CUGE Centre for Urban Greenery and Ecology
RESEARCH deriving information, extending knowledge

City in a Garden Touchpoints
A suggested approach from reading ACM Green

INTRODUCTION

In business, the term touchpoint has evolved much from the original ca. 2001 definition that refers to customer interaction channels such as call centres, web sites, automated teller machines and web kiosks. (source http://www.customerthink.com/blog/what_exactly_touchpoint)

Today the term refers to the interface

- of a product,
- a service or
- a brand

with customers, non-customers, employees and other stakeholders - before, during and after a transaction respectively a purchase. (source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchpoint)

While our brand "The National Parks Board, NParks" in Singapore is probably not unclear, our products, or services might be harder to define broadly, not least because the point of transaction is almost impossible to determine, most of our products and services being free. Internally and externally, the Board has consistently used the name "City in A Garden" to qualify the sum of all our products and services. We have also never been clearer with regard what we do collectively to achieve this product:

"We conserve, create, sustain and enhance the green infrastructure of our Garden City.

Combining the visual delights and rich bio-diversity of our parks, gardens & nature reserves with thoughtfully-planned recreational activities, we facilitate your communion with Nature. We are driven by the chance to accord Singapore residents a truly enviable lifestyle where ultra-fast modern city living can go hand-in-hand with becalming greenery.

We strive to provide you with an environment that is visually stimulating, physically nourishing and emotionally uplifting. Along this journey, we hope to contribute to a Healthy, Happy & Enviable Singapore!" (source http://www.nparks.gov.sg/)

 This article enquires into how our collective work on one project "ACM Green" translated into various customer or user touchpoints that were relevant for its success and attempt to categorise these in order to allow a better understanding of some of the customer interfaces of our products, services and brand.

The ACM Green Project Background

The ACM Green project began when our stakeholder, the Asian Civilizations Museum (ACM), requested for an improvement to the open space in front of the museum for better integration with the surroundings and the museum. The desire for a garden setting that could cater to functions and the occasional staging of outdoor exhibits and exhibitions was expressed.

Figure 1: Initial gardenesque design of ACM green

An initial gardenesque design was presented that was met with delight from the stakeholder. It addressed the needs of the museum for a function lawn with better quality turf, and improved the circulation between garden and promenade as well as improved wheelchair accessibility (see figure 1). Dr Kenson Kwok, director of the museum however, pointed to two issues that he felt needed further addressing: one was for a better connection between the site and the river and the second was for a better connection to adjacent walkways.

To achieve this, the shrub plantings were deleted to facilitate visual connection to the river and one existing footpath was realigned. (compare figure 2 and 3) With the inputs from Dr Kenson Kwok, ACM Green evolved from a gardenesque design into the contemporary results we see at site today.

Figure 2: The gardenesque design (note the existing disconnected footpath and compare with figure 3)

Figure 3: The contemporary design (note the prominence of the river even on plan and the realignment of the footpath)

THE THREE CRITICAL VISITOR TOUCHPOINTS OF ACM GREEN

Touchpoint One and Two: The View and The Breeze

One of the greatest learning points about ACM Green project was the eye-opening re-discovery that some of the most important touchpoints of our products i.e. our parks, openspaces, gardens and greenery (from henceforth summarised under the term "parks") sometimes do not necessary reside within our sites or properties. These visual touchpoints: the river, the reservoir, the sea, the sky, the butterflies, the birds and even the stars must not be neglected as we design, build and manage our parks. Oftentimes, they are under the management and jurisdiction of other governmental agencies. Understanding the importance of these touchpoints to our products and services could guide us in the way we carry out our daily work. While the term "touchpoint" used here to illustrate this point is new, the idea that a garden is larger then its prescribed boundary is an age-old concept. Consider the following text from the Chinese definitive garden-making treatise of the seventeenth century "Yuan Ye":

> *"Extending to the utmost one's gaze upon a lofty field,*
> *Distant peaks form an encircling screen,*
> *Halls are open so that congenial air wafts over oneself,*
> *Before the door, Spring waters flow into a marsh."*

<div align="right">FUNG 2000</div>

Interpreting the text using today's terms, not only are views of distant objects considered touchpoints of a garden, even the wind that literally touches one's skin, itself not a "thing" but a phenomenon of nature's processes, is a critical touchpoint.

In the case of ACM Green, the removal of view-blocking hedges opened up the views to the Singapore River and the City beyond as well as allowed for unblocked air circulation for the entire site.
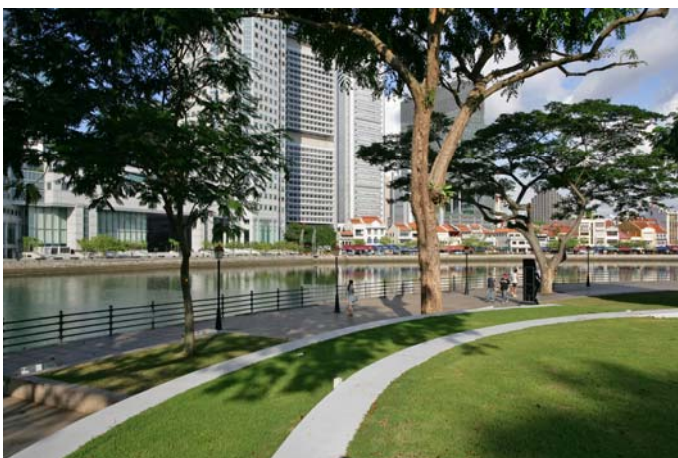

Figure 4: ACM Green today: Visual connection to the river and the city opposite.

Figure 5: ACM Green before: mounds and hedges separate the turf from the surroundings.

Touchpoint Three: The Lawn

With the view to the river and the city opened up, it was noticed that users of ACM Green started to linger more at site, with some choosing to sit or even lie down on the lawn. (see figure 6) Generally, the orientation of their bodies toward the river supported the hypothesis of the view as the primary touchpoint. A survey would need to be conducted to test this hypothesis. Nonetheless, the improved lawn, using the carpet grass Zoysia japonica with its finer leaf blades, the sandy planting media as well as its more even grading, makes for a more attractive surface for bodily contact. Again, it would be interesting to test this hypothesis: namely that the lawn is a further critical touchpoint that improved the attractiveness of ACM Green. It would also be worth investigating if the lawn is a primary or a supportive touchpoint, meaning: would visitors be attracted to sit or lie down on an attractive dry lawn surface without the draw of a primary touchpoint such as the river and the city view? Having enticed visitors with a primary touchpoint, how critical is the attractiveness of the lawn surface in the visitors' decision to linger and in the duration of this physical contact? Such studies would enable better understanding about the impact of different investments on the different parts of a project.

(It would be interesting to note that the transformations at ACM Green cost less than half a million SGD)

Figure 6: A couple sitting and lying on the lawn facing the river.

City in a Garden Touchpoints

The reading of ACM Green based on the three critical user touchpoints described enabled a new user-centric perspective on the City in a Garden. Figure 7 is a preliminary touchpoint map of the City in a Garden comprising of various categories of touchpoints and some of their components.
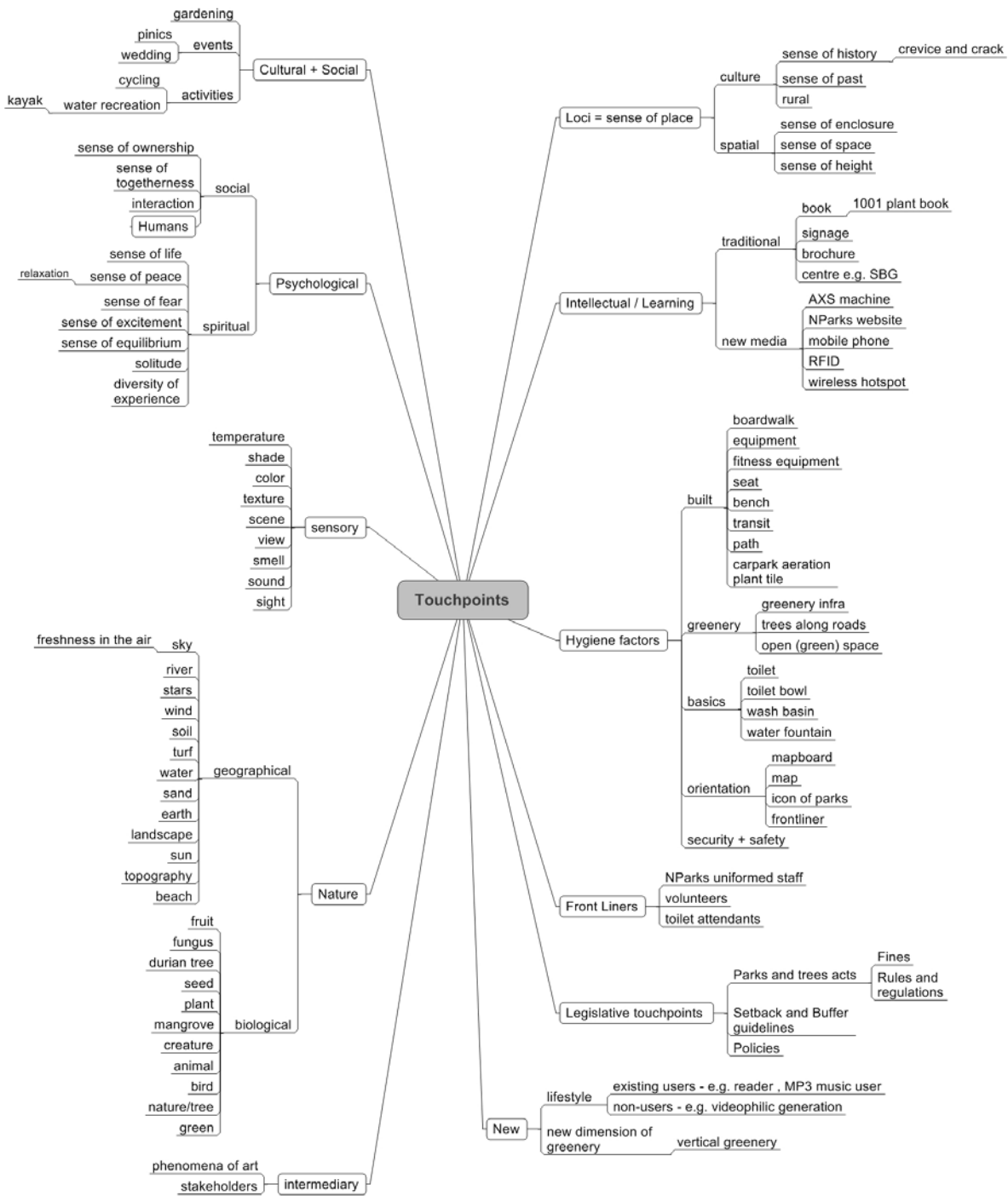

Figure 7: City in a Garden touchpoint map

POTENTIALS OF THE TOUCHPOINT PERSPECTIVE

A User-centric Approach

The touchpoint perspective enables a user-centric approach to understanding our City in a Garden, the sum of NParks' products and services. It also potentially serves as a framework for creative enquiries. Many interesting problems surface as we examine our current positions with respect to individual touchpoints, touchpoint clusters or categories, combined touchpoints and new or hitherto unknown touchpoints.

New and hitherto unknown Touchoints

New and hitherto unknown touchpoints could refer to non-user touchpoints or even non-existing touchpoints with current users. Just spending some time thinking about the later for example could potentially generate a multitude of projects we could embark on that could

    i)   enhance the experience of existing users,

    ii)   increase the duration of stay of existing users,

    iii)   improve the way we design, develop and maintain existing products and services, and even

    iv)   potentially attract non-users.

Touchpoint Enquiries

Other touchpoint enquiries are nonetheless no less interesting and could potentially reap huge returns. For example, hygiene factors need not be something that we merely strive to deliver. If we consider the question "how can we turn a hygiene factor (a particular one) into a delight?", we could possibly create delight factors much like the way the Zoo and Jewel Box did in redesigning their toilets. If we look at the problem of bird shitting on cars, we could arrive at the question of "how do we prevent mynahs and crows from roosting on the trees of our public carparks?" Prof Hugh Tan from NUS had exactly done such an enquiry and will have interesting strategies to share. These are but merely a few examples of touchpoint enquiries that NParks can embark on that could broaden our current understanding of our City in a Garden. Each enquiry has the potential to enhance our managerial and professional knowledge, inform our practices and revamp our city by directly impacting on the experience of our garden city.

Each Enquiry leading to the Whole

Hence, as we embark on each enquiry, we will obtain a piece of the jig-saw puzzle to the whole. And as more pieces of the jig-saw puzzle materialise, slowly, the image of the whole, the City in a Garden, will emerge, piece by piece, touchpoint by touchpoint, one small step at a time.

CONCLUSION

"Four hundred years ago, a wise Japanese Zen master named Sen no Rikyu designed a legendary tea garden on a dramatic cliff site overlooking the Inland Sea. Despite the spectacular view over the broad expanse of murmuring ocean, the tea master carefully planted a high screen of hedges and trees all around the garden and blocked out the vista to the sea. In front of the hedge, Rikyu placed a small stone font for washing the hands, an important prelude to the tea ritual. Just above the bowl, he clipped a tiny opening through the leaves. It was a brilliantly choreographed genuflection. As visitors knelt down to the bowl, their eyes would catch a fleeting glimpse of sea through the leaves just at the moment when their hands mingled with the cool water."

<div align="right">MOORE 1994</div>

Sen no Rikyu in one masterstroke orchestrated three simultaneous touchpoints with the natural element water. The first is a literal touchpoint as the hands encounter the water. The second is a visual touchpoint as the eyes take in the sea. Last but not least is a learning touchpoint. As the Chinese saying goes: "one thinks of the source as he drinks the water"

What an appropriate lesson for a tea garden!

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ILLUSTRATION AND PHOTO CREDITS

Figure 1, 2 and 3: Kenneth Lim, Parks Development, Design Branch
Figure 4, 6 and 7: Parks Development, Design Branch
Figure 5: Parks Development, Development Management
Figure 7: Kelly Chiang
(content of figure 7 was the result of a brainstorming session involving Kelly Chiang, Samuel Oh, Victor Tan Hee Hiong and author)

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