Cultural Connections

Volume II | 2017

About the Culture Academy Singapore

The Culture Academy was established in 2015 by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth to groom the next generation of cultural leaders in the public sector. Guided by its vision to be a centre of excellence for the development of culture professionals and administrators, the Culture Academy's work spans three areas: Education and Capability Development, Research and Scholarship and Thought Leadership.

The Culture Academy also provides networking opportunities, platforms for exchange of creative ideas and offers professional development workshops, public lectures and publishes research articles through its journal, Cultural Connections to nurture thought leaders in Singapore's cultural scene.

Some of our current and past partners include the Smithsonian Institution, the Reinwardt Academy, Museums Victoria, the Asian National Museums Association and institutes of higher learning such as the University of Melbourne, Nanyang Polytechnic, and other government organisations within and outside Singapore.

Cultural Connections is a journal published by the Culture Academy Singapore to nurture thought leadership in cultural work in the public sector.

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Foreword

The arts, culture and heritage scene in Singapore has grown tremendously since the publication of our nation's first formal plan back in 1989. This plan by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA)[1] envisioned a city with a bold and exciting arts and heritage landscape, comprising national museums dedicated to Singapore's history and Southeast Asian arts; a world-class performing arts venue; and statutory boards focused on growing Singapore's arts and heritage sector.

Almost three decades later, I am glad that Singapore has achieved all these and more. Singapore is now a vibrant cosmopolitan city with an arts and heritage scene which is internationally celebrated and respected. We have artists, artistes, scholars as well as arts and heritage professionals doing excellent work all over the world, flying Singapore's flag high.

Back home, many Singaporeans attended an arts event or activity in 2015. In the same year, museum visitorship also reached an all-time high of 3.75 million. More Singaporeans also believe in the value of arts and culture, and recognise that Singapore's arts and cultural landscape has become more vibrant.[2] All these would not have been possible without the passion of the arts and heritage community, and the close collaboration among the public, private and people sectors.

The Government has, and will continue to, invest in the sector to promote artistic excellence, enhance professional capabilities, and make arts and heritage a part of our everyday lives. Over the past five years, Government funding to the arts and heritage sector has increased from S$344.2 million in 2011 to S$595.7 million in 2015. This underscores the Government's belief in the sector and its value in making our city a home for all citizens.

Indeed, our arts and heritage sector can form common platforms and bridge differences across race, language or religion. It can bring our people closer together, and nurture a more caring, cohesive and confident nation.

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth will also continue to engage various communities to hear what they would like to see in the arts and heritage landscape. These engagements are also about discussing what roles different communities can play in enlivening this landscape and contributing to its richness for years to come. The next chapter of Singapore's story needs to be written together, taking into consideration Singaporeans' aspirations for our arts and heritage scene.

(Continued on next page)

This second volume of *Cultural Connections* is dedicated to this theme of how arts and heritage can contribute to the creation of liveable cities. We are very privileged to have public sector leaders from the arts and culture sector, as well as eminent diplomats and scholars contributing to this volume.

I hope you will enjoy reading their thoughts as much as I have.

Rosa Daniel (Mrs)
Deputy Secretary (Culture),
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

Notes:

1. The ACCA Report was followed by three Renaissance City Plans issued between 1999 and 2008, and later by the Report of The Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee in 2012.
2. In the "Population Survey on the Arts 2015" by the National Arts Council, 88% of Singaporeans indicated that the arts gave them a "better understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures", while 78% of Singaporeans agreed that the arts "say who we are as a society and country". Also, 79% of Singaporeans indicated that "the arts scene in Singapore has become more vibrant in the past five years", compared with 64% who responded to the same question in 2013.

Editor in Chief's Note

This second issue of *Cultural Connections* looks at how the arts, heritage and culture contribute, and indeed are essential elements, to the making of liveable cities. This theme will be of interest not just to heritage and culture practitioners but also readers involved in city planning, architecture and public policy related to urban development.

The editorial team is especially honoured to have worked with a line-up of illustrious contributors who have shared their insights and experiences in essays that examine the links between the arts and heritage and liveable cities.

Professor Tommy Koh, who wears many hats and is perhaps best known as Ambassador-At-Large at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs opens this issue of *Cultural Connections* with a wide-ranging and international take on what makes cities great and how the arts and heritage sectors can breathe new life into cities regardless of their size. This theme returns in Michael Koh's essay on how the preservation of historic districts can contribute to a more liveable city, using examples from Singapore as well as other great cities across the world.

Our next eminent contributor is Dr Mathew Trinca, Director of the National Museum of Australia and Co-Chair of the Australia-Singapore Arts Group. Dr Trinca puts forth a very strong case for the arts as a central element in the making of creative cities and that arts or heritage events are increasingly moving away from passive "arts consumption" by the audience towards more active, engaged and interactive forms of participation that entails greater dialogue and even co-creation.

Benson Puah, as Chief Executive Officer of Esplanade – Theatres On The Bay in Singapore, extends Dr Trinca's argument in his detailed and insightful account of how the Esplanade, Singapore's leading performing arts centre, has endeavoured to make the arts and culture an essential and enjoyable part of life for all Singaporeans.

Paul Tan, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Singapore's National Arts Council, offers a view from both Japan and Singapore that explores how support for the arts from all levels of society can help to make a country home, truly, for everyone.

And if you had thought that Singapore's status as a liveable city was a recent achievement, the next essay will make you rethink this assumption. Professor Derek Heng offers a thorough and thoughtful account of how people in fourteenth century Singapore lived and the surprising sophistication of their culinary and cultural practices.

(Continued on next page)

Finally, we round up this issue with an essay by Charmaine Toh, Curator at the National Gallery Singapore, that looks at how living in different cities has influenced the practice of one of Singapore's eminent contemporary artists, Tang Da Wu.

I hope you will enjoy reading this issue of *Cultural Connections*.

Thangamma Karthigesu
Director, Culture Academy

History, Culture and the Making of a Successful City

Professor Tommy Koh

Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore
Special Adviser, Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore
Chairman, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore
Rector, Tembusu College, National University of Singapore

In this essay, I wish to share some thoughts on the role that history and culture play in the making of a successful city. These reflections are based upon the experience of Singapore in the last fifty years. I had the privilege of serving as the first Chairman of Singapore's National Arts Council and the second Chairman of the National Heritage Board, which has jurisdiction over our museums, Heritage Institutions, national monuments and historic sites.[1] I have also had the benefit of living more than twenty years abroad, in Cambridge, England, and in Boston, Buffalo (New York state), Washington DC and Palo Alto in the United States. My work has also taken me to many other cities around the world.

A successful city: size does not matter

Let me begin by clarifying what I mean when I use the term, "a successful city". My first point is that size does not matter. A successful city can be a big city, such as New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, Seoul, Bangkok, Surabaya and Sydney. A successful city can also be a small city, such as, Penang and Malacca in Malaysia; Ubud, Bali, in Indonesia; Bagan in Myanmar; Luang Prabang in Laos; Thimphu in Bhutan; Perth in Australia; Queenstown in New Zealand; Bruges in Belgium; Vilnius in Lithuania; Tallinn in Estonia; and Riga in Latvia.

A successful city can, of course, also be a mid-size city, such as Copenhagen in Denmark; Stockholm in Sweden; Helsinki in Finland; Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand; Kyoto in Japan; Hong Kong, Xi'an and Suzhou in China; Chiang Mai in Thailand; Bandung in Indonesia; Barcelona in Spain; and Hamburg, Berlin and Munich in Germany. I apologise if I have not referred to your city. This is a rather random list of successful cities which I have visited and which I like.

Criteria for a successful city

My second point is that a successful city is one which provides adequately for its citizens' basic needs. These basic needs include housing, jobs, an efficient transport system, affordable healthcare, good schools and a healthy environment. A city with many homeless people and people living in slums or on the street is not a successful city. A city with many unemployed citizens, especially among the young, is not a successful city.

A city in which the citizens live in fear for their safety is not a successful city. A city in which the tap water is not safe to drink, where people defecate in the open, where the air is too polluted to breathe and where the soil, rivers, lakes and groundwater have become contaminated, is not a successful city. In my definition, a successful city is one which provides for the basic needs of its citizens – not just some citizens, but all its citizens. In my definition, a successful city must be inclusive and must provide a good quality of life to all its citizens.

Some cities are more equal than others

My third point is that not all successful cities are equal. Some cities are more equal than others. Some cities have a stronger identity and spirit than others. Some cities are better designed, better planned and better organised than others. Some cities are more

welcoming than others. Some cities are more joyful than others. Some cities have the "x" factor which makes them deserving of being called "great" cities.

I think I am on safe ground when I say that New York, London and Paris are great cities. One manifestation of their "greatness" was the exemplary manner in which their citizens behaved when their cities were attacked by terrorists. The New Yorkers, Londoners and Parisians were not intimidated. They did not cower in fear. Instead, they showed courage and defiance. They did not turn on their Muslim minorities. Instead, they sought to protect their minorities and reaffirmed their faith in diversity. The great sociologist, Robert Ezra Park (1864-1944), was right when he said that the city is "a state of mind"[2] The citizens share a body of customs, attitudes and sentiments. My conclusion is that these great cities have strong cultures, values and mindsets.

Singapore's state of mind

What is Singapore's state of mind? I think it consists of three core values: multiculturalism, meritocracy with compassion, and integrity and no corruption. Multiculturalism has become part of our DNA. We celebrate our diversity of race, language and religion. It is rare in our troubled world to find a place where people of so many different races and religions live harmoniously as brothers and sisters.

In Singapore, we are proud of the fact that a person is judged on the basis of his or her merit and not on any other basis. In Singapore, the son of a taxi driver can rise to become the Head of the Civil Service. We are very proud of our record as one of the least corrupt countries in the world. Honesty and integrity are our public and private virtues.

Singapore will be put to the test when it is hit by a terrorist attack. When that happens, will Singapore stay united or will it fracture along its racial or religious fault lines? I am quite confident in saying that Singaporeans will pass the test as the New Yorkers, Londoners and Parisians did. We will stay united and not be intimidated. We will not turn against our Muslim minority because we have no quarrel with Islam. Our quarrel is with a group of extremists who have hijacked Islam and use it to achieve their political objectives.

History and culture: lessons from Bilbao

The next point I want to make is that history and culture can play an important role in the rejuvenation of cities and in transforming ordinary cities into great cities.

Some years ago, I was the founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation, which was established in 1997 to promote greater mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges. A Swedish colleague and I had co-convened a conference in Stockholm to create a network of Asian and European museums and to discuss the role of culture in the fortunes of cities. In preparation for the conference, I went to visit Bilbao to see for myself how this city has succeeded in rejuvenating itself.

Bilbao is a mid-size city located in the Basque region of Spain. Like many industrial cities in Europe, it had suffered decades of decline. However, unlike other cities, the leaders of Bilbao decided to embark upon a 25-year journey to revive the fortunes of their city. Their plan had several legs.

One leg was to clean up the physical environment of the city. Another leg was to restore the city's infrastructure. A third leg was to restore the city's historic areas. A fourth leg was to transform the city through internationalisation and good design. Finally, the city decided to build the iconic Frank Gerry-designed Guggenheim Museum.

The Guggenheim Museum, which showcases masterpieces of modern and contemporary art, was meant to bring about a symbolic transformation of Bilbao, with the objective of bringing international arts and culture to its citizens, with tourism as a by-product. Since it opened in 1997, the Museum has attracted one million visitors a year. It has brought prosperity to the hospitality industry and to the city.

Bilbao won the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize in 2010. What lessons can we learn from its success? First, we can learn that a city can be successfully regenerated through the use of culture, internationalisation and design excellence. Second, we can learn that a city should not only focus on economic growth but also on the social issues and the quality of life.

European Capital of Culture

One of the European Union's most successful projects is the European Capital of Culture. It all began in 1985, when the Minister for Culture of Greece, the talented actress Melina Mercouri (1920-1994), and the French Culture Minister, Jack Lang (b. 1939), proposed that the EU should designate a Capital of Culture every year. Their rationale was that the project would bring Europeans closer together by highlighting the richness and diversity of European cultures and raising awareness of their common history and values.

To date, more than fifty cities across the European Union have been designed as European Capitals of Culture. The list includes two British cities, Glasgow (1990) and Liverpool (2008). How has such recognition benefitted the cities? It has done so in the following five ways:

- It has led to economic growth and the regeneration of cities;
- It has raised the international profile of the cities;
- It has enhanced the image of the cities in the eyes of their own citizens;
- It has breathed new life into the cities' cultures;
- It has boosted tourism.

Harnessing the power of history, culture and the arts in Singapore

During the past 50 years, Singapore has gone through a major transformation. In the first 25 years of nation-building, the priority was on growing the economy, renewing the city physically and building a world class infrastructure. In the second 25 years, Singapore has added three more ambitions to our agenda. These are to improve the city's liveability and quality of life; to harness the power of culture and the arts; and to make Singapore a global city of distinction.

The conservation movement came to Singapore too late to save some of our historic buildings from destruction. However, it came in time for us to realise the importance of conserving our built heritage and the anchors of our individual and collective

memories. To date, we have conserved over 7,000 buildings. We have protected, by law, more than seventy national monuments. Two of our historic landmarks, the City Hall and the old Supreme Court, have been successfully transformed into our new National Gallery, which attracted a million visitors in its first year. The Asian Civilisations Museum is housed in a historic colonial-era office building. The Singapore Art Museum and the Peranakan Museum are both located in old and historic school buildings. I am happy to report that the conservation movement has broad public support and that Singaporeans, including the young, are increasingly interested in their past and in protecting their heritage. It is a sign of our growing cultural maturity.

I am also happy to report that, after many years of investment and effort, we have overcome the old perception that Singapore was a cultural desert. Today, Singapore is a cultural oasis in the heart of Southeast Asia. The arts have blossomed. In Singapore, we have been careful to ensure that culture and the arts are not just for the elite but for all Singaporeans.

Our island-city now offers a busy arts calendar that includes the Singapore International Festival of Arts, the Singapore Night Festival and the Singapore Biennale. The annual Singapore Heritage Festival, organised by the National Heritage Board with the support of many community partners celebrates our heritage, including our cultural traditions, diverse communities, historic districts, and food. Singaporeans live to eat and not eat to live. We love all kinds of food but especially our local hawker food. The opening of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, a performing arts centre that locals have nicknamed the "Durian" for its spiky roof, in 2001, was an important milestone in our cultural journey. The opening of the National Gallery, in 2015, was another milestone. The journey continues. In the years ahead, we will have to focus on developing the soft aspects of our cultural assets, namely, our talent pool, our cultural capital and our acceptance of diversity. We are heading in the right direction and I am very optimistic about our future. Our ambition is to make Singaporeans a culture-loving people.

I shall conclude by quoting the following wise words written by an old friend, Joel Kotkin (b. 1952), in his 2006 book *The City: A Global History*. Kotkin wrote:

> "For 5,000 years or more, the human attachment to cities has served as the primary forum for political and material progress. It is in the city, this ancient confluence of the secret, safe and busy, where humanity's future will be shaped for centuries to come".[3] □

This essay was adapted from a keynote address delivered on 12 July 2016 at "Culture – Should Cities Care?", a Thematic Forum at the World Cities Summit held in Singapore from 10-14 July 2016.

Notes:

1. Professor Koh, who was Chairman of the National Heritage Board (NHB) from 2002-2011, has also shared his thoughts on the importance of heritage in Singapore in BeMuse, a publication of the NHB. See "A very happy journey: MUSETalk with Professor Tommy Koh" in *BeMuse* July-September 2011, pp. 46-53.
2. Robert Ezra Park, Ernest W Burgess & Roderick D McKenzie. *The City*. Chicago, 1925.
3. Joel Kotkin. *The City: A Global History*. New York, 2006.

A Historic Heart:

How Heritage Districts Can Make Cities More Liveable

Michael Koh
Fellow, Centre for Liveable Cities, Singapore

Katyana Melic
Manager, Centre for Liveable Cities

Singapore Skyline showing the unique juxtaposition of old and new.
Source: Erwin Soo @ www.flickr.com/photos/erwin_soo/8463911183

A sunny afternoon with friends, lounging on a cosy balcony or in the garden; cycling or walking along tree-lined malls and streets; strolling in a public square or by the waterfront; breathing fresh air in broad green parks; catching a tram to visit museums filled with art and artefacts, browsing quaint shops in historic quarters; admiring street art, artists and buskers; taking in the beauty of the city skyline.

When we think of people getting away from the daily grind of urban life to relax and enjoy themselves, such images come to mind, against which the city itself seems to serve merely as a scene backdrop. But a city's built environment – its architecture, buildings and layout – plays a key role in shaping its character and identity, and are part of what gives it a distinct sense of place.

In the course of urban renewal, old streets and buildings are often razed for the sake of modernity; in the name of productivity and progress, green fields are frequently redeveloped as concrete structures. But such a view of urban development risks stripping a city of its soul and identity: the streets become mere thoroughfares, and urban centres become mere stepping stones, with always a better, newer one to move on to. Can we instead take the view that a city's historic character is the X-factor that contributes towards making it a unique place in which people want to live, work, play and spend their lives in?

A city with a historic heart: guiding principles

For historic districts to contribute to making a city more liveable, some principles may be useful in guiding their conservation, planning and integration into urban life. Singapore's own urban development experience is a good illustration of these principles brought to life.

First, we need to recognise that historic buildings help make a city's urban landscape distinctive. Singapore's conservation buildings and national monuments reflect our history and identity as a city with a diverse heritage that includes

Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian and European influences. These older conserved buildings, juxtaposed with newer, still-evolving areas in the city, manifest our unique identity as a progressive young nation that is nevertheless still rooted in its history.

Second, we need to provide physical and social spaces within historic districts for people to gather. Such spaces can be interwoven among conserved buildings to become an integral part of everyday urban life, community spaces that are well used by a wide range of people for a variety of activities.

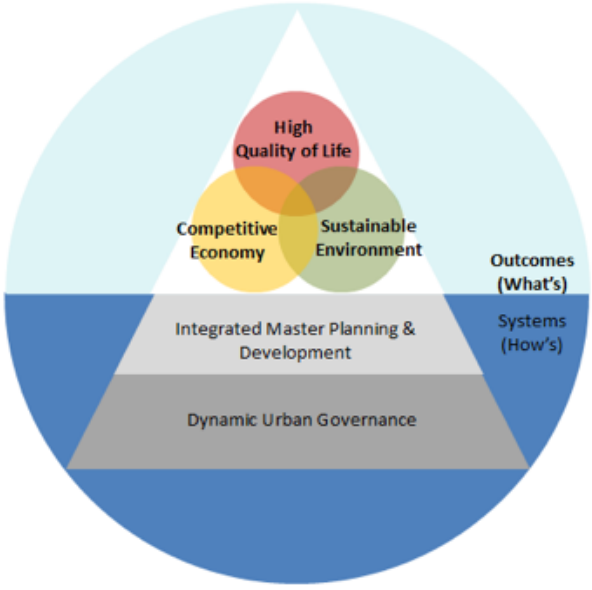
Third, historic districts need to be supported by integrated, long-term planning and appropriate programming in order to stay relevant and to help nurture inclusive neighbourhoods and communities.

Shaping a unique cityscape

Singapore's mix of modern and heritage buildings creates a unique cityscape that anchors us to our vibrant and plural history. The signature image of the Singapore River – with conserved warehouses at Boat Quay in the foreground and tall modern office towers rising dramatically right behind them – has characterised our Central Business District (CBD) at Raffles Place for decades. It attests to our economic progress from a colonial outpost to a thriving global financial and business hub. Similarly, the Chinatown historic district, framed by modern offices along Shenton Way and Cecil Street, is yet another image of this dynamic blend of old and new, East and West.

The Singapore Liveability Framework

Developed by the Centre for Liveable Cities, a knowledge centre for urban liveability and sustainability, the Singapore Liveability Framework describes successful liveable cities as those that are able to balance the trade-offs needed to achieve the three key outcomes of: high quality of life, a sustainable environment, and a competitive economy. This is based on strong foundations of integrated master planning and execution as well as dynamic urban governance. Within this framework, the built environment and architecture of a city provides character and identity for a sense of place, and is a key factor in these outcomes.



Such low-rise historic districts also provide urban respite from a landscape otherwise dominated by high-rise skyscrapers.

View of Boat Quay and the Civic District with its old conserved shophouses, colonial government buildings and modern skyscrapers.
Source: Miguel Bernas @ www.flickr.com/photos/timberwolfstudios/2544935298/

By day, these historic districts attract office workers; at night, visitors both local and foreign throng to a diverse offering of cuisines, sights, sounds and smells that present a different, softer face to the city and provide a high quality of life.

Vibrant economic activity continues apace in these historic districts, ensuring their continued relevance. Many small-medium enterprises, start-ups, entrepreneurs and creative professionals prefer locating their offices in the historic districts because of the colourful and stimulating environment they provide. Shared co-working spaces further boost the dynamism and variety of productive activities situated in these districts and contribute to Singapore's economic competitiveness.

The distinctive rows of traditional shophouses[1] prevalent in historic districts from Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India to secondary settlements such as Joo Chiat and Geylang form a distinctive architectural backbone. Their facades, combining elements of different cultural building styles – such as the wooden frieze under the roof eaves derived from Malay kampong houses and Chinese green tiled roofs above covered walkways[2] – are physical reminders of our multi-ethnic heritage.

On a city-wide scale, national monuments – including historic places of worship, former colonial government buildings and public institutions – have become civic icons and a source of pride. With more than 7,000 historic buildings gazetted for conservation, Singaporeans have a concrete sense of place and heritage to call our own, strengthening our social resilience.

The way forward for our post-independence built heritage

During the 1980s, when Singapore was undergoing a rapid and sweeping transformation, some members of the public and heritage non-governmental organisations (NGOs) felt that the city risked losing its soul if it continued to demolish the old built landscape at a relentless pace; that it could end up as a generic modern city.[3] On the other hand, others felt that scarce land could be better used for the high-rise expansion of the CBD or downtown public housing.

Singapore's planners and tourism officials at the time were conscious of these concerns, and considered the trade-offs very carefully. Through an ongoing process of discussions amongst institutions, different options were weighed. Eventually the integrated

master-planning process ensured that there would be enough land to sustain future development, and the conservation of heritage districts in the city centre became viable. The Singapore Government's 1988 Committee on Heritage explained the value of historic buildings and districts to a fast-changing urban landscape: "It is clear therefore that the conservation of buildings, structure and other districts which provide the signposts from the past to the present is critical to the psyche of a nation."[4] Singapore's first conservation areas were gazetted in 1989.[5]

Singapore's conservation efforts have since come a long way. The city's vibrant historic districts and secondary settlements are well-frequented and hold a special place in Singaporean hearts and minds.

Efforts have also been made to conserve some of our modern buildings, including the Asia Insurance Building (Southeast Asia's first skyscraper at its completion in 1955) and the Singapore Improvement Trust's art-deco apartments in Tiong Bahru from the 1930s. Iconic post-independence buildings such as the Singapore Conference Hall at Shenton Way and Jurong Town Hall have also been preserved as national monuments, reflecting milestones from the early days of nation building and the challenges and triumphs of independent Singapore's formative years. Are there other buildings in Singapore that also commemorate our pioneering years as a nation?

In accordance with guidelines by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), buildings over thirty years old can be considered for conservation. This guideline suggests that we can consider more of Singapore's unique post-war buildings for conservation: for example the Toa Payoh Town Centre (the first satellite town centre to be built and designed solely by the Housing and Development Board in the mid-1960s), or the Singapore Indoor Stadium, which opened in 1989.

Many buildings of global distinction have also come up in Singapore over the past twenty years, some of which have been recognised by international architectural accolades. Will such buildings, which include the distinctive Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, which opened in 2002 and whose Concert Hall was listed as one of the "World's 15 Most Beautiful Concert Halls" in 2014, merit conservation in the future because they reflect Singapore's aspirations and ongoing evolution as a city-state? Can our way forward as a city be one that ensures the Singapore cityscape remains unique and expressive of our story, representing the different stages of growth as we moved from Third World to First?

Turning historic districts into car-lite shared spaces

In its conservation efforts, Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has made the historic districts more pedestrian-friendly and accessible to shared public use. The historic districts, which were gazetted for conservation in 1989 and represent some of the oldest quarters in Singapore, are Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and Boat Quay. Pedestrianised streets, such as Pagoda Street and Terengganu Street in Chinatown, are now bustling social and commercial spaces, particularly during festive periods such as the Lunar New Year. In the Little India historic district around Serangoon Road, selected side streets lined by traditional shophouses and trades have been designated as car-free zones on Sundays since 2014. Open spaces such as the urban square at Kreta Ayer Complex in Chinatown and the lawn at Istana Kampong Glam (former residence of Malay royalty in Singapore) provide welcome breathing space amid tight streets in the historic districts.

Streets in historic districts have become urban assets for people to enjoy and explore, instead of spaces that favour or privilege vehicular traffic. For example, periodic weekend road closures of Club and Ann Siang Streets in Chinatown has allowed al fresco dining activities to spill over onto the street, so patrons can dine in car-free safety amid colourful historic surroundings. Some historic streets have also become spaces for community events and gatherings, and nodes for social bonding. Having vibrant activities at street level means Singaporeans and visitors alike can have more diverse options for leisure, creativity and even shopping beyond the usual malls or major commercial complexes in

Saving the skyline in New York and Chicago

Cities such as New York and Chicago have taken decisive steps to conserve buildings from different periods: buildings that represent milestones in urban development and which contribute to the unique character of each city. New York's high-rise Lever Building in midtown, built in 1952, was designated a city landmark in 1982. The towering 28 Liberty Street, formerly One Chase Manhattan Plaza (completed in 1962), was gazetted as a landmark in 2008.[6] Chicago has also preserved some early modern skyscrapers in the Chicago Loop (the city's downtown commercial centre), such as the Inland Steel Building (completed in 1957) and the Richard J Daley Center (completed in 1965).[7] Such buildings testify to the physical and social transformation of their respective home cities, and form part of their distinctive skylines.

1

2

3

4

1. Daley Center.
Source: Chicago Architecture Today @
www.flickr.com/photos/
chicagoarchitecturetoday/6308234200/

2. Lever House in New York.
Source: Gabriel de Andrade Fernandes @
www.flickr.com/photos/gaf/15726775064/

3. Inland Steel Building in Chicago.
Source: Teemu08 @
www.flickr.com/photos/teemu08/7183857941/

4. 28 Liberty Street in New York.
Source: Wally Gobetz @
www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/172955806/

the city. Such experiences, shared with family and friends, can help Singaporeans nurture important memories and a greater sense of rootedness.

As more Singaporeans appreciate and visit our historic districts, other public spaces can be created. Our historic districts feature narrow streets flanked by unique clusters of buildings, reflecting the flow of urban life in the past. Such spaces could be preserved or adapted to enhance the experience of these districts, bringing together a vibrant range of commercial, social and civic uses: a microcosm of the city in a small space. Cities around the world have experimented with pedestrianised streets and squares with promising success. As Singapore goes increasingly car-lite, such people-oriented spaces can become key features in our urban landscape, contributing towards an even more sustainable environment.

Looking ahead, can we find new ways to expand our current network of pedestrianised streets in Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam, into more fully realised, car-free, people-oriented districts full of life at street level?

Building inclusive communities and neighbourhoods

The integration of historic districts into the everyday fabric of urban life is fundamental to nurturing inclusive communities in these areas. Little India for example, is often cited as the most authentic of Singapore's historic districts: its temples and shophouses, its vibrant, bustling street atmosphere, and the variety, value and relevance of its businesses draw visitors and locals alike. Little India offers unique trades and services not commonly found in other parts of the city. Likewise, the traditional shops on Arab Street in Kampong Glam are renowned for their wide array of textile offerings, which differ from shop to shop. At the same time, nearby Haji Lane now teems with small "indie" retailers and food and beverage outlets.

Local business associations such as the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association or Chinatown Business Association have invested much effort into making festival occasions a lively time for their respective districts. But activities organised by independent operators are also playing a greater role. In Chinatown's Keong Saik Street, Urban Ventures (a ground-up placemaking initiative) has organised regular street closures, attracting people to the conservation district with fun events and F&B offerings.

Street closure along Keong Saik Street spearheaded by Urban Ventures
Source: © Urban Redevelopment Authority. All rights reserved.

Cultural institutions, by organising festivals, art markets and heritage trails in the historic districts, also help to build up awareness and a sense of community. The Indian Heritage Centre or the Malay Heritage Centre have injected life into the streets of Little India and Kampong Glam

respectively through their active programming, which features exhibitions, events and festivals that are closely related to the history, communities and stories associated with their respective historic districts.

On another front, the National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme has enabled state-owned buildings within the historic districts to be adapted for arts and cultural activities ranging from performing to the visual arts. These buildings, such as a row of historic shophouses at Kerbau Road in Little India's Arts Belt and another row of shophoues in Chinatown's Smith Street, now host cultural groups such as dance, drama and musical associations, and host activities ranging from workshops and

Creating car-lite historic zones

Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, has a comprehensive pedestrian network that is often cited as a model example of a car-lite city. Having evolved over time from a few streets in the historic core, this network now consists of some 99,770 sqm of walkable paths and bicycle lanes.[8] Visitorship to Copenhagen's historic downtown has since increased substantially. Historic cores in other European cities such as Vienna (Kärtnerstrasse and Graben) and Munich (Kaufingerstrasse and Neuhauserstrasse) are also successful examples. With easier access and greater space for interaction, more people are drawn to visit the historic districts and their attractions. This also helps to enhance public awareness of the city and its place in history, society and the hearts and minds of the people.

Renowned Danish architect and urbanist, Jan Gehl (b. 1936) explains: "We can see that in city after city where conditions for life on foot are improved, the extent of walking activities increases significantly. We also see even more extensive growth in social and recreational activities… better conditions for bicyclists invite more people to ride bikes, but by improving the conditions for pedestrians, we not only strengthen pedestrian traffic, we also – and most importantly – strengthen city life." [9]

Copenhagen's pedestrianised streets in the historic downtown forms a total network of 99,770 sq m. Source: Adriana @ www.flickr.com/photos/adrimcm/7397045600/

Vienna's famous pedestrianised street in Graben. Source: Szilveszter Farkas @ www.flickr.com/photos/szilveszter_farkas/251250344/

performances to the visual arts, providing unique opportunities for artists, audiences and visitors to interact, within these culturally important historic areas of the city.[9]

As these examples highlight how and varied programming, from the simple to the sophisticated, can bring vibrancy to community life in these districts, attracting visitors of different backgrounds and interests. Indeed, the vibrant historic districts of cities such as George Town, Penang, and New Orleans, USA have become well known destinations in their own right as well as for landmark events such as the George Town Festival and Mardi Gras, which are popular with locals and visitors alike.

Towards an integrated local planning approach to historic districts

How can we bring together historic buildings and public spaces, with both contemporary and traditional uses, in ways that nurture inclusive communities and vibrant neighbourhoods? Planning is crucial: how these districts, and their immediate surrounding areas, are planned for the long term will make a difference. Both hardware (e.g. buildings and infrastructure) and software (e.g. programming and social value) factors will determine how liveable and sustainable these districts remain. One key consideration is that historic districts thrive when there is a resident population within and around them. Initiatives that encourage more people to live in these districts may need to be introduced.

In Singapore's historic districts, the traditional mix of uses no longer exists: at present, they are geared mainly towards retail and commerce. The second floor of shophouses, historically used as housing, could yet be opened up to a new generation of younger residents. One possibility might be to introduce student housing into these areas, particularly in the vicinity of educational institutions. Land parcels zoned for residential use could also explore new housing typologies that integrate residents into the day-to-day fabric of these districts. Some cities also locate government offices in heritage buildings, ensuring that the uses of these buildings are not left entirely to market forces.

The injection of such newer developments into historic districts can also enhance liveability by providing more options for housing and job opportunities. This can reduce distances travelled between work and home, strengthen the neighbourly character of the district, bring new life into surrounding areas, and render the district as a whole, more walkable and pedestrian-friendly.

One approach to be explored could be appointing a team of local planners dedicated to historic districts and their surrounds to provide a more holistic planning approach so that these districts thrive further as part of our urban landscape. Such a team can provide a deeper ground-up understanding of how best to nurture the social, economic and cultural life of these districts. Instead of treating a historic neighbourhood as just another niche in the city, can we consider bringing essential city functions into historic neighbourhoods for them to thrive and remain relevant to everyday life?

Residents add life to historic districts

Many cities have found that having an anchor population resident in historic districts helps ensure a varied range of commercial activities and street life after working hours. The historic districts of Lyon in France and Barcelona in Spain, for example, have schools, child-care facilities, clinics and other day-to-day shops catering to their live-in populations,[11] who hail from a range of economic backgrounds. These cities use a variety of policy levers to provide affordable housing in or around historic neighbourhoods.

In New York City, an integrated local planning approach was taken around the High Line, which is an urban park connector on an abandoned elevated rail line. Through new zoning ordinances and community consultation, the historic Meatpacking District was rejuvenated with new residential units (across the price range), cultural institutions, and schools. At the same time, some of the original meatpacking industry buildings were retained and converted into commercial art galleries. This ground-up planning approach has succeeded in transforming the area into a dynamic, inclusive neighbourhood.[12]

View of New York City's Highline showing mixed use developments clustered around it.
Source: Michael Koh

Conclusion: a unique cityscape is our lasting legacy

A liveable city is one where a high quality of life, sustainable environment and competitive economy are made accessible to all its residents. Historic districts contribute towards the liveability, accessibility and attractiveness of a city. Conserved historic buildings and their related urban spaces help anchor a city's distinctive identity, providing residents with a sense of rootedness and civic pride, while also attracting visitors from afar.

Providing shared public spaces in these districts encourages interactions that nurture a thriving communal life and social integration. But all these outcomes call for the active and thoughtful participation of local planners and programmers, and effective partnerships between the public and private sectors, to ensure that the built environment can contribute to Singapore's liveability as a city, with authentic, thriving neighbourhoods and inclusive communities. We owe it to the generations of Singaporeans who have done so much to help build our city, to ensure that our unique cityscape becomes our lasting legacy. ☐

Notes:

1. Singapore's traditional shophouses represent a form of urban architecture with roots in the Raffles Town Plan of 1822, which stipulated that buildings in the settlement must be linked by an overhanging verandah that became known as the five-foot way. Traditional shophouses, which may be two or three storeys high, usually combined business and residential functions, with a shop or warehouse on the ground floor and rooms for the owner's family or tenants upstairs.
2. Urban Redevelopment Authority. *Conservation Guidelines.* Singapore, 2011. From www.ura.gov.sg/uol/uol/-/media/User%20Defined/URA%20Online/Guidelines/Conservation/Cons-Guidelines.pdf. Retrieved December 2016.
3. Lily Kong. *Conserving The Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore.* Singapore, 2011.
4. Ibid.
5. The first conservation areas, with a total of more than 3,200 buildings, to be gazetted as such in 1989 were: Chinatown (Telok Ayer, Kreta Ayer, Tanjong Pagar and Bukit Pasoh), Little India, Kampong Glam, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill.
6. David Dunlap. "A Landmark From the Start, Now Getting Its Official Due" in *The New York Times.* New York. 19 March 2008. Accessed 30 Jan 2017.
7. Commission on Chicago Landmarks. *Chicago Landmarks.* Chicago, 2016. From www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/zlup/Historic_Preservation/Publications/Chicago_Landmark_Name_List_Oct2016.pdf. Retrieved January 2017.
8. Gehl Architects, *Public Spaces in Copenhagen.* Copenhagen, 2010.
9. Jan Gehl. *Cities for People.* Washington DC, 2010, p. 19.
10. Lily Kong, Ching Chai-ho and Chou Tsu-Lung. *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities: Creating New Urban Landscapes in Asia.* Northampton, 2015, pp. 191 – 211.
11. Didier Repellin. Heritage and Sustainable Urbanism: Case Studies from France, Singapore and the Region [Lecture]. 5 May 2016.
12. Friends of the Highline. *About the High Line.* January 2017. From www.thehighline.org/about. Retrieved January 2017.

Arts, Culture and the Creative City

Dr Mathew Trinca

Director, National Museum of Australia
Co-Chair, Australia-Singapore Arts Group

I was recently asked to speak at a conference on the relationship of the creative arts to a wider policy agenda in Australia aimed at fostering innovation and the knowledge economy. Interestingly, the convenors of the session seemed intent on considering how the arts community might respond to the Australian Government's innovation agenda, promoted as a solution in part to the economic dislocations of globalisation and the rise of new technologies in the 21st century.

To be honest, I was a little nonplussed by the implication that the arts needed to become more innovative. Wasn't it a clear and evident truth, I said during the conference session, that the arts and cultural industries have by their very nature always strived to be innovative? Isn't invention at the very core of the artistic imagination? Surely we should see arts and cultural activity as being in the vanguard of the nation's creative enterprise and as drivers of the new economy?

It is fascinating that we can still surprise people with the argument that the arts and related fields are vital to the development of a creative economy. Perhaps this blindness stems from a persistent view in some quarters that arts and culture are somehow enjoyable "extracurricular" activities for those with time and money on their hands. Such people see the creative arts as "high cultural" pursuits that are the province of the educated elites. Nice to have, but not absolutely necessary.

On "creative cities"

You think we would all know better by now. For more than thirty years, for example, we have been thinking and talking about the idea of "creative cities". Since David Yencken (b. 1931), Professor Emeritus in landscape architecture at the University of Melbourne) coined the term in his 1988 essay in the journal *Meanjin*[1], a host of writers – notably scholar celebrities like Charles Landry (b. 1948), Richard Florida (b. 1957) and John Howkins (b. 1945) – have made much of the necessary connection between arts, culture and the broader creative capabilities of cities. Each of these scholars has described their own, expansive visions for the sustainable twenty-first century city, and all of them have identified arts and cultural activity as important facets of these urban centres.

That is not to say such theorists have all had the same view of the arts. Florida's argument in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*[2] was particularly focused on the idea that public sector support for arts and culture helped attract creative, highly educated and talented professionals to cities, which in turn drew businesses and capital investment. His ideas gained a strong following, particularly among urban planners. But Florida has also been criticised for encouraging an overly mechanistic approach to the power of the "creative class", and in turn invigorating an elitist view of the arts and cultural sectors as being somehow removed from the interests of the wider public.

I tend towards a broader conception of the way that cities and the arts enmesh and nourish the lives of their inhabitants, and thereby encourage creativity and creative enterprise more generally. This seems to me more suited to the age in which we live, which is characterised by the rise of a more democratic spirit in arts and cultural activity for all, and not just for educated, moneyed elites. This sees creativity as not the preserve of a particular class, but as something that emerges more generally in societies that are prepared to show value and invest in the arts and cultural enterprise.

Participants, not just consumers

We know this democratising force is at work because we feel it. No longer do people simply come to "consume" artistic products – whether in a gallery or museum, a theatre, or a music hall – and go home satisfied with what they have been given. Today, people want to be more actively involved and actually participate in arts and cultural experiences. Our visitors and audiences increasingly see themselves in dialogue with artistic producers, in ways that allow them to develop and to generate their own ideas, and not simply digest those prepared and presented to them.

If this democratic spirit has heralded a new participatory condition in the relationship between artists and their publics, then it has also widened the capacity of artistic and cultural endeavour to stimulate the broader knowledge economy. Broad scale participation in the arts collapses the distinctions between producers and consumers and encourages a wider range of people to think creatively and to express their ideas. This kind of ideational enfranchisement can help power our cities' economies.

The participatory turn is apposite given the rise of new digital technologies that have placed very powerful creative and communication tools in everybody's hands. Computers, tablets, mobile phones and social media have all given more people the means by which they can reach and engage publics. Anyone can get online and develop a constituency of interest for their work or artistic practice, as long as they can inspire and stimulate people. They can also build and communicate with a network irrespective of physical location in time and place. As a result of this, key arts institutions such as museums, galleries and libraries are more often absorbed in dialogue with audiences virtually, as much as physically.

A more challenging, but creative cultural landscape

If the idea of an emerging democratic and participatory mood in arts and cultural practice is transformative, it is also not without its accompanying challenges. In particular, it can be confronting for many arts professionals. Broad-based public involvement and participation in the sector has worked to diminish the claims of connoisseurship, and called into question the privileged, rarely contested role of the expert. In developing his manifesto for creative cities, for instance, Yencken argued that "the de-mystification of culture and high arts ought to be a major plank of arts policy – often the initiated would be as grateful for such demystification as the uninitiated."[3]

While the diminishing power of the expert might sound challenging, I think that these democratising forces are ultimately working in the long-term interests of museums, galleries, performance theatres and the like. Each of these key institutions in our cultural landscape is redescribing their relationships to audiences, and seeing themselves more as enablers and facilitators of experiences and information flows. Rather than acting as temples of high culture, such institutions have the chance to recast themselves as critical to embedding arts and cultural experiences in the daily life of our cities and urban centres. This potentially puts them

at the centre of policy efforts to inspire creative possibilities for all.

I see this spirit infusing what we do in my own institution, the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. All the visitor evaluation suggests that our audiences are drawn from a very wide range of socio-economic groups, and that they see the museum as their place. Moreover, the front-of-house staff tell me all the time that people come through the door intent on telling us what they know and speaking with the Museum and its staff, rather than simply consuming what we have to offer them. And if we are sometimes concerned by the stridency that enters public debates in this age, then I can think of no better antidote to that than encouraging people to engage in real two-way conversations.

The arts as central to creative cities

This is why the place of arts and culture in our lives has never been more important. At a time when changes in the global economy are redescribing the potential sources of our wealth and well-being, the work of inspiring broad publics to creative endeavour is uplifting for the life of our cities. It also holds promise for harnessing the potential of our people in the drive to develop new economies. This is not a vision of the arts as simply "ennobling" our civic culture, but as central to engaging and stimulating people from all walks of life to think, imagine and create in different ways. It also asks us to think of the arts not as "nice to have" add-ons to the main game of business and economic development, but as foundational to our future well-being and civic culture.

All this explains why I have been so delighted to see the arts acknowledged as central to the Australia-Singapore relationship, alongside our strong ties in defence and trade. Through the establishment of the Australia Singapore Arts Group, I hope our nations will draw closer together in developing our arts and cultural sectors in ways that involve the populations in both countries in the work we do. There is a great deal we can learn from each other as we transform the place of the arts and culture in the changing cities of the twenty-first century. □

This article is based on a speech given at the inaugural Australia-Singapore Arts Group meeting held at the National Museum of Singapore on 12 January 2017.

Notes:

1. David Yencken. The Creative City. *Meanjin,* Vol. 47, No. 4, Summer 1988.
2. Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life,* New York, 2004.
3. David Yencken. The Creative City. *Meanjin,* Vol. 47, No. 4, Summer 1988.

Connecting the Arts and Life:

The Role of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Benson Puah
Chief Executive Officer, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

In 2009, as the world battled an unprecedented financial crisis and tensions heightened with rising religious intolerance, we at Singapore's national performing arts centre decided we needed to do something reaffirming to bring calm and reflection to our people. We created a sacred music festival. We wanted to take sacred music out of the cloisters of different religious communities, put it on a secular platform and break down the barriers for people of different beliefs and faiths to be uplifted by great and stirring music. And the audiences came, totally struck by the common hopes and desires expressed in sacred music.

The festival, A Tapestry of Sacred Music, led one journalist to comment: "In this dour economic climate, a programme of sacred music that aims to purify and rejuvenate couldn't have come at a more timely moment."[1] Since then, for one weekend every April, the centre is filled with spiritual sounds, ranging from the rousing vocal improvisations of South Asian qawwali[2] singers to the tranquil chants of Tibetan Buddhist monks.

This festival is just one of many in Esplanade's year-round calendar. It is a demonstration of our vision to be an arts centre for everyone, as we believe that the arts can break down walls and instil an awareness of our shared humanity. Aside from serving our audiences, our other key role is to provide a platform for talented and illustrious artistes from Singapore and around the world, creating a safe space for artistic creation and social discourse.

Fareed Ayaz at A Tapestry of Sacred Music 2016
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

View of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay from Marina Bay
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Making people feel at home with the arts

Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay opened its doors on 12 October 2002. At that time, the arts were seen either as an exclusive or a fringe activity, and sceptics wondered if the arts centre would become a "white elephant". The last thing we wanted was to be a glittering but empty shell, underutilised by artistes and irrelevant to the various communities it was meant to serve. We wanted to be a living arts centre, alive with people who feel at home here. To that end, we activated whatever public spaces were available for performances, workshops, talks, film screenings and visual arts installations to ensure that at any time, anyone at Esplanade encounters art of some kind. These non-ticketed or free performances and art installations are staged every day throughout the year.

Even at Esplanade's Concert Hall, which is renowned internationally amongst artistes as an "acoustically perfect hall" and has been named one of the world's most beautiful concert halls, we programme free performances. This is in keeping with our determination to ensure that everyone can claim the space as their own and attend a concert there. For one Sunday afternoon every month, we put on a free concert by homegrown music groups for anyone to enjoy. We take care to make sure that a significant chunk of what we do is well within the reach of everyone – 70 percent of our performances are actually non-ticketed or free! So regardless of your background, anyone can walk into and around Esplanade and experience a diverse variety of arts. Over time, this has had a positive impact on the aesthetic sensibilities of audiences and frequent visitors.

For the first twelve years or so, we worked hard to develop a culture of attending concerts and

performances, as well as the capabilities of the arts industry in Singapore to put on shows of the highest quality. To date, more than 34,000 performances have taken place at Esplanade, drawing an audience of 24 million patrons and 88 million visitors. In 2011, famed Taiwanese choreographer Lin Hwai-Min (b. 1947) – whose Cloud Gate Dance Theatre has performed several times at the centre – would remark:

> "Esplanade brings in performances, the quality of which goes without saying, but I don't know if you have thoroughly observed the behaviour of the audience at Esplanade. They are not only there to watch performances – whether it is the whole family having French cuisine, friends having beer together, (parents) bringing their kids to buy an ice cream, or just wandering around the centre; these behaviours, be it before or after performances, always seem natural and full of joy… A performing arts centre such as Esplanade is very rare elsewhere in the world. It represents an 'ecosystem' where arts & culture and life can coexist, and it's teeming with life."[3]

The making of a national performing arts centre

This essay looks at the strategies we took to serve our diverse communities through the arts and, in the process, make the arts a part of Singaporeans' lives. This essay also explores the challenges that lie ahead; as Singapore changes, so must Esplanade think of new ways to deepen the roots of the arts in society.

It is now widely accepted that culture helps to build resilient and liveable cities. *Culture: Urban Future,* a report by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), a broad survey of the cultural practices of some 200 countries including Singapore, found that "culture lies at the heart of urban renewal and innovation" and is a "strategic asset for creating cities that are more inclusive, creative and sustainable", as noted by Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO.[4]

Singapore came to the realisation back in the mid-1980s that fostering a vibrant arts and cultural scene would help talented individuals feel at home here. In 1989, a high-level committee chaired by then Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong (1936-2002) produced the seminal Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. It led to the establishment of several national arts institutions, such as the National Arts Council, and the plans to develop a national performing arts centre that became the Esplanade.

The Singapore government recognised that as with performing arts centres in other countries, Esplanade would require long-term funding to contribute to the goal of a creative, vibrant society. However, unlike other arts centres which are set up as public bodies, Esplanade was set up as a not-for-profit company with charity status, subject to the disciplines of both a business and a charitable organisation. This was to keep us on our toes, so we would not be overly reliant on public funding. As a result, the work of running Esplanade requires careful negotiation between social, artistic and financial considerations.

Festivals as the building blocks of our programming

The multicultural, multilingual nature of Singapore's society, coupled with the wide range of socio-economic groups and differing tastes, meant that Esplanade programmes must reflect this diversity. Early on, we decided that presenting arts events in a festival format gave audiences a certain focus and intensity of experiences, which translates into excitement and buzz. A festival can also contain a range of ticketed and non-ticketed performances, workshops for families, masterclasses for artistes, and talks for the curious that would allow people from all walks of life to come together. Each festival targets a different audience or community segment or is dedicated to one art form. In one year at Esplanade, you can participate in cultural festivals which bring together the various ethnic communities through the arts; genre festivals dedicated to specific art forms; family, children and youth programmes, as well as community outreach and free programmes. One would be hard pressed to find another arts centre in the world with such a broad remit.

Our cultural festivals are the bedrock of our annual calendar. These comprise: Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts which is held during the Lunar New Year period; Kalaa Utsavam – Indian Festival of Arts held in conjunction with Deepavali; Moonfest – A Mid-Autumn Celebration during the Mid-Autumn Festival, and Pesta Raya – Malay Festival of Arts, held during the Hari Raya Puasa period.[5] We wanted to integrate our programmes with how communities in Singapore celebrate

Pesta Raya 2015
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts 2016
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Kalaa Utsavam 2015
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

key occasions. Collectively, these festivals create conversations about our identity and heritage, and at the same time provide opportunities for Singaporeans of different ethnic backgrounds to learn about each other's culture and connect with the region. The theatre productions in our cultural festivals have English surtitles so that they can be understood by the majority of Singaporeans. We also organise introductory talks and workshops on different facets of each culture, from traditional art forms to food. When we commissioned market research consultancy Blackbox to do a survey of our audiences in 2015/2016, we found that a growing proportion of audiences at our festivals were of a different cultural background from the art works headlining the festival.

At our genre festivals, we seek to whet the appetite of those totally new to an art form, while also offering more discerning fare for culture vultures. Our programmes cater to audiences with different levels of art appreciation, and in this way, we have seen our audiences grow with our festivals. Take the example of da:ns festival, launched in 2006. For the last ten years, the festival has presented premier dance companies from around the world and Singapore and nurtured a community of dance lovers – audiences, those who just enjoy dancing, and festival volunteers. At the 2016 festival, we had Batsheva Dance Company of Israel, which has won a following around the world for its sensuously explosive brand of contemporary dance. Arts-goers in Singapore are attuned to its work because the company had performed twice before at Esplanade. A reviewer in The Straits Times noted that Batsheva "brought the house down in rock concert style with its performance, *Decadance*. The audience lapped up every single moment".[6]

At the other end of the contemporary dance spectrum, in terms of accessibility, was the renowned Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch from Germany, whose performance at the same festival marked a return to Singapore after forty years. Its performance of a seminal work, *Nelken*, had some audiences scratching their heads at its non-linear narrative and spoken word fragments which overturn many expectations of dance. In the same festival, Singapore dance company Chowk's *The Second Sunrise*, a work commissioned by the festival, broke down boundaries between classical *odissi* (a traditional dance form from Odisha, formerly Orissa, India) and contemporary dance. By programming these different elements and perspectives, we seek not only to entertain but also to surprise and be thought provoking. At the free performances and outdoor mass dance sessions, people are exposed to hip hop, salsa, tango and a range of traditional dances from Asia.

Developing and supporting artistic talents

Behind the excitement of our festivals is another critical aspect of our programming – the relationships with both homegrown and foreign performers. Particularly for Singapore artistes and arts companies, through our programmes, we try to take their art to another level. Take our 14-year-old indie music festival Baybeats, with its focus on homegrown indie bands. Notable Singapore bands it has featured include Anechois, Disco Hue and Sphaeras, which have gone on to play elsewhere in Asia or open for prominent regional bands. The mentorship of bands and their showcasing at Baybeats are slowly but surely changing the perception among many ordinary Singaporeans that local music is "not good enough". In 2013,

CNN Travel called Baybeats "Southeast Asia's premier alternative music festival" and put it on its list of "50 greatest summer music festivals" alongside England's famed Glastonbury Festival and Japan's Fuji Rock Festival.[7]

Another opportunity for developing artistes is through the commissioning, producing and presentation of new work. At Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts in 2012, one reviewer cited *One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0*, a collaboration between Hong Kong director Danny Yung (b. 1943) and Singapore's Drama Box. She noted that while Huayi has "built up a following for the leading lights of Chinese contemporary arts", what would "prove more significant for Singapore theatre" in the long term was that "Drama Box, a Mandarin theatre group known mainly for text-based plays, was able to hone its physical theatre skills on this wordless production".[8]

These presentations and commissions are often based on an understanding of the artiste or company's artistic development, built not only through Esplanade's festivals. Instead, it can start from opportunities for Singapore musicians to play at non-ticketed performances at Esplanade's Concourse or Outdoor Theatre, productions at our various cultural or art form series throughout the year, or through collaborations on festivals presented by the arts companies themselves. Over the years, we have partnered Apsaras Arts for Dance India, Era Dance Company for their Muara Festival, T.H.E Dance Company for their M1 CONTACT Contemporary Dance Festival, and The Necessary Stage for their M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

Embracing all demographics

In recent years, we have also heightened our focus on three groups of audiences: the young, seniors and underprivileged communities. With the young, it is not so much about building audiences for the future, than it is about how the arts are integral to children developing their sense of imagination, empathy, confidence and identity. At our cultural festivals, we programme workshops and performances for children so that our next generation can make their own connections with Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures. That aside, the little ones have their own festival tailor-made for them, Octoburst! – A Children's Festival. With schools, our Feed Your Imagination series integrates the arts into various aspects of the school curriculum, while the Limelight series gives promising school bands and choirs the unforgettable experience of performing in our Concert Hall. There was so much more that we felt we could do, including developing the capabilities of arts practitioners who are passionate about young audiences, that in 2011, we set up a dedicated education unit in our Programming department.

At the other end of the age spectrum, seniors have special programmes dedicated to them at Esplanade, such as A Date with Friends. This is an annual festival of music and theatre performances celebrating the songs of yesteryear, delving into experiences that the elderly can relate to, and providing a platform for our seniors to perform. Every month, the Coffee Morning & Afternoon Tea performances of evergreen music provide an occasion for seniors to gather with friends, reminisce and enjoy being at the arts centre. Over the years, this series of concerts has even reunited

many musicians, including some currently living overseas. It is very precious to have our veteran musicians like The Stray Dogs, Black Dog Bone and The Meltones reconnect at Esplanade and to watch our senior audiences spontaneously clap, sing and even dance to their music.

We are also asking ourselves how we can be more inclusive, not only to different cultures and age groups, but to people with different needs and abilities. We believe that anyone, regardless of circumstance, should be able to feel the joy, inspiration and healing that the arts can bring. Since the early years of the centre, we have worked closely with voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) to serve the underprivileged. In 2013, we formed a dedicated community engagement unit in the Programming department.

Every year, we reach out to some 10,000 VWO beneficiaries, including children, youth, those with special needs, seniors and migrant workers through arts performances and workshops. The numbers, however, do not tell the whole story of how the arts can touch lives. During our 2016 National Day Celebrations, we presented *Home, Sweet Home – A Migrant Worker Showcase,* where a group of Indonesian domestic workers collaborated with a Singapore vocal coach to put on a performance. They had an opportunity to work with a professional artist and share with Singaporeans, in a free performance at our Concourse, their longing for home through music. It was quite a moving experience for all, particularly when the Indonesian group sang Dick Lee's *Home*, a National Day song that resonates with many Singaporeans. "The first time we introduced the song *Home* to (the Indonesians), they were already crying, because it has such a deep meaning for them. Some have not been home for eight years," said Angelina Choo, their vocal coach.[9]

Working together with artists who have some training or background in community engagement, many of us at Esplanade have witnessed first-hand how the arts can impact the young, the elderly and the underserved in specific and helpful ways. Young children can hone their imaginative powers, language skills and empathy for the weak and vulnerable through theatre. Elderly participants of our arts workshops have told us that learning a new craft or art form helped improve their motor skills, boosted their self-esteem and made them feel young again.

Overall, it is about making sure that our arts centre is welcoming to all and leaves no one behind. In 2016, we started producing sensory friendly performances for children with special needs during our PLAYtime! series. These shows have been modified to be brightly lit and have no sudden or loud sounds that could alarm those with special needs, who can move around or leave the venue at any time. In a post dated 6 December 2016 on the Friends of ASD Families Facebook group (ASD stands for Autism Spectrum Disorders), a mother thanked Esplanade for "the strides (it) has taken" in accommodating those like her son, who are usually viewed as disruptive when they react in shock and confusion to various stimuli. "Inclusion starts with participation. Thank you Esplanade, for walking the talk with the genuine steps you have been taking," she wrote.

Going beyond our four walls

After fourteen years, Esplanade has reached a point where it is recognised as a national icon, and its fundamentals as a performing arts centre are strong. We have a diverse calendar that connects us

to schools, families, seniors and arts lovers, and we are constantly reaching out to underserved groups in society so that they too can be rejuvenated by the arts. We have solid venue management and programming capabilities, which we impart through different training programmes, and we have built up the international networks to pull off major presentations and co-productions.

Fundraising and partnerships are critical to our next phase, where we want to encourage more ownership of what we do from all levels of society. Every year, to supplement our commercial income, we receive grants from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and Singapore Totalisator Board (Tote Board).[10] However, there is also the expectation that Esplanade should be increasingly less reliant on public funding in meeting its recurring funding needs.

To do more, we hope that more individuals can contribute to our mission and activities. For example, our community engagement team is looking for sponsors and donors to support worthwhile projects. We have piloted some of these projects, such as a singing project for seniors with Tote Board's grants, and are ready to take these projects to even more beneficiaries. We have developed dance programmes for the elderly, and are ready to develop a new dance programme for children with special needs with a donor's support.

Each time frail or elderly VWO beneficiaries are hosted at Esplanade to performances and workshops, we need volunteers to assist our staff in making their visit a comfortable one. The time is ripe for deeper ownership of the arts and cultural scene among Singaporeans. Overall appreciation of the arts and culture is at its highest level since 2005 – with 41 percent of the respondents to the 2015 National Population Survey on the Arts indicating their interest in it, up 13 percentage points from 2013.[11] But the economic uncertainties ahead may dampen the propensity to give, making it a challenge to woo corporate sponsors and individual donors.

Another challenge is engaging youth aged 13 to 26. We have built up one generation of arts-goers, what about the next? The reality is that Generations Y and Z – as millennials and today's teenagers have respectively been dubbed – have very different habits and expectations from older audiences. The latter may be accustomed to the house lights coming down during a performance, absolute silence, and certainly no photography. Enter young digital natives weaned on social media and smart phones, who want Wi-Fi-enabled and brighter spaces, as well as the freedom to snap images of the performance and share it instantly on their social feeds. To meet these new demands, we have relaxed our house rules for certain types of performances. For example, during free programmes held in the Esplanade Theatre or Concert Hall as well as ticketed school performances, photography without flash is allowed, and during curtain calls for many of our performances, we encourage audiences to snap and share their experience. In 2016, we also launched our Annexe Studio, a new raw performance and rehearsal space targeted at older teens and 20-somethings. Converted from a nightclub, the space is suitable for casual, late-night and open-mic sessions.

We also want to go beyond the four walls of the centre to engage digitally savvy audiences well before and long after a performance, as many arts centres elsewhere are starting to do. This entails using tools such as live streaming of shows in our venues, either online or on video screens in public spaces around Esplanade. We have a wealth of

content at our disposal; our archives, for example, contain everything from video recordings of performances and post-show dialogues to house programmes documenting the creation of a work. We are looking at how we can produce insightful behind-the-scenes or educational videos and other materials that can appeal to arts lovers and students. These materials can turn our Esplanade website into a content-rich arts resource, supplementing the actual experience of our festivals and programmes, as well as extending our reach beyond them.

Finally, we are looking at how we can better support artistic creation given the maturing arts scene in Singapore and Asia. Works created for mid-sized theatres currently make up about 80 percent of all works produced for major festivals. In Singapore, there is a lack of such spaces which can seat between 500 and 900 people. While there were mid-sized spaces in Phase II of the arts centre's original architectural blueprint, these have yet to be realised. To this end, Esplanade has launched a project to build a mid-sized waterfront theatre. Such a theatre would allow Esplanade to develop a wider range of programmes for the young, given that our existing venues are already fully utilised. It would also enable us to work closely with both Singapore and regional artistes to create productions with touring potential, particularly in contemporary dance and theatre and in Asian traditional arts. Although we are already producing such shows in our small studios, there is a need to transpose these works to a mid-sized venue to reach more people and have greater impact.

Whether in aspiring to do more in engaging underprivileged communities, or striving to become a leading producer of new performing arts works in the region, Esplanade's vision and mission remain the same. We are a performing arts centre for everyone and we seek to entertain, engage, educate and inspire. We want to bring different communities together to express themselves through the arts, as well as find comfort, joy and introspection through it. Doing that effectively requires new strategies in our next phase of growth. The danger facing any institution is thinking that once you have arrived in a port of call, you can safely dock and drop your anchor. As we enter our fifteenth anniversary year in 2017, we at Esplanade are still on the move, because we know that more than anything else, we need to stay relevant to the artistes and audiences we serve. ☐

Notes:

1. Clara Chow. "Music of love, peace and hope" in *My Paper,* 30 April 2009, p. A24
2. Deriving its name from the Arabic word *qaul,* meaning "to speak", *Qawwali* is a Sufi devotional music with origins in ancient Islamic poetry that is popular in parts of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.
3. Wang Yiming. "Books circle" in *Lianhe Zaobao,* 4 December 2011, p. 21.
4. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Culture Urban Future: Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development.* Paris, 2016, p. 5.
5. The Esplanade's series of festivals coincide with some of Singapore's most important cultural celebrations. The Lunar New Year marks the beginning of the New Year according to the lunar calendar and usually falls in January or February. Deepavali (also known as Diwali), which usually falls in October, is the Hindu Festival of Lights which celebrates the victory of good over the forces of evil and darkness. It is also celebrated by the Sikh and Jain communities. The Mid-Autumn Festival takes place during the middle of the eight lunar month and is celebrated with displays of lanterns and the giving and eating of mooncakes. Hari Raya Puasa (also known as Hari Raya Aidilfitri or Eid) is a festival that marks the end of the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan*.
6. Lee Mun Wai. "Gaga didn't quite blow the mind away" in *The Straits Times,* 24 October 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/gaga-didnt-quite-blow-the-mind-away
7. Jade Bremner. "50 greatest summer music festivals" in *CNN Travel,* 10 June 2013, http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/play/worlds-50-best-summer-music-festivals-008106/
8. Clarissa Oon. "Rocky revolution road" in *The Straits Times,* 9 February 2012, p. C8.
9. Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. "Home, Sweet Home. Migrant Worker Project. (June – August 2016). Video. Singapore, 2016.
10. The Tote Board is a statutory board under Singapore's Ministry of Finance that manages the donation of surplus funds generated from the operations of the Singapore Turf Club and Singapore Pools. These funds are donated to the community and charities for activities that benefit the nation.
11. National Arts Council. "Population survey on the Arts 2015". Singapore, 2016, https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/research/population-survey.html

Home Truly:

The Role of the Arts in Making a Country Home

Paul Tan
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One of my most abiding memories in my leisure travels is visiting the small islands in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan. This is a clutch of islands in a rural part of Japan in between the city of Okayama and the large island of Shikoku. Previously an under-the-radar destination among art aficionados, these isles have in recent years become popular with general tourists looking for a unique experience focused on art and culture, coupled with the assurance of quality Japanese hospitality and cuisine.

What struck me on my brief visit to that region was how art has been integrated into these islands and how this process has been instrumental in revitalising local communities. These were islands which faced a raft of problems – depopulation, the loss of a farming economy and even environmental degradation. Today, there are small museums, public art installations and art trails found everywhere – particularly on the islands of Naoshima, Teshima and Shodoshima – and old buildings and industrial sites have been repurposed to house fascinating and visually arresting artworks.

Anyone who has visited the islands would have interacted with elderly island residents acting as docents in arts spaces, or serving in cafes and bed-and-breakfast establishments. When one reflects on the local history of these islands, it is nothing short of amazing how art has activated all typologies of spaces and brought back life to the region, generating economic activity and bringing a sense of purpose and optimism to the local communities. Given the charge that the contemporary art is an elite enterprise which alienates the average man on the street, there is something refreshing in hearing an elderly local – possibly a farmer in an earlier part of his life – explain how one could interact with an artwork.

The art installation *In the Stillness* transformed a classroom in Shodoshima into a "garden" with a huge cloud-like sculpture.
Image courtesy of Shingo Kanagawa

From one island to another: a Singaporean artist in Shodoshima

The islands also play host to a well-regarded contemporary arts festival, the Setouchi Triennale, which sees temporary site-specific artworks installed across the islandscape. First organised in 2010 and running for about eight months each time, the Triennale was last held in 2016.

With the support of the National Arts Council (NAC), Singapore's independent arts centre The Substation and artist Grace Tan (b. 1979) took part in the 2013 edition of this visual arts festival. Tan's work, titled *In the Stillness*, transformed a classroom in a defunct school on Shodoshima with a huge cloud-like sculpture made of two million polypropylene loop pins. (These are the plastic bits you see in a department store which attach price tags to apparel.)

Tan, who spent about three weeks in Japan, spoke of how the work was constructed with the help of volunteers from Fukuda town, involving residents ranging from kindergarten and high school students to nursing home residents. They would spend time creating the sculpture bit by bit in the community centre or at other local sites, drinking tea and sharing local snacks. Tan spoke of the warm ties that resulted from time spent together and how the completed work attracted Triennale visitors, who also got to enjoy the food specially prepared in the makeshift café within the defunct school. (Parallel to the art-making were workshops which taught local residents how to cook Southeast Asian dishes such as chicken rice and prawn noodles.)

It is heartening that a Singaporean artist like Tan can create work which resonates on so many levels, in both critical reception and social outcomes. It is a reminder of the power of good art. I suspect though, that in all likelihood, such broadly transformative arts projects are more the exceptions than the norm, across the globe.

School children viewing the installation.
Image courtesy of Fukuda Residents' Association

Close-up of the sculpture made out of two million polypropylene loop pins.
Image courtesy of Artist

Volunteers from a local nursing home helping to construct the sculpture.
Image courtesy of Fukuda Residents' Association

The arts in Singapore: a diverse heritage and audience

As the agency that champions the arts, NAC has to acknowledge that art in Singapore is created with different artistic intentions for diverse audiences.

Singapore is a modern cosmopolitan country with a multi-ethnic, multi-religious heritage. This means we have artistic traditions that go back centuries as well as an open attitude towards external ideas. For sure, these circumstances create for a complex art-making and reception in a relatively young nation.

Borrowing the lingo from the marketing world, one could say that potential consumer base for the arts in Singapore can be divided into discrete describable segments. Each segment has different attitudes and expectations of the arts, responds to different stimuli and thus, needs to be addressed differently, if NAC wants Singaporeans to embrace the arts.

Our most recent population survey in 2015[1] revealed that while eight in ten Singaporeans attended an arts event, in reality, only four in ten expressed an interest in the arts. It could mean, I remarked to colleagues in a moment of levity, that half the people who encountered the arts in 2015 – perhaps a free performance or exhibition in a public space – were dragged there reluctantly by family members, or had experienced the arts "accidentally" on a weekend errand run.

The statistics underline the fact that the appreciation of the arts is in its nascent state in Singapore. But when taken together with the upward trend of important indicators, it gives us in NAC some comfort. Things can only get better in the longer term. This is especially so when we consider today's opportunities for arts exposure in our public schools. There is also increasing recognition that young people should chase their dreams and that there are many possible pathways to become a contributing member of society.

Art for all audiences and ages

For today's artists, there is little doubt that the base of interested audiences and arts appreciators (the four in ten Singaporeans) is indeed a varied one. For every serious collector of conceptual art who visits international art fairs and enjoys in-depth discourse about art, there is someone who derives an uncomplicated aesthetic pleasure from a beautiful watercolour painting. For every audience member who is willing to shell top dollar for a hard-hitting stage drama on a difficult topic, there is someone who is happy to hear beautifully harmonised pop songs, reprised from his youth. For every reader of serious poetry and follower of the vibrant literary scene, there is a parent hunting for accessible children's stories for his mobile-device addicted child.

With this demographic diversity, which we at NAC are trying to understand better, as well as the variety of art forms in Singapore practised here, NAC's support of the arts need to be multi-dimensional. We will need to cater to audiences who are encountering the arts for the first time, as much as we need to champion artists who are presenting art which well-informed arts lovers expect of a global cultural city.

For us to deepen the level of arts appreciation, there is the need for the arts to be relevant or accessible for first-timers, with the aim of helping them build a foundation of understanding and importantly, a love for the arts. This must be the only sustainable way to broaden the base of Singaporean audiences, readers and arts collectors in the long term.

Fortunately, there are many artists in Singapore like Grace who can develop work which can be accessed at different levels and who are interested to reach out to the community in the process of artistic creation. There are also many seasoned programmers, curators, and producers who know how to build bridges between the artwork and the audience, who know how to mediate that tricky space between artistic intention and critical reception. We can do more in this area, for sure.

Pushing boundaries and awkward questions

While we have said Singapore's art scene is still relatively young, there is no denying that the last decade has seen a dynamic growth in the range and quality of cultural offerings. There is a plethora of quality art which reflects our diverse communities, recognises our local contexts and poses thoughtful questions. We have, for instance, enjoyed theatre that uses humour to talk about integration of new immigrants, experienced installation art that expresses the hope of prisoners waiting for their day of release, and read poetry that mourns the loss of local landmarks and captures a forgotten way of life. This vibrant scene has not gone unnoticed internationally with both international tourists and expatriates appreciating the sea change.

At the same time, there is a need to remember that art is not about the lowest common denominator. We cannot assess the merit of the arts based on the numbers of audiences, or exhibition attendees, or books sales. If we did, we will not support poetry, vernacular theatre, experimental performance art, or contemporary dance. Niche, we should not be shy to declare, is not a bad word in itself.

Of course, some Singaporeans will like their art immediate, not taxing or overly cerebral. They just want a good evening out after a demanding work day, or a stress-free excursion during the weekend with the children in tow. We have to respect that art serves that role too, and NAC must strongly support such endeavours.

In the same breath, it also needs to be said that we must also continue to support artworks that challenge boundaries or pose awkward questions. We should not be afraid. If the play on stage pokes fun of us as Singaporeans, may we have the grace to laugh it off, recognise our foibles and think about the merit of the critique. If the music sounds strange at the first listening, or the novel seems too difficult in the first few pages, may we have the patience to persist a little longer and give the artist that consideration. If we do not like the work in the end, may we have the generosity not to generalise about all home grown artworks.

Such works do reflect the polyphony of artistic voices in Singapore, even if at an individual level, we may not take a shine to some of these works. More often than not, they are unique to our island and collectively express perspectives on life here, ultimately adding to and enriching our growing national canon.

Singapore, I am sure readers will agree, will be poorer if we did not support such art forms.

Art in making a country home

My personal wish for the next few years is to see more arts in the heartlands (the public housing estates which most Singaporeans call home) and for artists to keep creating works which have universal appeal but are yet locally anchored and to showcase more works that welcome multiple responses. Critically, I hope to see more Singaporeans who understand that art, in all its forms and voices, is relevant to their lives, their sense of self and their well-being. When that happens, there would be greater recognition of the role of the artist in society, including a ready willingness to support the arts as patrons, collectors, ticket-buyers and volunteers.

With the present uncertainty in global geopolitics and gloomy talk of protracted slow growth, there should also be a recognition, however unquantifiable it may seem, that an appreciation of and participation in the arts too have a part to play in the future economy of this island. The creative mind does not belong only to the artist. An engaged arts lover will have the intellectual curiosity and nimbleness of a creative disposition: an individual who can imagine broader horizons and may be better able to respond to challenges created by the disruptions" that we see in the market today.

In this age of global connectivity and unprecedented movement of peoples, some have responded to the accompanying anxieties by looking inward or raising barriers. Singapore, as a port city and trading hub that has prospered by being open to ideas and people, cannot afford to do that. While we must be chary of over-instrumentalising and simplistic reductionism, the truth is that the artworks that are being created in Singapore are uniquely placed to speak to our citizens and residents. They can capture, channel and reimagine the lives of residents in a way that an imported Broadway musical or a work by an international writer cannot.

The understanding and connections forged by such art can indeed be a bulwark against the vicissitudes of uncertain times or the anxieties of a borderless cyber world.

What art can do is to root the Singaporean youth who is still finding his or her voice and provide a link, through imagination, to their forbears and a physical landscape that has been lost. It can also create a sense of empathy for the people we encounter in our midst – from the unhappy domestic worker to the newly retrenched office manager or the child from a new immigrant family.

At the end of the day, what makes a country home? The answer must lie beyond physical trappings, gleaming buildings and state-of-the-art infrastructure. The bedrock of that home must be in its social fabric – its people, the relationships they have with each other and the experiences they build in the common spaces they share. The arts and culture form a vital part of this fabric and there is so much potential yet unlocked.

On the one hand, Singaporeans can remember the lump in the throat when an entire stadium sings in unison to Cultural Medallion recipient Dick Lee's song *Home*.[2] But what else is out there? What artworks can articulate what we know, remember and treasure about our world; capture the struggles and milestones of a young nation; and ultimately, help us see ourselves and the world beyond? What new visions of the future can inspire us? If we want a glimpse of the answers, we should all support our artists as they imagine those possibilities and together celebrate the works they create. ☐

Notes:

1. Population Survey on the Arts 2015 by the National Arts Council. Singapore, 2016.
2. Composed by Dick Lee (b. 1956) and first performed by singer Kit Chan (b. 1972) during the 1998 National Day Parade (NDP), *Home* has become one of the most well-loved NDP songs. The title of this essay also draws from a line in the song which goes: "This is home truly, where I know I must be."

Diversity at a Port City in Southeast Asia:

The Case of Singapore in the Fourteenth Century

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Research on the history of Singapore in the fourteenth century, when the first documented settlement on the island came into existence, is very rich. Since the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, there has been a persistent effort to bring light to the pre-colonial history of Singapore through textual research, art historical discourse, and more recently, through archaeological research. The result has been that we have a rich depiction of the fourteenth century world in Singapore, which provide the backdrop for the Malay traditional stories, such as those recounted in the *Sejarah Melayu* ("Malay Annals"), as well as Chinese accounts that we now know so well.

Temasik: a cosmopolitan settlement?

Indeed, the late Paul Wheatley (1921-1999), an eminent historical geographer and scholar of pre-modern Southeast Asian urbanism, noted in the 1960s that Temasik, the fourteenth century settlement located at the mouth of the Singapore River, was perhaps one of the port-cities in the Malacca Straits region with the richest historical textual information related to it.[1] From an urban historical point of view, there is a combination of information on the inhabitants' ethnic backgrounds, the nature of the trade that took place, the nature of its politics, and the descriptions of the built features of the settlement – all these point to Temasik as a thriving urban centre that was engaged with the external world, both regionally as well as further afield.

Over the last thirty years, archaeological research has demonstrated that the settlement was prolific, maintaining a fairly high level of material cultural consumption and economic production. The broad range of imported and locally produced items, including ceramics, metalware, foodstuffs, and even coins, to name but a few types of artefacts recovered, along with the different values that were inherent in these finds, indicate that the consumption patterns of the inhabitants of Singapore in the fourteenth century were varied and complex. Taken together, the historical and archaeological records provide glimpses of what must have been a cosmopolitan society, if not in terms of the different ethnic groups that composed the population at large, then at least in terms of their tastes, activities and customs.

Temasik, from this perspective, appears to have been a well-connected urban centre. Yet consumption patterns alone can be a fairly superficial means of determining and characterising cosmopolitanism. The outward display of a cosmopolitan culture, made apparent by such visible attributes as the things that people would use, and even such tangible practices as the food that is consumed, is only one aspect of what could be a broader and deeper diversity that may be reflected in how the settlement functioned, how it subsisted and survived, and how it saw itself as a cultural identity.

This paper will endeavour to assess these three aspects of cosmopolitanism by looking at the settlement's trading and consumption patterns; the possible agricultural practices and activities that the inhabitants maintained, and the aesthetics and religious practices developed by the population.

Diversity as a port of trade: the case of Chinese ceramics

Through the fourteenth century, Temasik maintained a small but vibrant trade with the external world. The archaeological recoveries from more than ten excavations in the area north of the Singapore River, including excavations at Empress Place, the Padang, the former Supreme Court building (now the National Gallery), and the old Parliament House (now The Arts House), to name but a few, have produced a material cultural record that demonstrates that Temasik imported a wide variety of foreign products.

As an example, ceramics imported by Temasik, which were primarily high-fired types made in China, ranged from cheaper examples made in provincial kilns located around the port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou, to rarer examples from kilns located further north along the Chinese coastline, such as at Jiangxi and Jiangsu. There were also expensive ceramics from such national kilns as Jingdezhen (Jiangxi), Dehua (Fujian Province) and Longquan (Zhejiang Province).

The different sources of Chinese ceramics at Temasik reflected the settlement's aesthetic diversity at a number of levels. On the one hand, the aesthetic experience of an end user, when he or she handled a ceramic, would have differed significantly depending on the type of material used. Ceramic bodies were of different types, resulting in different weight or densities. The different glazes, including the colour, degree of transparency or opacity, as well as tactile characteristics such as the smoothness or roughness of the glaze, all contribute to the different aesthetic experiences of the use of these ceramics.

Ceramics also reflect the different values that the inhabitants of Temasik were able to support and appreciate. While bowls and plates were the normal forms of ceramics that were imported, there were also other, more unique, forms. The latter included large celadon (a grey-green glaze) platters that were exported to the Middle East, small figurines such as Bodhisattvas in Qingbai (a blue-white colour) glaze, and white-glazed figurines of a couple in a copulating position, mounted on the inside of a small ceramic box. This range of artefacts reflect the diversity of consumer preferences and usage that were present in Temasik, which included utilitarian, religious, ceremonial and even entertainment purposes. The values and religious outlook of the inhabitants would have been fairly diverse to have made the importation of such a range of forms and items possible.

Clues to Temasik's culinary culture

Other than reflecting the tastes and consumption patterns of imported ceramics, ceramic finds also provide a glimpse of the possible culinary practices of Temasik's inhabitants. Storage jars, both earthenware and high-fired stoneware, have been recovered from all excavated sites. While earthenware jars come from neighbouring areas, including north Sumatra, Borneo and South Thailand,[2] the high-fired stoneware jars come from further afield, primarily the south Chinese coastal provinces.[3] Such jars were often not exported on their own, but were used as containers to ship smaller ceramics as well as foodstuffs.

None of the storage jars recovered from Singapore have any of the original foodstuff remains in them. However, shipwrecks from the region, including the Belitung wreck (ninth century), Pulau Buaya wreck (early twelfth century), and Turiang wreck (late fourteenth century), contain storage jars filled with foodstuffs.[4] These finds from shipwrecks suggest that similar culinary ingredients were imported by Temasik's inhabitants during the fourteenth century. The types of storage jars recovered in Singapore are similar to those recovered from these shipwrecks.

As an example, two types of storage jars found in abundance in Singapore – mercury jars (round-bodied jars with narrow bases and small mouths that were used to store dense liquids such as mercury and rice wine) and Jiangxi purple-clay jars – were likely to have been containers that originally contained glutinous rice wine produced in South Fujian and sauces from Jiangxi respectively in the fourteenth century. Larger jars, such as those produced in the vicinity of the Chinese port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou, would have contained preserved foodstuffs that were known to have been produced in the immediate agricultural hinterlands of these port cities, including fish and vegetables.[5]

It has to be understood that all of these are postulations based on the archaeological record of storage ceramics. Nonetheless, it is likely that the population of Temasik used substantial quantities and varieties of imported foodstuffs to complement the local production of food supplies. The use of imported food ingredients hint at the possibility of familiarity with these culinary ingredients, which in turn would suggest that different foreign influences were present in Temasik and affected the culinary consumption patterns of its inhabitants. This situation possibly led to either a diversity of culinary traditions present, or a hybridised culinary culture that adopted aspects of different culinary cultures that found their way to Singapore.

Agricultural practices and food sustainability in ancient Singapore

Because Temasik has traditionally been studied in the framework of a Malay port city, it has always been assumed that the bulk of its inhabitants' food supplies was imported from abroad. The Malacca Sultanate (1400-1511), along with the Johor Sultanate that succeeded Malacca, have frequently served as the model of sustainability. While the hinterland of the port city of Malacca yielded produce such as fruits and possibly some cereals, the supply was clearly insufficient to sustain approximately ten to thirty thousand people, which was the size of Malacca's population at its peak during the fifteenth century, during the high trading seasons of the year.[6] Instead, such staples as rice were imported from such places as Ayutthaya (Thailand) and Majapahit (Java). Malacca's role as a Malay regional trade hub enabled it to import such staples for its own needs, as well as to redistribute the surplus to other port cities in the region.

Temasik was not in the same position as the Malacca Sultanate. There were a few possible sources of cereal staples that Temasik could have tapped into. Java would have been one, as would have been the Gulf of Siam littoral, including Sukhothai in the early fourteenth century and Ayutthaya in the later part of the century. However, trade in the Malay world in the fourteenth century was a lot more dispersed than it would be in the fifteenth century, and while it is possible that cereals such as rice could have been supplied to Temasik on a consistent basis, the

ability of the port-city to attract regular supplies of rice may have been lower than in later periods. The absence of larger ports in the Malay region with connections to the major rice producing states of Southeast Asia also suggests that Temasik did not have a network of nearby ports that it could tap into for supplies of cereal staples as did Malay ports of the pre-fourteenth and post-fourteenth century eras.

At the same time, Temasik's population was likely much smaller than Malacca's. In a previous study on the reconstruction of Temasik, it has been proposed that the inhabited land area north of the Singapore River was approximately 54,000 square meters, or fifty-four hectares.[7] This excluded the land area of Fort Canning Hill, which was also occupied during that time, and represents the plain area at the southern foot of the hill. Such an occupied land area would have seen around five hundred to two thousand people as a possible population base for the settlement, similar to the population base of Malacca in the first decade of its existence following its inception in 1405.

The ability to ensure a sustainable food supply would have been important to the survival and well-being of the inhabitants of ancient Singapore. The absence of a broad range or volume of local products that could be traded externally, coupled with the relatively high material cultural standard of living exhibited by the archaeological record, suggests that the population was able to sustain itself to some extent, without having to divert all of its trade earnings towards purchasing food from abroad.

Could Temasik have had agricultural lands? One of the most important built features of that time was the moat, or freshwater rivulet, that stretched for approximately one kilometre from the shoreline (which then lapped the eastern fringe of the Padang) towards the eastern foot of Fort Canning Hill in a southeast to northwest direction, corresponding closely to the course of Stamford Road up until the 1990s, when the road was redirected. Early 1820s maps of Singapore town show that the moat would have served as a catchment, drawing water from Fort Canning Hill and several other hills in the vicinity, including Mount Sophia, Selegie Hill and the hills which today form the grounds of the Istana.[8]

Similar to the moated irrigation systems built in the Gulf of Siam and Central Thailand during the first and second millennia, such as at Satingpra, Nakhon Si Thamarat, U Thong and Nakhon Pathom,[9] water from nearby hills could have been used to develop agriculture in the northern vicinity of the moat in Singapore. The irrigation would have enabled Temasik's inhabitants to develop rice or other cereal agriculture in the area bound by present-day Stamford Road and Bras Basah Road.[10] Research into the paleo-geology of this area indicates that clay with substantial organic material formed the soil stratification of this land.[11] This soil characteristic has been demonstrated to be ideal for rice cultivation.[12] In fact, cereal production at Temasik was alluded to by such visitors as Wang Dayuan (1311-1350), who noted that agriculture took place in the settlement, although the fields were not fertile, and the productivity low.[13]

Other built structures point to a concerted effort at developing and maintaining agricultural lands in Singapore. An earth rampart, named "The Old Malay Lines" by the British in the 1820s before it was demolished, pre-dates the nineteenth century. Built along the northwestern to eastern foothill of Fort Canning Hill, it would have had the effect of stemming systematic soil erosion and enhancing ground moisture retention on the northeastern slope of the hill, corresponding to where the National Museum is located today. Such soil

retention would have supported agriculture on the northeastern slope of the hill. This is similar to the soil retention techniques utilised at settlements such as Khao Sam Kheo and Si Pamuntung.[14] The northeastern slope of the hill would have been suitable for sustained agriculture, as well as the construction of buildings, evidenced by the presence of brick foundations that were witnessed by John Crawfurd (1783-1868), Singapore's second British Resident, in 1822.[15]

The building of a rampart and moat suggests that agricultural influences in Temasik may have originated from the Gulf of Siam region, possibly alluding to either a sustained exchange between Singapore and the Gulf of Siam littoral, or an extension of the Gulf of Siam cultural sphere southwards into the southern end of the Malay Peninsula during this period.

Aesthetics and religion

As a cultural centre, Temasik's population would have produced, imported and appropriated, and exhibited cultural characteristics, which changed over time to reflect the nature of its population base, and the interaction that this population would have had with the external world. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of material that would provide an impression of the cultural aesthetics of Temasik.

In the case of the large bulk of the archaeological remains unearthed so far, it is not evident that specific tastes were articulated to the producers and procurers of the imported material culture, with a corresponding manifestation of unique tastes being reflected in the visual and physical attributes of the objects that were then brought into Singapore. Similarly, it is difficult, in the absence of a more secure and detailed framework of analysis, to develop a sense of the aesthetic productions by the inhabitants of Singapore. In other words, we may be able to elucidate aesthetic consumption as a reactive activity, but not aesthetic production as an active aspect of the cultural production of Temasik.

As a case in point, it may be possible to develop a taxonomy of the decorative motifs seen on the earthenware sherds recovered. Nonetheless, these motifs were reflective more of the island Southeast Asian, and specifically the Malacca Straits littoral, aesthetics that accompanied the production of such ceramic wares, than necessarily of local aesthetics or even an appreciation for imported aesthetics.

Brick foundations: a Buddhist pattern?

At the same time, several archaeological remains from the period do provide a glimpse of the possible aesthetic production carried out by the inhabitants of Singapore. To begin with, in Crawfurd's account of Fort Canning Hill, he noted that the eastern and northern slopes of the hill were dotted with brick platforms that did not have any superstructures over them.[16] There was apparently no spatial order or logic to the location of these built forms. This suggests that what Crawfurd was witnessing were likely the remains of the culmination of a series of building projects that took place organically, and over a long period of time.

Two points could be elucidated from Crawfurd's observation. Firstly, the geographical distribution of the brick foundation tradition is primarily located in the Malacca Straits region. Sites that

have such remains include Si Pamutung (north Sumatra), South Kedah (Peninsular Malaysia), Takuapa (south Thailand), and the east coast of Isthmus of Kra in Thailand.[17] This regional pattern suggests that the inhabitants of Singapore who built the brick platforms on Fort Canning Hill were likely inspired by similar architectural practices evident in the north Malacca Straits and Isthmus of Kra, or included individuals with architectural skills who had hailed from these places.

Secondly, the practice of building individual religious structures over a long period of time, likely a collective act of merit making, stands in contrast to a singular building project to create a cosmological setting, which would have been a political project. The former practice has similarities with cultural traditions in Southeast Asia that adhered to Buddhism, including Bagan (modern day Myanmar), sites of the Dvaravati tradition in Central Thailand, and sites along Isthmus of Kra belonging to the first half of the second millennium AD.

Javanese influences

Other evidence, however, point to aesthetic production that may have been influenced by other cultural spheres. The Singapore Stone, which was discovered on the southern tip of the south bank of the Singapore River in June 1819, was a ten-foot high sandstone boulder split in half, containing writing on the inside surface of the split. A surviving fragment of this stone, which was blown up into smaller pieces in 1843 when the British sought to widen the river mouth, can be seen in the Singapore History Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore.

The Singapore Stone, discovered at the south bank of the Singapore River in 1819.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

J. G. de Casparis (1916-2002), a philologist of ancient Southeast Asian languages, has suggested that the language on the stone appears to have been a variant of Old Javanese, with a possible date of around the tenth to twelfth centuries.[18] Boechari (1927-1991), an eminent Indonesian epigraphist and historian, has suggested that the language was possibly Sanskrit, a language used in Sumatra, with a date of no later than the twelfth century.[19] Whatever written language influence that Temasik may have come under, however minimally, appears to have been from the Indonesian Archipelago, and more specifically the regional power of Majapahit in Java.

The cultural influence of Java may also be seen in a number of metal objects recovered from Temasik-period sites in Singapore in particular the cache of gold jewellery that was recovered from Fort Canning Hill in the 1920s.[20] The use of the goose motif on one of the rings is reminiscent of Javanese decorative arts up to the fifteenth century. Along the same lines, the use of the *kala* (a lion-headed Javanese demon) head on the gold wrist band is reminiscent of the *kala* head that is well-known in contemporaneous Javanese decorative arts. Archaeologist P. V. van Stein Callenfels (1883-1938) has suggested that the decorative icons on

Gold jewellery recovered from Fort Canning in the 1920s.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

Lead figurine of a male rider on a horse recovered from Empress Place in 1998.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

the jewellery, in particular the *kala* head motif, mirrors the best in fourteenth century Javanese gold craftsmanship. Finally, a lead figurine of a male rider on a horse was recovered from Empress Place near the mouth of the Singapore River in 1998. The figurine is similar to the ones that have been recovered from Majapahit sites in East Java.

Cultural diversity and hybridity in Temasik: sources and issues

The above aspects of consumption and production is only a glimpse into the way of life in Singapore in the fourteenth century. Foreigners traversing the Malacca Straits region have, through the centuries and millennia, been fascinated by the ways of life maintained by the region's inhabitants. In the case of Temasik, such descriptions have been noted in the account of Wang Dayuan, a Chinese merchant who travelled in this region during the first decades of the fourteenth century.

Wang's account mentions three groups of people resident in Singapore during that time – orang laut or "sea peoples", land-based natives, and a group of South Chinese who were resident at the settlement at Keppel Straits[21] (the narrow channel between Telok Blangah and present-day Sentosa Island). The presence of Chinese at Keppel Straits has often been cited by scholars of Temasik as a sign of cultural diversity, and possibly the first Chinese record of an overseas Chinese population in Southeast Asia.[22]

Notwithstanding the merits of such arguments, two issues pertaining to ethnic diversity and the notion of cosmopolitanism of an urban centre, come to mind. Firstly, while ethnic diversity can be gauged from the number of groups of people resident in a settlement, sojourning alone does not in and of itself contribute to the benefits that diversity could bring to a place and its people. In other words, the mere presence of non-locals amongst the native population does not imply

that the local culture – and its attendant practices and traditions, methods of survival, as well as its behaviours and responses that foreigners may note anthropologically as differences – would be influenced or fundamentally affected and changed. The notion of equating ethnic group identity with population diversity has its roots in colonialism and port-city management, in earlier eras of the coastal Chinese port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou, during the early period of European incursion into Asian port cities as Nagasaki and Macau, and in European colonial cities and territorial holdings from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries.[23]

Instead, diversity may be elucidated: in terms of the specificity of consumption patterns, and of the key practices and activities of the population. In terms of consumption, one would expect that the impact of diversity would be evident from the range of specific foreign products that was imported by the settlement. Herein, specific tastes, including visual aesthetics, as well as tactile tastes, would be exhibited by the degree of consistency in the range of products demanded over a significant period of time.

For example, where the range of ceramics imported from China remained fairly consistent over the course of the fourteenth century, the archaeological record would suggest that a taste for such Chinese ceramic was quickly acquired by the population of Temasik and remained a part of their ceramic consumption taste for around a century. Similarly, the consistency of the range of storage jars recovered, suggests that the Chinese products stored in these jars, including foodstuffs and liquids such as wine and sauces, were very quickly incorporated into the culinary palate of the people of Temasik, and thence consistently demanded and imported over the course of the fourteenth century.

Herein, cultural absorption and hybridisation would have been the outcome of a diversity borne out of interaction between the local population of Singapore and those who brought different consumption patterns and tastes to the settlement. However, it is not possible to extrapolate the ethnic backgrounds involved as represented by the material cultural remains that have thus far been recovered. One can only assume that ethnic diversity was inherent in the initial interactions between the local population and the foreign groups that brought these materials, which eventually led to the development of a hybrid culture.

External discourse versus local exchanges

Cultural absorption and hybridisation were not the only dynamics at play. There is no other evidence of writing apart from the inscription on the Singapore Stone, and no gold jewellery other than the cache recovered from Fort Canning Hill in the 1920s. This suggests that certain cultural elements, such as writing and craftsmanship of high value metalwork, all of which have social-elite connotations, were extremely limited in terms of how widespread they were practiced by the population. One could argue that these examples highlight the regional cultural sphere within which Temasik found itself and therefore was a part of. But a counter argument could in fact be made that the exclusivity of these cultural elements, coupled with their extremely limited occurrence in Temasik, precludes them primarily as elements of external articulation to a specific external audience, as opposed to being elements of internal articulation and discourse.

In other words, in the absence of any correlation with elements of internal social dialogue – such as building structures and layout of built forms, local written traditions or ritual practices, or even the adoption of similar craftsmanship in the production of lower value articles made of different materials – these specific elements of high culture, having originated from a specific external culture (in this case, the Javanese cultural sphere), would have only been understood by, and relevant to, that specific foreign culture at the appropriately high socio-political level there. Rather than internalisation and hybridisation, the writing on the Singapore Stone and the gold jewellery from Fort Canning Hill would represent high cultural distinction and interaction with the outside world.

The vital practices maintained by the general population of Temasik would have denoted ethnicity. The construction of brick foundations (possibly religious buildings) occurring in an unplanned matter over a long period of time, as well as the building of the fresh water moat and earth rampart possibly for agricultural purposes, strongly hint to the possibility that for the population of Singapore, religious practices and urban survival strategies were more closely aligned with settlements in the Gulf of Siam and Isthmus of Kra.

It is not possible to determine if this alignment was the result of the movement and settling of people from the Gulf of Siam and Isthmus of Kra southwards to Singapore Island, or if it represented a transfer of cultural knowledge from one group to another. However, the fundamental importance of the built structures to the population of Temasik, given the scale of these structures in relation to the size of the Temasik settlement, suggests that unlike language or the aesthetics of precious metal objects, these civil engineering practices were likely shared and undertaken by the whole of the settlement's population. The common culture, at least in this important regard, would have been Tai than Malay. Again, though, this may not be synonymous with Singapore's inhabitants being ethnically Tai, but rather, that the practices evident suggest the possibility of an internalised and hybridised culture.

Diversity and liveability in fourteenth century Singapore

This paper has sought to demonstrate that Temasik was likely a diverse community. Bound within a physically constrained space, and coupled with opportunities for interaction with the external world, the resulting adoption of external cultural traits enabled the population to develop a hybridised culture of its own, possibly distinct from the ethnic groups that were present in the area around Singapore at that time.

At least in the case of Temasik, diversity did not necessarily contribute to its liveability of as a value-added aspect or an enhancement in the intangible quality of life, along the lines of how the liveability of world cities and major urban centres have been defined by urban geographers and sociologists over the last four decades.[24] Instead, diversity was likely to have been one factor that contributed to the mosaic mix of strategies that enabled the settlement to become liveable, and therefore to remain viable for a significant period of time. ☐

Notes:

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6. Armando Cortesao. *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires and the Book of Francisco Rodrigues, 2 vols. London, 1944, p. 238.*
7. Derek Heng. "Temasik as an International and Regional Trading Port in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries" in *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society,* 72, 1, 1999, pp. 122.
8. Built in 1869 as Government House, the Istana ("palace" in Malay) originally functioned as the residence of the British Governor. When Singapore gained internal self-rule in 1959, the building was renamed Istana and housed Singapore's Head of State, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara. Since 1965, when Singapore became fully independent, the Istana has served as the official residence of the President.
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19. John Miksic. *Archaeological Research on the "Forbidden Hill" of Singapore: Excavations at Fort Canning, 1984.* Singapore, 1985, p. 13.
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21. Su. *Daoyi zhilue,* p. 213.
22. John Miksic. *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300 – 1800.* Singapore, 2013, p. 23.
23. Hugh R. Clark. *Community, Trade and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century.* Cambridge, 1991); Derek Heng. "Shipping, Customs Procedures and the Foreign Community: The *Pingzhou ketan* on Three Aspects of Guangzhou's Maritime Economy in the Late Eleventh Century AD" in *Journal of Song Yuan Studies,* 38, 2008, pp. 1 – 38; Roderich Ptak. "China's Medieval *fanfang* – A Model for Macau under the Ming?", *AHAM,* 2, 2001, p. 47 – 71; A. J. Christopher. "The quest for a census of the British Empire c.1840–1940" in *Journal of Historical Geography,* 34, 2, 2008, pp. 268 – 285; Charles Hirschman. "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications" in *Journal of Asian Studies,* 46, 3, 1987, pp. 555 – 582
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Going Home:

Negotiating Identity in Tang Da Wu's Art

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In a public conversation in the Japanese city of Fukuoka in 1999, Tang Da Wu, then on a six-month residency with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, and Japanese art historian Masahiro Ushiroshoji (b. 1954) discussed Tang's shift in identity from Chinese to "something else".[1] Elaborating on this matter, Ushiroshoji noted that Tang was born in 1943, when Singapore was occupied by the Japanese; hence he was at first Japanese. (Tang has even made a work titled *I was born Japanese*.) The British returned to Singapore in 1945, so Tang then became British. In 1963, Singapore formed part of newly-independent Malaysia, before separating in 1965, so Tang was subsequently also Malaysian, and then Singaporean.[2]

Tang moved to London in 1969 and lived there for twenty years, except for a one-year stay in Singapore between 1979 and 1980 (when he made and exhibited *Earth Work* at the former National Museum Art Gallery).[3] In a recorded conversation with the curators and volunteers at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM), also during his 1999 residency, Tang spoke broadly about his life in London and his current stay in Fukuoka. With rare candour, he talked about his personal life, including his loneliness and lack of close friends in Japan, how much he missed being away from his son, as well as about his previous marriage to British artist Hazel McIntosh.[4]

Tang Da Wu's art practice is often discussed in relation to social and environmental issues. However, it is seldom considered with respect to his personal history and identity, as touched on in the conversations described in the opening of this essay. This paper aims to contribute to the existing knowledge of Tang's practice through a detailed analysis of two key performances, *...and the Pants Remain* and *Home*, which have not been studied to date. Both performances took place during his 1999 residency at FAAM. This essay concludes by positioning these works within Tang's broader practice.

Tang Da Wu is a contemporary artist who has become an iconic figure in the art scene in both Singapore and elsewhere in Asia. He is the founder of The Artists' Village in 1988, an experimental and multidisciplinary collective of artists that was Singapore's first artists' colony. Tang is particularly known for his performance and installation artworks, many of which employ mythological narratives to discuss social and environmental issues.

The "social" works

Following the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in what is now Ukraine, Tang Da Wu began addressing social and ecological issues in his art, believing that art should provoke discussion instead of merely providing aesthetic pleasure or entertainment. Between 1989 and 1991, he made three key works addressing the practice of animal poaching. All three works are held in the Singapore National Collection and have played a major role in informing the general understanding and perception of Tang's artistic practice.

They Poach the Rhino, Chop Off His Horn and Make This Drink was made in 1989 as a response to the hunting of rhinoceroses for their horns for use in traditional Chinese medicine. A combination of performance and installation, the work comprises a life-sized papier-mâché rhino laid on the floor, ringed by bottles of liquid medicine. The rhino's fragility is emphasised by its construction from paper and glue, and its horn is missing. A white axe, placed on the floor alongside, alludes to the rhino's impending extinction.

The second work, *Tiger's Whip*, was made in 1991, and continued to address the implications of man's actions in driving the extinction of an entire species. In this work, Tang constructed ten tigers from linen and wire, positioning them around a large wooden bed. He performed with this installation in front of medicine halls in Singapore's Chinatown which sold tonics made from tiger penises for their supposed aphrodisiac qualities. The following year, he made *Under the Table, All Going One Direction*, which referenced the unrestrained hunting of crocodiles for their skin in the production of leather goods.

Tang Da Wu, *Tiger's Whip*
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

Tang Da Wu, *Just In Case*
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

These three works have been widely discussed by scholars and curators, and *Tiger's Whip* and *Under the Table* have been exhibited several times at the Singapore Art Museum. Together with works such as *Tapioca Friendship Project* (1995), which appealed for friendship between Japan and Singapore despite the history of the Japanese Occupation[5]; *Just in Case* (1991), which looked at the way justice has been denied in Myanmar; and *Don't Give Money to the Arts* (1995), which commented on the place of the arts in Singapore society, it is unsurprising that Tang is regularly

Tang Da Wu, *Don't Give Money to the Arts*
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

thought of as an artist who engages mainly with social and political issues.[6] However, this framing does not account for many of his works, including several paintings recently acquired by National Gallery Singapore, which I will discuss towards the end of this essay.

…and the Pants Remain and Home

Tang presented five performances during his 1999 residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. I will focus on two in particular: *…and the Pants Remain*, performed on 20 November, and *Home*, performed on 4 December.[7]

…and the Pants Remain took place in the Artist's Gallery, a large rectangular space in the museum. It began with Tang running up and down the length of the gallery, balancing a long wooden beam on his head. Repeatedly crying out, "What do you want?", he leapt and hurled himself against the white gallery walls, arms grasping futilely for something above his head. In the centre of the space, leaning against the wall, was another pair of long wooden beams: hanging from one was a long-sleeved red shirt; from the other, a pair of pants.[8]

In the first half of the performance, Tang put on the red shirt and pretended to be Santa Claus. Carrying a large white bag, he went around the audience, asking them what they wanted for Christmas and drawing whatever they stated onto the white bag. In the second half of the performance, Tang removed the red shirt and hung it back on the end of the beam. Balancing the beam on his shoulders, he ran after the shirt, telling it, "Don't go away from me!" He finally "caught" the shirt and brought it back to the middle of the gallery, proceeding to do the same with the beam carrying the pants, telling it, "I go where I want to go". Finally, he carried both beams, with the shirt hanging in front of him and the pants behind him. "Where my legs go, where my body goes, where my heart goes. Make up your mind! What do you want?". Stumbling around the gallery, Tang repeated variations of these phrases, as the shirt pulled him in one direction and the pants in the other. Finally, he lifts up the white bag full of "things" and tries to bring it home with the red shirt, but the pants insist on going in another direction.

It is clear that the performance deals with Tang's struggles with his divided identity. If the red outfit is a symbol of Tang's body, then the separation of the shirt and the pants could refer to his dilemma on where to live: London or Singapore. It could also refer to his roles as a father and an artist, which might entail conflicting desires. Similarly, the reference to Christmas is also linked to the idea of family, such as being home for Christmas. However, Tang would be spending Christmas in Japan that year, away from his friends and family.

In the performance, he literally asks the audience: "Where should I go? Follow my head or follow my heart?" and tells himself to "make up your mind!" In the end, he solves the problem by sawing the wooden beam into two to bring the shirt and pants closer together and calls it a "compromise". But clearly, it is not much of a real solution and he finally leaves the pants behind, telling himself to "never settle" even if "you can't have both". The performance ends with Tang cutting up pieces of the outfit and giving them to the audience.

Home, on the other hand, is a more literal presentation of Tang's desire to find "home". Performed in the same space, Tang created several "homes" ranging from paper tents to a cardboard house, similar to what homeless people use on the streets. During the performance, Tang lamented: "I want a home" and "I still can't find a house". In his search, he drew different elements of a home onto the cardboard – a door and windows, even a cat and a Christmas tree. He also invited the audience to enter his structures and draw their representations of home. At the end of the performance, with all the homes "filled" with objects, Tang ran frantically between his different homes and cried "Home, come back!".[9] Again, we see Tang's dilemma in choosing between his lives in London, Singapore and perhaps even Japan. The performance also asks the audience to think about what makes a home: material possessions or perhaps something more intangible.

Both performances expressed Tang's current struggles with his life. But more than that, through his engagement with the audience, typical of his performance practice, he also provoked wider reflection on familial relationships, identity and even materialism. His interest in such issues can also be seen in the series of public workshops he conducted as part of a project called "My Life". Held over seven sessions with different participants, Tang invited people to take photographs that expressed themselves and described their personal histories. Thus it seems clear that his work in Fukuoka was not merely an outlet for his own loneliness, but a broader investigation of human relations. This led to a series of powerful performances that could translate well between cultures.

dA dA bAA bAA and *sofA sonAA*

In 2016, National Gallery Singapore acquired two paintings by Tang made in 1986, the year that his son, Zai Tang, was born. Painted in London, the paintings express his struggles with his decision to stay in the UK. *dA dA bAA bAA* depicts Tang and a goat, which is another representation of himself. (The goat is his Chinese zodiac animal.) It is an expressionist self-portrait that depicts the artist almost collapsing beneath a goat bound within a red frame. The grey background and dripping paint streaks adds to the feeling of melancholy. The second painting sheds more light on his feelings during this period: *sofA sonAA* shows Tang's giant hand moving towards the Union Jack. The Chinese characters running across the painting read 近山远水, meaning "near to the mountain, far from the water". Here, Tang's mountain is artistic success, for which he studied and subsequently stayed in the UK, while water represents his home and his friends in Singapore. His hand is nearing that mountain, yet he still feels torn about being away from Singapore. Tang, of course, chose to return to Singapore in 1988 and continues to commute between the two cities.

I offer these two examples to show that Tang's Fukuoka performances were not a sudden shift in his practice, nor an aberration. Even in the 1980s,

he was already expressing a certain introspection through his works, including his longstanding internal dilemma about his home. (Until today, he maintains residences in both London and Singapore.) Such works give us an insight into Tang's life and therefore, might then provide a better understanding of his other works. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the personal and social aspects of his work are not mutually exclusive. Tang acknowledges that much of his interest in social issues arose during his time in London, and it was also in London that he felt most "Chinese".[10] The relationship between his self-identity and his practice is a complicated one and deserves more attention. Unfortunately, many of his performances presented overseas, for example, are not well-known in Singapore, and hundreds of his paintings, particularly in Chinese ink, remain completely un-documented. Given Tang's extremely prolific artistic practice, spanning over four decades, much still remains to be done in terms of cataloguing and analysing his work. I hope that this essay, in some small way, goes towards addressing this lack. □

Charmaine Toh is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Melbourne. Her research in Fukuoka was made possible through the Cultural Diplomacy Fund established by Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth in 2014.

Notes:

1. Fast Moving Asian Contemporary Art: Tang Da Wu and His Works. http://www.asianmonth.com/prize/english/lecture/pdf/10_05.pdf. Accessed on 1 March 2017.
2. In my conversation with Masahiro Ushiroshoji on 28 August 2016, he explained that Tang had described himself as having these four nationalities when they had met in Singapore in 1990.
3. More on *Earth Work* is discussed in my essay "Notes on Earth Work" in *Earth Work 1979* (exh. cat., National Gallery Singapore, 2016).
4. The interview is kept with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
5. *Tapioca Friendship Project* was inaugurated on 15 February 1995, the fifty-third anniversary of Singapore's surrender to the Japanese during the Second World War.
6. The latter two works are also in the National Collection.
7. The other performances were *I think about it* on 12 November 1999 and *I came back for it* on 29 February 2000, both at the Enjoy Space Daimyo, and *Ghost* on 12 March 2000 at Ajibi Hall
8. A full video recording of this performance is kept in the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
9. A full video recording of this performance is kept with the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum archives.
10. Fast Moving Asian Contemporary Art: Tang Da Wu and His Works. http://www.asianmonth.com/prize/english/lecture/pdf/10_05.pdf. Accessed on 1 March 2017.