Singapore has often been described as a highly planned city-state. It is a city in which land development is planned and strictly controlled. With few exceptions, all development involving construction or change of use requires permission. Despite criticisms of its centralized planning and tabula rasa development outcomes (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995), Singapore presents a prototype of urban governance in which land use planning is taken seriously and plans are implemented with relatively high compliance with development control and planning regulations. In recent years Singapore has gained increasing international recognition as a model of good practice for public land management (Yeung, 1987; Wakeley & You, 2001).

Singapore, with a land area of 690 km², is located just 1° north of the equator in the subregion of Southeast Asia. It has a present population of 5 million and a projected population under its long-term development plan of 6.5 million. Singapore is at the same time both a city and a country, with the city center occupying an area of about 110 km² in the southern part of the main island. Urbanization of the city-state has progressed to such an extent, however, that the entire island is classified as urban (Motha & Yuen, 1999). The planning system must take these factors into account, because within the limited land area it must address the needs of the growing population, the city, and the nation.

While Singapore can trace its origins to earlier centuries, the form of its modern development and planning stems largely from its founding in 1819 as a trading post of the British East India Company.¹ Comprehensive planning and development control in Singapore started under the British colonial administration in 1959 with the enactment of the Planning Ordinance, which introduced the British notions of

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¹ Singapore was granted self-rule status by Britain in 1959. It then joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and became independent in 1965.
development plan and development control. Control over land allocation and building was considered important for three main reasons. The first relates to matters of law and order, given the multiple ethnicities, languages, and religions of Singapore’s immigrant population. Separate housing areas were identified for the different ethnic communities of settlers: the Europeans, Bugis, Arabs, Chinese, Indians, and Malays. In allocating land, first preference would be given to merchants, second to artisans, and third to farmers. The second reason relates to the island’s geographic constraints; the limited land area led to a need for the government to control the use of the space and to arbitrate between competing uses. The third reason was the rising value of land and the desire of its new owners to do with it as they liked. This situation led to competing interests between property owners and businesses and a resulting need to protect the collective community interest. It is precisely because of such interests that modern town planning has evolved as a particular set of administrative arrangements and procedures for the control of land development and use (Ashworth, 1954).

Nowhere is this perhaps more evident than in the British planning system with its key elements of development plan and development control. The Town and Country Planning Act 1947, which introduced these aspects, established for the first time in the United Kingdom a comprehensive and compulsory planning system that covered the entire country. The act sought to relate land use and development matters to national and regional policy and to define a major role in urban development for the public sector, with regulatory powers and control over land use. Many of those planning ideas were transported to British colonies, where they continue in urban planning practice, making the British planning system a common tool for managing the urban environment in many postcolonial cities. As Healey (1988, p. 397) states, “The British planning system was once considered the most advanced in the world, in terms of both its legislation and its practice.” Increasingly too, however, different studies within Britain have generated debates about the effectiveness of the planning system, particularly of development control, for contemporary challenges (McLoughlin, 1973; Healey, Doak, McNamara, & Elson, 1985; Booth, 2002).

In postindependence Singapore the pace and priority of development have changed dramatically. Under a program of deliberate intervention by the state, or what McGee (1976) calls “deliberate urbanization,” an entire new townscape of high-rise, high-density buildings has all but replaced the low-rise, predominantly shophouse colonial city of British rule. The new government (which has been in place since independence) has chosen an overtly interventionist approach toward urban development, adopting a strategy of integrating social, economic, political, and spatial visions through the overarching process of planning, and legitimizing its control through performance in the provision of public goods. A good example is housing. Some 84% of Singapore residents live in public housing, with many continually registering satisfaction with residential conditions (Wong & Yeh, 1985; Wong & Yeh, 1985; The Town and Country Planning Act 1947 came into effect on July 1, 1948, and along with the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1947 was the foundation of modern town and country planning in the United Kingdom.)