CUGE Schemes for Landscape Industry Development
A Strong Shade of Green

Text by Narelle Yabuka

It has been 50 years since Singapore’s leaders embarked on a campaign to green the city. In 1963, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew planted a Hemp tree (Chulapotium formosum) in what was then a roundabout at the junction of Farrier Road and Holland Road. It marked the beginning of a tree-planting and greening campaign that would change the character of urbanised areas in Singapore and deeply impact the nation’s economy.

Historically, the push for a “Garden City” of pervasive greenery (now for “a City in a Garden”) has been top-down in nature. The first annual tree-planting day was held in 1970. The Garden City Action Committee (SCAC) was assembled in the late 1960s and constituted high-level officials from various government agencies, who heard reports on greening efforts and issued directives to boost the greening cause. The Parks and Recreation Department (PRD)—the first agency devoted to greening-related matters—was formed in 1976. Merging with the PRD, the National Parks Board (NParks) was formed in 1990, with a particular emphasis on parks.

The Industry Takes Root

Today, there is a clear indication that the idea of urban greening, although required and encouraged by Singapore’s leaders, is now being implemented in the Singaporean consciousness. About two-thirds of the Singapore landscape industry’s yearly revenue in landscape construction and maintenance, of over $8400 million, is currently attributable to the private sector. Explains Chong Whyte Keat, Deputy Director of the Industry Development branch of the Centre for Urban Greenery and Ecology (CUGE), “It’s not to say that the government is spending less, it’s just that the private sector may be growing faster, I think that will be the trend going forward.”

He continues, “In the past, most of Singapore’s greenery was invested by the government in the form of streetscapes and parks. But these days, look at any premium commercial development, even some industrial facilities. Trees, green walls, and green roofs are sprouting up everywhere. The Industry Development and Development Board has implemented greynery for a long time, but now the private sector housing developers are doing as much, if not more.”

The Need to Improve Productivity Levels

The industry’s revenue has been growing at a rate of around five percent per year since 2010, says Chong. Productivity levels, however, need to be raised in order for labour productivity growth to achieve greater parity with GDP growth. While improvements to productivity are being called for across the board in Singapore, Chong suggests that within the landscape industry, “it is very evident that we need to do something about productivity because some things are still being done in ways that could be improved.”

Aiming to transform the landscape industry, the Landscape Productivity Roadmap (developed by CUGE together with the industry) has the goal of improving productivity by 2.5 percent per annum over the next 10 years. “We are looking at four different areas,” says Chong. “First, we help the industry’s managers and leaders to change their mindset about productivity. We conduct productivity study trips overseas to illustrate the ways that things can be done. Second, we encourage increased mechanisation and innovation. For example, we ask, can you use a ride-on mower that allows one person to do the job of four people using hand-held mowers?”

Chong continues, “Third, we encourage best practices and high standards. We organised the GreenUrbanScape event in November to bring together the industry players from around the world to network and share best practices and latest trends. We’ve also released a set of guidelines for the productive maintenance and sustainability of landscape designs, and we’ve introduced a scheme for the accreditation of nurseries. And fourth, we encourage manpower development—a bottom-up approach to improving the industry via training.”

The Landscape Productivity Grant Scheme is a key component of CUGE’s Industry Development branch and Manpower Development branch have initiated a number of programmes that target improved productivity and skills, as well as an elevated profile for the landscape industry and its workers. Among those handled by the former are the Landscape Productivity Grant Scheme and Nursery Accreditation Scheme. Among those handled by the latter are the Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme and Landscape Excellence Assessment Framework (LEAF). The Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme is an intensive 10-day refresher cum-training course (with assessment) for practising horticulturists that is accredited by the Australian Institute of Horticulture. It covers a number of subject areas: soils and media, water, plants, plant maintenance, irrigation, site implementation principles, project costings and implementation, project planning and supervision, and project implementation and construction. It also presents an extensive overview of the landscape industry.

CUGE’s Schemes for Landscape Industry Development: A Strong Shade of Green

The programme was established in 2008, and as of June 2013, has produced 132 certified practicing horticulturists. The CUGE website features a list of certified practitioners.
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The course also attracts participants from the region—from Singapore’s private industry. The course also practising horticulturists and then wonder why the plants don’t do well. The Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme reminds us of the need to plan ahead before selecting soils, as well as the implications of the different soils with regard to fertilizer application. In particular, says Kwok, the programme “encourages younger up-and-coming horticulturists to embrace the standards we’ve always adhered to”.

She has observed the emergence of positive outcomes from CUGE’s training programmes. “Generally I would say that the skill level of the workers in our nursery—and those of our contractors—has gone up. I see an improvement in standards overall, as well as a lift in image for landscape technicians. They are no longer called gardeners or foremen. They feel proud to be called landscape technicians, and they have the option of progressing in their career path.”

However, she comments, progress of study. All the degree courses are lacking in Singapore. Kwok teases in a diploma course, and finds that many of her graduating students are keen to further their studies. “They ask, ‘What’s next? Unfortunately there’s no degree course available to them. One channel open to them is the University of Queensland in Australia. They need to spend a year away, and not everyone can do that,” she explains.

Landscape Excellence Assessment Framework

Building a stronger landscape industry and nurturing the idea of pervasive greenery is a multifaceted effort, and the value of recognition for outstanding greening efforts has been formalised with NParcs’ Landscape Excellence Assessment Framework (LEAF). Launched in August 2013, LEAF is the only certification scheme in Singapore that recognises greening excellence in developments. It recognises developers, architects, landscape architects, and maintenance agents for excellence in the provision and management of urban greenery.

New and existing projects are assessed and awarded by a broad team from NParcs, and the winners receive recognition and publicity rather than a financial reward.

“LEAF recognises everyone who was involved in a project,” says Shahril. “It celebrates innovative solutions created by professionals in the industry. The beauty of the LEAF scheme is that it’s not prescriptive; it doesn’t specify the kind of space, the size, the type of plants, and so on. It’s flexible in terms of simply recognising innovative or creative ways of incorporating greening developments. We see many kinds of approaches,” he says. The inaugural LEAF winners in the category of “new developments” were the condominiums Corals at Keppel Bay and The Interface. Senja Parc View HDB estate; and executive condominium The Rainforest. In the “existing developments” category, LEAF awards were issued to 158 Cecil Street (office building), Khoo Tuck Puat Hospital, Newton Suites (condominium), Pangshan Grove (HDB estate), and Siloso Beach Resort (hotel).

Growing History

“One of my first projects with NParcs [then the PRD],” recalls Kwok, “was the walkway planting along Shenton Way. Previously there were no plants. In those days we used to keep working even on Saturdays, just to finish our projects. We had a tight timeline for Shenton Way. Once the Public Works people had finished the walkways and the pipes were in, we did the soil work followed by the planting. Come Monday, wow, you could see the change. The entire street was done. All the walkways you see now are the result of that initiative to beautify the central business district.”

Continuing the story of Singapore’s greening requires the continual growth of its landscape workforce. Attracting people to the industry, however, can be challenging. In Kwok’s words, “You have to feel something for the plants. You have to be happy to come to work every morning, in spite of the rain and the sun.”

On 7 September 2013, the annual Green Thumbs event was held at ITE College East. At the event, a memorandum of understanding was signed by NParcs, Institute of Technical Education (ITE), and Landscape Industry Association (Singapore) (LIAS) to award 50 scholarships to help develop a pool of highly trained students for careers in the landscape industry. The scholarships are worth S$600,000 over five years and funded by NParcs’ Garden City Fund and LIAS. They will assist students studying ITE’s two-year NITEC (National Institute of Technical Education Certification) in Facility Technology (Landscape Services) course. To aid curriculum development, NParcs and LIAS will share expertise in landscape services and related disciplines.

Combined with measures to increase productivity and recognising innovation, the development of landscape-focused courses catering to groups ranging from school leavers to practising professionals indicates effective steps toward a strong and healthy landscape industry. “Perhaps one day there could be a tie-up with a university to offer a degree course in Singapore,” suggests Kwok, to continue the progression already underway in the industry.

More information on the programmes discussed in this article can be found at cuge.com.sg.

Inaugural LEAF-Certified Developments 2013

New Developments

Canals at Keppel Bay
Developer: Keppel Bay Pte Ltd

The Rainforest
Developer: Senja View Pte Ltd
Team members: Development and Building Board, 3PA International, OE Consultants (S) Pte Ltd, Alpha Consulting Engineers Pte Ltd, WT Partnership (S) Pte Ltd, Tain Designs Pte Ltd, and Vision Construction Pte Ltd.

The Interlace
Developer: The Interlace Consortium led by CapitaLand Hotel Properties, and a third shareholder
Team members: BDP Architects Planners & Engineers (Pte) Ltd, ICN Design International Pte Ltd, WHP Huap (Private) Limited, and Blooms & Greens Pte Ltd.

The Atrium
Developer: The Atrium City Developments Limited and TID Pte Ltd
Team members: ADDP Architects LLP, ONGEUNG Pte Ltd, and Nomura Singapore (Pte) Ltd.

Existing Developments

158 Cecil Street
Developer: Alpha Investment Partners Ltd, Singapore

Khoo Tuck Puat Hospital
Developer: Alexandra Health Ltd Pte Ltd
Team members: PM Link Pte Ltd, CPG Consultants, Perdana Asia Pte Ltd, Hyundai Engineering & Construction Co. Ltd, and Tropical Environment Pte Ltd

Newton Suites
Developer: Seng & Sons Ltd, Group Limited
Team member: WDA Architects Pte Ltd

Pangshan Grove
Developer: Housing and Development Board
Team member: Town Council

Siloso Beach Resort
Developer: Siloso Beach Resort
Team member: Tan + Tsakonas Architects

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