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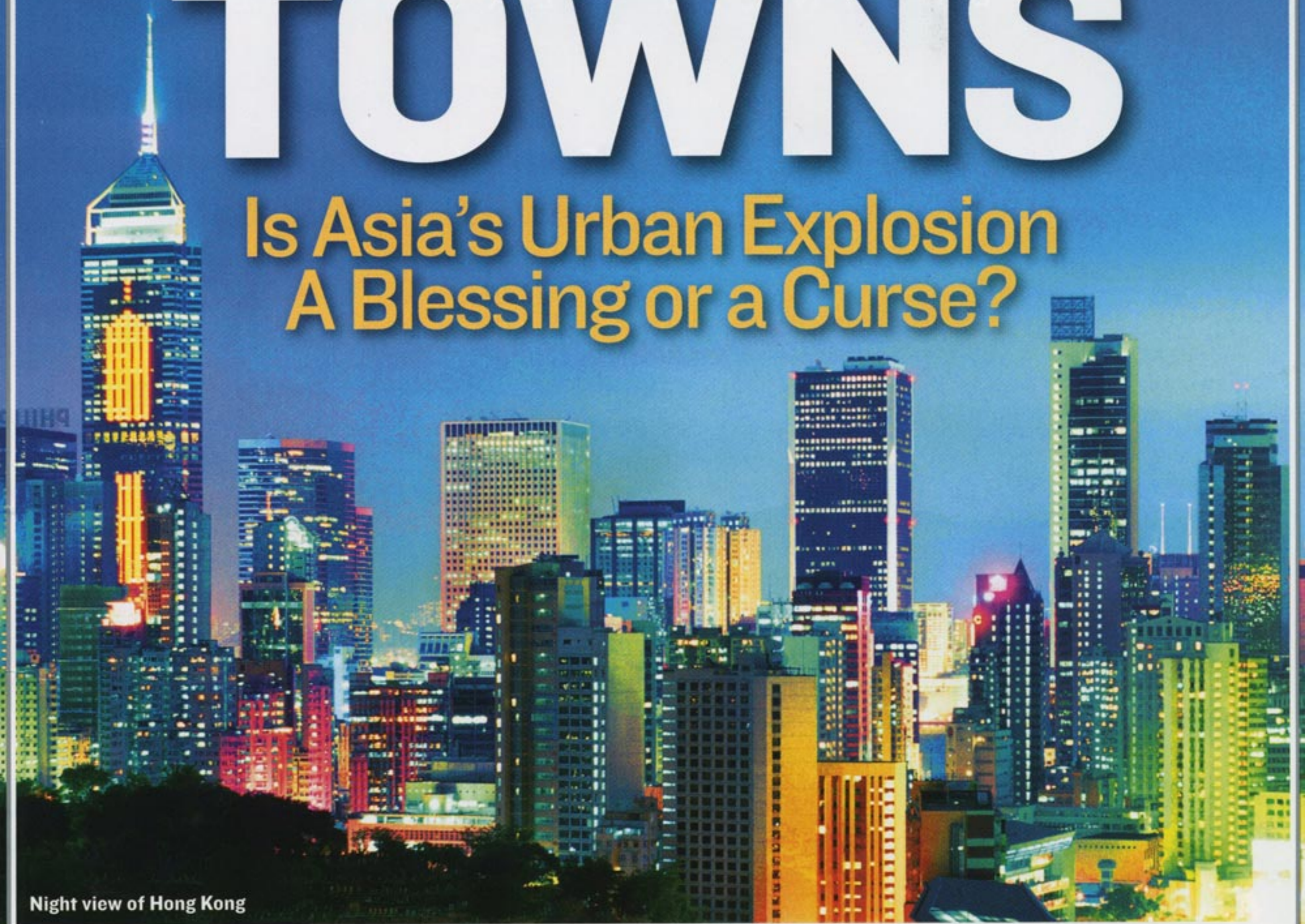
# Newsweek

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# BOOM TOWNS

## Is Asia's Urban Explosion A Blessing or a Curse?



Night view of Hong Kong



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**When it comes to finding the quick fix, Singapore stays on the cutting edge. What will it come up with next?**

**By Joe Cochrane**

# The City That Could

**A**NDREA SIEW HATES AIRPORT lines, and the ones caused by SARS this past summer were some of the worst she'd ever seen. From Hong Kong to Thailand, standard procedure called for a half-hour wait while airport officials poked and prodded arriving passengers with thermometers. So it was with some delight that the Malaysian business traveler arrived in Singapore to discover a bustling airport with no thermometers or lines to speak of. Little did she know that Singapore's airport officials were discreetly monitoring the flow of passengers for SARS-induced fevers using state-of-the-art thermal-imaging devices.

Leave it to Singapore to find the efficient fix. In recent decades, technology has played a key role in transforming the tiny island state from a Third World outpost to a regional economic power. While the big car and computer companies of Japan get all the ink for glitzy new gadgets, Singapore has emerged in recent years as something of a laboratory for less fancy but no less dramatic technological innovations that keep the city humming. Forced by its tiny size to experiment, Singapore has found answers to problems like congested roadways and scarce water resources that larger cities are just beginning to address. "Because Singapore is small and successful, it's been able to experiment with some of these [programs] faster and with less resistance," says Paul Bradley, a managing director of IDS Logistics and a World Economic Forum fellow.

Singapore's approach to SARS was lightning quick. Officials, worried that airport de-

lays could hurt the fragile travel and tourism industry, tasked the country's Defence Science and Technology Agency to come up with a solution. It took exactly one day to create the thermal-imaging scanner. A week later, 32 units were up and running in the airport. Now as passengers walk past infrared cameras, the scanner reads body temperatures in real time and displays a color outline of what it sees on a computer screen. Passengers with high temperatures show up red and are taken aside for further health checks. The

moving tollbooth lines, drivers buy prepaid toll cards and insert them into their onboard computer, which deducts fares based on where and what time they travel. It's not hard to imagine the technology spreading to traffic-choked Asian cities like Manila, Bangkok or Jakarta down the road.

Singapore's unique approach to water purification is another technology that you may find coming to a city near you. Singapore purchases almost all its water from neighboring Malaysia. Until recently, many

affluent citizens were used to grabbing Evian off a grocery-store shelf. But recently a Singaporean company, Hyflux, began marketing bottled water made from treated sewage under the name NEWater. "It is revolutionary," says Singaporean Trade Minister George Yeo. Earlier this year the government began adding millions of liters of treated sewage water—it's purified through a process of reverse osmosis—into its reservoir. That bold move followed a year-long public-education campaign to convince Singaporeans that NEWater was

safe and to "get over the natural psychological fear" of drinking processed sewage water, says Yeo. And it seems to be working. A recent poll showed that 82 percent of Singaporeans would drink the recycled water.

Of course, even Singapore thinks it can do a better job preparing for the future. "In the past [the government] told you, 'Don't take risks.' Now they want to encourage you to take risks," says Bradley. "They have to be open to more creativity, more risk-taking." That's a tough task in a place with such a small margin for error. But don't be surprised if many of Asia's bigger players keep looking to the city-state for solutions. ■



**HUMMING ALONG:** New thermal-imaging devices make airport lines a thing of the past

city-state recently shipped 155 of the machines to cities across Asia.

Or consider how the island untangled its traffic. Because of the country's size, congested roadways are a constant concern. The government established tollbooths in 1975 to discourage motorists from going into central areas of the city. But that's old news. Nowadays all cars in Singapore have a minicomputer onboard that communicates with sensors set up on streets and highways across the island. Instead of waiting on slow-