction into the league of leading nations. This belief, if it persists and is embraced as a crutch by the powers that be, could retard progress in one of the handful of emerging powers. The street protests which have not ceased after weeks are about deep-rooted contradictions in a society roiled by inequality and a morality of the elites that take little account of the masses struggling to cope with daily living.

It ought to be said that Brazil is not alone in this familiar fix. The protests in Turkey and the endless Arab Spring differ in some crucial respects – an excess of hereditary power and religion in statecraft, for instance – but the pleadings for a better life and for change are common to all uprisings. The streets are saying that if people in a position to do something do not hear the message, they must be prepared for the consequences.

Global capitalism has produced 50 dollar billionaires and 150,000 millionaires in Brazil, but contrast this impressive statistic with the unspeakable squalor in towns a world away from the glitzy visage of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Uneven development and opportunity are a feature of transitioning societies. How a government goes about canvassing support for redressal programmes will mark it as a competent or an unresponsive one.

A matter as mundane as bus fare increases ignited the protests, but the government of President Dilma Rousseff has found itself fending off serious accusations about corruption, misdeployment of resources and the deprivations of the middle class. Costly stadiums are in the event not just a convenient imagery being exploited by protesters for effect. There is real anger about the billions being spent on one-off grand displays while basic needs are not being met adequately.

President Rousseff has shown she understands the triggers of grievance. She has to make amends, yet her response of holding a plebiscite on electoral reform would at this juncture look to the people like a joke. The social distemper requires an honest response – jobs, schools, clinics, slum clearance, help to get youths off the streets. The rash of protests in the Maghreb, the Middle East, Europe and now Latin America demonstrates the truth that tending to the people's needs is what governments must do.

The 'S' in Singapore also stands for sophistication. There is so much this vibrant city-state can showcase beyond the Sentosa-Orchard Road-Night Safari offering.

Sophisticated Singapore



BY INVITATION

By PARAG KHANNA
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

PRECISELY one year since my family's arrival in Singapore, the honeymoon seems far from over. In my last column, I had written about Singapore's many hidden virtues and how such traits can help reboot the country's international brand. I continue to wonder why, of the many adjectives that Singapore is associated with – wealthy, efficient, smart, clean, strict – one does not hear the word "sophisticated" mentioned often.

No doubt, one should heed the cautionary aphorism of my first boss Les Gelb, emeritus president of the Council on Foreign Relations, who quipped: "If you have to say you're tough, you're not".

Still, a good reputation is earned through actions and is spread by word of mouth.

In the various city rankings that flood our inboxes, sophistication is associated with cities that are simultaneously global financial, diplomatic, and cultural capitals. This is often measured by the number of world-class museums, opera houses, theatrical productions, and other historical sites.

But I freely admit that in over a decade of living in New York, I barely ever visited the high-modern Museum of Modern Art, and went to the Metropolitan Museum even fewer times. In London, we were regulars at the British Museum, but mostly for the kids on frequently rainy days.

What makes New York City and London arguably the two greatest cities in the world is not their dominance of traditional metrics such as cultural institutions but also the fact that you could spend a week or month exploring their many neighbourhoods inside and out at your own pace.

Things to do and see

THERE aren't any fixed instructions to follow to enjoy them. A worldly and refined city constantly offers an array of things to do and to see.

Sophistication in this sense is a process, not an event or place. People increasingly want, and pay for, experiences over things.

In just the past few weeks, I've attended the Shakespeare in the Park performance of Othello, a midnight disco rave at the Gillman Barracks, the high-level International Institute for Strategic Studies' Shangri-La Dialogue, and the opening of a unique exhibition of avant-garde Arab installations ("Terms & Conditions") at the Singapore Art Museum.

I frequently argue that Singapore is the (unofficial) capital of Asia. Showcasing the best artists, performers, entertainers and intellectuals representing more than half the world's population that is within easy reach of Singapore should not be difficult.

Indeed, there is a great opportunity to define what Asian sophistication is beyond Japan's cultivated habitudes and the region's now ubiquitous *nouveau riche*.

A lengthy recent Wall Street Journal profile of Singapore thought fit to explain the city through the lens of overpriced cocktails at "ultra lounge" Pangaea and red Ferraris. It called the country a "tax haven", playground for billionaires, and cited the high Gini coefficient, an indicator of income disparity.

This backhanded caricature far more resembled Monaco than Switzerland, which is surely one of the world's most sophisticated countries with its rich history, urban-rural-mountain lifestyle balance, and engineering and design prowess.

Beyond the traditional, institutional metrics mentioned above, a city is considered sophisticated if its population is educated and confident, its architecture bold and compelling, its street life dynamic, its products stylish, and its service standards (from restaurants to hotels to taxis) impeccable.

Every region has cities – whether Buenos Aires, Seattle, Paris, or Beirut – that stand out for their sophistication.

A unique combination

SINGAPORE-STYLE sophistication is a unique combination of these elements that can be appreciated only if one moves beyond the cliches. It is already a declared goal to persuade visitors to Singapore to stay longer; the more time tourists spend, the more money they spend, the more they appreciate the country's diversity.

This can only be achieved by offering more immersive experiences beyond the usual Sentosa-Orchard Road-Night Safari circuit. Far more outsiders should appreciate Singapore's offering of vantage points combined with walkability: A view from atop the Pinnacle@Duxton combined with a long meandering stroll through Chinatown, the Marina Bay Sands down through the Gardens by the Bay to Marina Barrage.

Shared experiences are also a new niche in travel, both for families and small groups. Recently, corporate offices around the Marina area offered tours of their art collections. Taking a page from London, museum entry across the country is now free for citizens and permanent residents. Architectural tours of heritage or refurbished shophouses, and the latest designs from students of the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), should all be more widely promoted.

Capitalising on Singapore's rich gastronomical scene is another idea: three- to four-day or longer cooking schools. Then there is the water: more sunset sailing and water-sport camps.

Even sprucing up existing institutions can unlock creativity. Singapore already has the world's best airport and airline. Why not replace Changi's Kenny G soundtrack with a rotating set of live DJs playing diverse music and hosting a global conversation?

City's intellectual vibrancy

SPEAKING of which, I would be remiss not to mention the importance of intellectual life, from book talks to global policy lectures. The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (where I lecture) hosts multiple experts who give presentations literally every day. Renowned professors from America to England to South Korea and Australia have covered topics from innovation networks to Chinese foreign policy.

The Singapore Institute of International Affairs is experimenting with casual weekend presentations and debates. (Last weekend, I recounted my 2012 trip to North Korea at one such event.) This type of public conversation model needs to be adopted far more widely across the city; businesses, malls and restaurants can all cleverly get involved.

All of this is for the benefit of the public and civil society at large, not just for tourists in transit. A vibrant Singapore of, by, and for Singapore's residents is naturally the kind of place ever more people would want to visit. The two go hand in hand.

There are difficult decisions involved as well. Much of Singapore's population lives in functional Housing Board enclaves that feel devoid of the vibrancy they could exhibit if HDB ground floors were made available for shops. Many Singaporeans remark on how mature estates with their markets and hawker stalls at the town centre, as well as shops around the "void deck", have a character and life lacking in newer estates, which are designed without "void deck" shops, and often do not have a clear town centre.

Yet the charm and diversity of traditional street life should be amplified. This is a mark of sophistication. We cannot just talk about promoting local entrepreneurship and creativity; we must unlock and enable it.

The campaign to promote Singapore's sophistication is therefore a public-private effort. Everyone can find a way to participate – but then let the rest of the world talk about it.

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By Invitation features expert views from opinion leaders in the region and Singapore.

