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Creative Placemaking as a Policy and a Practice of Urban Regeneration in Singapore: Negotiating Power Relations and Forging Partnerships in Civic Society

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ABSTRACT

Existing research of emerging urban paradigms like heritage activism, placemaking and other creative interventions establishes a strong link between urban cultural production and emerging forms of civic participation in East and Southeast Asia, marking the shift in relationships between states and civic societies. Although prosperous Singapore with its tightly controlled urban planning and cultural policies is spared of many issues that have been targeted by urban regeneration initiatives elsewhere in Asian cities, placemaking has been firmly established as a government-led policy and a practice since some 10 years ago. By unpacking multiple factors involved in creation of its current momentum in Singapore and mapping out its evolving placemaking landscape along with the key social, economic, spatial and cultural conditions and policies that continue to form the setting for local placemaking practices, the paper argues that uncontested leadership of government agencies resulted in the initiatives mainly serving the broad national agenda rather than localizing social and spatial regeneration impact by focusing on concrete issues and interests of communities and local stakeholders. Unsurprisingly, this entices a shift in the scope of placemaking missions and effectively discourages community and private sector stewardship. The paper, however, suggests that there are several existing opportunities for creative placemaking in Singapore to gradually develop into a more inclusive and truly participatory practice.
INTRODUCTION

This research was inspired by the proceedings of the Asia Research Institute's (ARI) conference “Remapping Arts, Heritage and Cultural Production: Between Policies and Practices in East and Southeast Asian Cities” that took place in August 2017, bringing together current and compelling research at the critical intersection of cultural policies, urban governance and emerging creative practices. Acknowledging the many differences in existing state-society relationships and the various roles arts and culture have been playing in the ongoing transformation of social and physical landscapes across Asian cities of all tiers, conference speakers such as De Baukelaer, Bruhn, Huang, Lee and others established a strong link between urban cultural production and emerging forms of civic participation, marking the shift in relationships between states and civic societies. Emerging urban paradigms like urban acupuncture, placemaking, heritage activism and other strategies discussed at the conference are increasingly transforming existing relationships between local communities, public spaces and culture in East and Southeast Asia. The authors approached these evolving paradigms as means of social production of space that, embracing new forms of activism and partnerships, create spaces of hope for Asian cities in need of revival and for communities inhabiting them.

Placemaking is a fairly complex and a relatively novel concept for Asia, and as such it perhaps needs a brief introduction at the very beginning of this paper. Placemaking first originated in the 1960s in the United States as a community-centered urban revitalization strategy, and has further evolved as a standalone practice and an urban development policy within a broad discourse of culture-led regeneration in European countries. By the early 2000s placemaking and creative placemaking, which developed as a continuation of existing place-based artistic practices to serve placemaking agenda, provided a timely response to both the shrinkage of state funding to non-profit arts sector (Frenette 335) and the growing role of communities in local governance, the latter best exemplified by a newly created institute of community planners. Currently creative placemaking is defined as an overarching idea and a hands-on approach where “partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, city, or region around arts and cultural activities (Markusen 3). Being a powerful community-centered transformative practice, it supports economic development of the area, encourages community engagement, builds resiliency, and improves quality of life (Bennett). Its impact on urban and social fabric is considered wider than that of traditional government-initiated mega-projects: although placemaking occurs on smaller scale, it allows targeting specific social or economic issues of concrete urban area in a more timely manner, with greater flexibility and less resources required (Lerner). The methods employed by creative placemakers include a range of temporary and permanent transformations from development of cultural districts and creative cluster to pop-up public art and artist residences in local communities, but, as stressed by Borrup, the important difference of placemaking from the development of art and cultural sectors is that in the former, art forms function rather as a catalyst for community and area revitalization, than as the center of attention (1, 6).

Singapore, an affluent city-state with its excellent infrastructure and tightly controlled urban planning, is spared of such issues as crime levels, unemployment or physical dereliction that have been targeted by culture-led urban regeneration initiatives in cities like Taipei and Yogyakarta. However, placemaking has become an official government policy in Singapore for the last decade, driven by an agenda that remains specific to the local socio-economic and cultural environment: injecting much-needed vibrancy in over-regulated and somewhat “sterile” public spaces, localizing the infrastructure and cultural activities to ensure social and cultural sustainability (Kong 83), and promoting nation building. Having initially led and fully funded the initiatives, recently the public sector started to encourage greater ownership of placemaking initiatives by private stakeholders’
groups and organizations, most recently by institutionalizing private-public partnerships in placemaking initiatives to “move towards stakeholders-led place management” (Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority, or URA). Nevertheless, the extent of direct involvement in and ownership of placemaking initiatives by local resident communities appears to somewhat lag behind official policymaking rhetoric. The primary intention of this working paper is an attempt to discuss how Singapore’s specific policymaking rationale and implementation models shape the placemaking agenda and the resulting power relations between the state as a principal placemaker, Singapore’s private sector and local communities. Documenting and critically evaluating their roles and linking placemaking initiatives rationale to Singapore’s wider national agenda, eventually the author is interested in understanding how heavily the dialogue between the state and the civic society is regulated in placemaking, and can the policies and the government-led processes truly enable desired positive social, spatial and economic effects.

Placemaking, a complex interdisciplinary concept and a fairly current phenomenon in Singapore, is scarcely documented in the mainstream academic literature, therefore in order to arrive to sufficiently sound conclusions about the core agenda in the use of placemaking for urban regeneration and the benefactors of this agenda, the author feels it’s most fitting to start the discussion by mapping out major placemaking stakeholders and evolving private-public partnerships and viewing them in the context of socio-political, economic and spatial factors of Singapore environment. The author hopes to identify key players’ motifs and roles, as well as to zero in on most notable controversies that are almost inevitable at the early stages of developing new forms of relationship between public sector, communities and private business that placemaking essentially entails, but that can potentially become a chronic and state of a failed cross-sector dialogue.

Drawing together conceptual discussions of the placemaking concept and critically unpacking multiple factors involved in creation of the current momentum for placemaking in Singapore, such as its specific social, political and spatial condition and policies, the paper interrogates the linkage between the roles of the government, those of civic society, existing environment and policies and prevailing methods and rationale of placemaking initiatives.

Placemaking can well be one of the approaches to production and transformation of space that, as discussed by Perera in “Transforming Asian Cities: Intellectual Impasse, Asianizing Space, and Emerging Translocalities”, creatively combine local, Western and global understanding and experience, but, nevertheless, are firmly rooted in local cultures and conditions. An attempt to investigate and conceptualize the placemaking environment in Singapore, an economic powerhouse where there is a clear political will towards placemaking as an urban renewal or city making strategy, is merely an attempt to take a closer look at this multi-layered combination.

Structurally, the paper consists of four parts. The first part forms the necessary context for subsequent discussion of Singapore placemaking practices, by briefly introducing key agents of the evolution of placemaking practices in the West and in Asian, as well as by highlighting the community-centered nature of the placemaking approach and the strong correlation between the multiplicity of its missions, relations of power and resulting cross-sector partnerships between public, private and non-profit sectors. This first part may appear rather lengthy for a working paper, however the author believes that providing sufficient context here is essential considering not only the relative novelty of the placemaking concept and its variations in Asia but also the inherent entanglement of Western frameworks and complex local macro conditions, defining the variety of local placemaking practices. The author would like to avoid making direct comparisons between the Western theory and the local practices as it does not account for a wide range of possible variation of the same urban regeneration strategy, so the main purpose of the first chapter is to look into what is it that makes placemaking so powerful and whose interests it is meant to serve. My second chapter discusses the
process of policy making behind Singapore’s placemaking initiatives by mapping out placemaking ecosystem, major stakeholders and the key areas of Singapore’s macro environment and policies that continue to form the setting for local placemaking practices. Demonstrating connections between the national policies, placemaking agenda and micro-level initiatives, the analysis in this chapter underpins the evaluation of Singapore’s socio-political, economic and cultural environment with examples of concrete implications of government policies for evolution of relations of power in placemaking context. The concluding chapter summarizes findings and the discussion on the key characteristics of placemaking as a policy and a practice in Singapore, and suggests a number of directions the approach can take to eliminate some current contradictions between the objectives and the methods of placemaking in the city-state.

Research for this paper included interviews with Singapore participatory design consultants, arts and cultural management academics, artists, a placemaking precinct management organization and government agencies’ representatives, all of whom engage in ongoing placemaking projects in Singapore, as well as policy documents analysis and participant observations. Questions that I attempt to reflect on with this paper speak to the same complex and integrated themes that guided the proceedings of the ARI’s conference last year. This paper is conceived as an inside-out observation of an evolving paradigm of Singapore’s placemaking, a study where situating the data in its cultural and social context is imperative for yielding grounded interpretations (Perera 4). With this working paper, I hope to contribute to the same interdisciplinary discourse that was initiated at the conference last year, while advancing the knowledge of a striking diversity in urban governance, cultural policies and civic participation surrounding emerging urban paradigms in cities of Asia.

THE ADVENT OF CREATIVE URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN ASIA AND THE CORE CONCEPTS OF PLACEMAKING

Rapid urban renewal in the sense of economic and socio-cultural regeneration has, in recent years, become a key process of transformation in most Asian cities that have been undergoing most profound social, political, economic and technological changes for over three decades now. The cities, confronted with globalization, migration and tectonic shifts in economy structure became subject to declining physical and social environment, infrastructural issues, remarkable growth of income disparity and other adverse conditions, all of which have been well studied in mainstream literature on global cities and international development by such authors as Mike Douglas and Perera. Responding to these challenges, central governments and local authorities in cities across all tiers and geographies from Seoul and Manila to Penang and Yogyakarta intensified activity around production and consumption of culture, including creating cultural infrastructure and developing cultural industries, to boost economy, regenerate physical space and forge their own distinct cultural identities. For example, public art has become one of the key elements of “Revive Manila”, an ambitious though admittedly controversial project of revitalization of declining areas of the Philippines capital (Guazon, 52). For George Town in Penang, Malaysia, a historic city with rich cultural heritage, inclusion into the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008 moved culture to the forefront of policy agendas and made it a driving force for economic growth through cultural tourism and creative industries development (Leng, 2). Ironically, cities seemingly the most successful in their development into global mega-cities, like Singapore and Hong Kong, are grappling with long-lasting adverse effects of building this image on multiple social and cultural dimensions. The rapid pace of urban transformation has itself become one of the key challenges to sustaining a socially inclusive urban fabric and fostering a cultural identity. Among the key effects are loss of social capital, erased spatial identity of the urban locality, the irreversible process of whitewashing of the potential offered by otherwise complex and nuanced urban emergencies and loss of familiar spatial and cultural anchors (Perera, He).
Against this background and in the wake of increasing criticism of large-scale, capital-intensive and lengthy cultural mega-projects for being increasingly less viable and feasible on top of effectively discouraging long-term local community stewardship (Miller 2011), emerging practices of inside-out urban transformation through people’s interventions such as creative placemaking, heritage activism and various temporary artistic interventions into urban spaces are becoming a significant dimension in Asian urbanism (Wang 65), too, which is demonstrated further in the paper through a number of examples from the region.

The world-wide advent of placemaking was closely connected with multiple factors in action. In the West, one of the first developments that laid the groundwork for creative placemaking and other piecemeal interventions was increased citizen participation in the planning process, which Landry in his seminal “The Creative City” linked to decentralization of (planning) powers, encouraging people to have a stake in the running of their neighborhoods (18). In Asia, too, direct community involvement in urban planning through policies such as participatory planning, introduced in cities like Taipei (DeWoff), and, much later, Seoul (CLC 1), promoted urban acupuncture and cultural interventions, respectively. Other common drivers for change were public spending cuts faced by many municipal authorities in Europe, the US and also in Asia, that prompted them to look for sustainable and low-risk planning instruments. Soon local authorities, planners, cultural organizations recognized the potential of temporary creative uses to activate underused buildings or whole areas by bringing a new cultural vibrancy and fostering the creative economy. Another important factor contributing to evolution of the role of public space is that communities become increasingly fragmented, resulting in a dramatic decline of social capital, and it is further complicated by globalization and growing ethnic and cultural diversity within neighborhoods (Putnam). Finally, the powerful global trend of “livable cities”, although dealing mainly with quality of physical environment such as safe and walkable streets, well-managed traffic, comfortable outdoor spaces (Bosselmann 155) and green areas, also contributes to increased use and importance of public spaces. One of the livability strategies picked up by many Asian cities including Seoul and Singapore, is an evident push towards walkability and car-light streets, which, in in turn, sparked interest in animation of public spaces and streets with arts and culture. All these factors combined resulted in new emerging urban social paradigms that allowed to reimagine and reinvent public spaces to include catalyzing place-based community engagement and development in places as diverse as Taipei, Yogyakarta and Penang.

Placemaking objectives are defined by its interdisciplinary nature of a policy and a practice situated in-between cultural, social and economic dimensions of urban development, which in turn inform the degree of necessary government intervention and models of cross-sector partnerships. To begin with, placemaking theorists and practitioners identify three key dimensions in which placemaking efforts impact community transformation: economic development, social regeneration and improvements to the physical environment, the latter often cited as livability (Borrup, Benett, Evans). Moreover, placemaking strategies, successfully applied across many dimensions, simultaneously address multiple challenges including social, economic and environmental (Hardy 149), as also demonstrated by many of the case studies from Southeast and East Asia at the conference, even though the practices in point were not explicitly named as placemaking. In modern-day Asia, involvement of local communities in planning and decisions concerning their living environment can becoming a viable alternative to market-driven or growth-oriented urban development of the past, as argued by Cho (“Cities”).

Indeed, in most of the cities that have long embraced placemaking, from Taipei to London, the leadership in placemaking (or its local variations like Taipei’s urban acupuncture initiatives, initially led by city government but strongly supported and often run by citizen groups, the design and heritage sector and non-profits) is being increasingly transferred to local communities and their
formal and informal organizations, while the authorities support locally-initiated projects with policymaking, coordination and in some cases funding, which is most often partial and is to be augmented by fundraising. As a result, communities are enabled to make informed and increasingly independent decisions affecting various planning levels. This broad public and stakeholder engagement in revitalizing, reusing, and creating public spaces uses techniques rooted in social engagement and new urbanist design principles such as temporary urban interventions, public space activation, co-creation and open-sourced design competitions, transitional space design and urban prototyping, among others. Some authors go as far as arguing that allocation of stewardship of the physical surroundings to a small body of professionals ultimately disempowers others because it denies the potential for people to take control over events and circumstances (of these surroundings) that take place in their lives (Schneekloth).

Overall, Western placemaking practice, that is most well-researched and documented, possesses several key characteristics: it puts relationships among people in places before relationships of people to the places (Schneekloth), it enjoys authentic and ongoing community engagement (Rapson), and it applies to a geographically defined community (not a geographically defined territory) with a clear set of issues that placemaking is expected to resolve, with varied degrees of support from authorities. The multiplicity and the interconnectedness of placemaking missions is also a critical element, because, as noted by Markusen, multiple missions mean enduring partnerships across multiple sectors and levels of government (5).

A brief survey of placemaking theories and practices suggests that it is an inherently complex phenomenon, drawing from theories, policies and practices situated in larger fields of arts and culture, urban economy and planning, and positioned within a broader theme of culture-led regeneration, which, as appropriately put by Vickery, itself is enmeshed in a mass of sociological and cultural issues (14). Therefore, relations of power and partnership models in creative placemaking are not only the products of multiple missions, but are shaped by a complex of intertwined local economic, social, political and cultural environmental conditions, as well as by the stage of development of existing networks, notwithstanding specific objectives of a given placemaking initiative. This rather stunning diversity that defines a variability of placemaking practices in different countries, appears inevitable and perhaps does not present a challenge as long as placemaking initiatives do connect people around their genuine needs and generate benefits for communities.

The next chapter illustrates the diversity of the possible spectrum of power relations in placemaking by discussing the prevailing environment and macro-politics of ongoing placemaking and place management initiatives in Singapore, and hopes to discuss whether Singapore’s placemaking governance strengthens communities and empowers people.

TRANSFORMATION UNDER CONTROL: THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT, KEY OBJECTIVES AND CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS FOR PLACEMAKING AS A POLICY AND PRACTICE IN SINGAPORE

Placemaking as a formal government strategy and a policy emerged in 2008 and intensified after 2013. Singapore’s policymakers, recognizing that the city’s public areas lacks a certain vitality and buzz, adopted the term “place management” to refer to “injecting a heart and a soul” into the city’s areas in need of rejuvenation (Hoe), and, in the words of the head of the URA’s Place Management arm, to enhance the identity and value of a place through collaborative efforts (Chen 4). These definitions were formulated at the seminal Roundtable on Place Management and Placemaking, organized by the Institute of Public Policy (IPP) in 2015. It marked wide acknowledgement of placemaking benefits on the level of policymakers rhetoric and resulting documents, shaping
subsequent placemaking efforts. Gathering over 50 representatives of major placemaking stakeholders and policymakers and featuring presentations on the pilot placemaking efforts by National Arts Council (NAC), Housing Development Board (HDB) and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the event sought to discuss definitions, strategies and challenges of placemaking in Singapore context and the role of arts and culture in these initiatives. It was decided that “place management” could be used interchangeably with “placemaking” or “creative placemaking” to refer to the “use of arts and culture to animate public spaces and neighborhoods” (Hoe).

Since 2015, Singapore’s government agencies and statutory boards such as URA, HDB, Singapore Tourism Board (STB), and, importantly, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) (through NAC and National Heritage Board (NHB)), have led state-funded placemaking efforts and currently, remain the key decision makers in Singapore placemaking process. Already in 2009, the agencies that play the key role in placemaking efforts, including NAC, NHB, STB, URA, National Parks and Sports Singapore (although the latter is not active in placemaking), formed the inter-agency group Place Management Coordinating Forum (PMCF) to champion place management “as a proactive approach in managing a precinct with the aim of achieving positive outcomes such as greater footfall and spending”, other objectives including creating vibrant and sustainable precincts and fostering public-private partnerships ( “Recognizing”). It is perhaps appropriate to cite directly from the respective websites and official documents of individual agencies to comprehend the agencies’ diverse although somewhat interconnected individual placemaking missions. MCCY defines placemaking as an “iterative process to enliven and shape the distinct cultural identity of a space and strengthen connections between people and the places they share” (COS 2016). URA, which is a leading place management agency in Singapore with a dedicated eleven-strong (as of March 2018) Place Management Department, focuses on “placemaking and place management to differentiate districts, making them more delightful and memorable” and “help humanize the urban environment”, according to the agency’s public website. Singapore Tourism Board, in partnership with various other agencies and organizations, develops and implements “various place-making initiatives, such as festivals, marketing initiatives and infrastructure improvements, to profile the precincts through differentiated leisure events that attract visitors and increase spending”.

Government agencies and boards dominate the placemaking ecosystem of Singapore, and in order to link their missions and resulting placemaking strategies to the larger national agenda as well as to provide sufficient context for the discussion of existing placemaking ecosystem in the next part of the working paper, it is important to first discuss the key underlying reasons for adoption of placemaking concepts, along with the specific conditions of the environment that called for increased prominence of placemaking rhetoric among local policymakers. Summarized below are major factors of spatial/planning, socio-political, cultural and economic environments that shaped development of current placemaking policies and power relations in Singapore, with some concrete examples of placemaking initiatives illustrating each area of impact.

**Spatial/planning Environment**

Singapore’s spatial experience is unique partially through its emergence as a meritocratic state in the post-colonial era from difficult conditions, paired with early deep racial divisions (Hee) of the first decade of independence. Among the factors that have shaped Singapore’s public areas and open spaces for decades and resulted in a certain “sterility” of space (Hoe 1) that is now subjected to placemaking efforts, some of the most notable are:
Domineering role of government in developing or redeveloping spaces and districts, resulting in public spaces that tend to be over-regulated and are too carefully manicured.

Excessive demolition of old buildings in the 70-80s and subsequent rapid redevelopment have resulted in a sense of “rootlessness” amongst residents as such efforts often removed “spatial anchors” (Lim). In the ever evolving public realm of Singapore its public space is “space in the making” (Hee), leading to a weakened sense of attachment and ownership of space among citizens, whether it be central areas or HDB estates (Hoe, Cho).

Censorship and rigid regulations of unsanctioned social or artistic activities that usually enliven public spaces in other cities. For example, busking is completely banned if a busker is not auditioned and authorized by NAC and, as an approved busker, does not hold a “busking card” (“A guide to the busking scheme”), and there is still a legally enforceable ban on any kind of public assembly, which is defined as a gathering of a group over two people, if unauthorized by the police. Moreover, any public performances, even non-ticketed ones, require the organizer to apply for an Arts Entertainment License. All this clearly diminishes spontaneity and “playability” of urban space, the very attributes that were deemed vital by urban and creative city theorists (Landry, Bosselman). The difficulties of creating truly vibrant and “playable” spaces are inherent in design and management of public spaces that are equipped with CCTV and “no loitering” signs and do not encourage play behaviors that might otherwise be able to “resolve tensions of modern urban life by stimulating benign playful expressions and social interactions”, as discussed by Stevens, who also asserted that “playability” and playful behaviors do not tolerate designed, determined solutions, thriving in useful, open, disorderly, truly public and accessible spaces (Stevens 197).

Responding to this apparent lack of the streetscape’s vibrancy and sense of attachment, Singapore’s agencies employ various toolkits such as creative urban interventions, open-sourced public space design competitions, cultural public events and co-creation sessions of participatory design and other strategies to “create places that people can connect emotionally to” (Marsamli). For instance, since 2016 URA runs “Our Favourite Place”, a program that provides Singaporeans with the opportunity to participate in public space activation projects island-wide by offering ideas and partaking in co-creation sessions, creating shared memories enlivening the spaces (OFP) with pre-agreed installations under URA’s close supervision. Another example of ongoing efforts of reconnecting citizens with history and contributing to a sense of belonging is celebration of Singapore’s architectural heritage through large-scale public events and festivals held in historic districts, such as “Night Festival” at Bras Basah Bugis precinct (BBB), which is managed by NHB and is referred to by MCCY as a placemaking initiative, too (COS 2016).

Perhaps, the essentially top-down model of placemaking in Singapore is necessitated by the fact that earlier as well as ongoing government policies have ’sterilized’ public spaces, and so the only way to re-animate them is for the government to take the lead.

Socio-political Environment

According to Tunas, there is a lack of established tradition of public participation in Singapore, mainly due to a prolonged period of establishing political stability as the primary objective of the government (78). Plans for Singapore were what Friedman calls “top-down efforts with very limited involvement of others than government and certain business sectors, thus falling short of active citizen participation”, as quoted by Perera (16). Another challenge of forging partnerships between public and private sector or civic groups is the weak state of horizontal relationships in Singapore’s society, where social capital is still not fully built up (Lien, 100), a challenge that also stems from the dominant role of the state in national development.
Placemaking was also made a part of ongoing nation building efforts in the young country and, according to the “Global Religious Diversity” index, the world’s most religiously diverse city. In 2015, MCCY announced place management strategies in Civic District and BBB and related funding for 2016 under the title “A Shared Endeavour to Strengthen National Pride and Identity”. Although the lack of enthusiasm and general dependence on a gradually loosening authoritative hand that shaped Singapore’s society into a largely unmotivated one were cited by Ang as the key obstacles for community participatory design practices, there still are ongoing combined efforts by the government agencies, Singapore’s built environment professionals and academics to nurture the culture of participation. Indeed, as illustrated by many projects by Participate in Design in their recent publication, and also demonstrated by Cho in her presentation on co-creation of public space in HDBs, public desire for co-creation of the living environment gradually grows as partnership between the state and civic society emerges through participatory community planning. It coincides with a growing recognition among political leaders that an active citizenry would be critical to continued economic growth (Noh), creating an impetus for more active and responsible civic participation, which is so vital for successful placemaking.

One of the examples of harnessing creative placemaking for localized social impact is the “Dear Neighbour” project, run in 2014-2015 by MacPherson Community Club and Participate in Design consultancy. It involved co-creation of an art installation by residents of a single HDB estate and was so successful in helping strengthen horizontal connections in the HDB micro-society that other towns tried to engage the consultancy to organize similar events with their residents.

Illustration 1. “Dear Neighbour” banner at Aljunied Crescent estate, 2014

Cultural Environment and Policies

The focus of cultural policy in Singapore has somehow changed from the “global” policy of the Global City for the Arts, when economic and tourist potential of the arts was realized, resulting in urban cosmetics policy and art hubbing that “emphasized massive infrastructural developments” (Kong 87, Yeoh 1037), and the “Renaissance City” paradigm of the 2000s when major ambitious arts infrastructure projects were developed. The Arts and Culture Strategic Review in 2012 highlighted the objective of “bringing arts and culture to everyone, everywhere, every day, and building
capabilities to achieve excellence”, marking the continuous shift towards community engagement. Current cultural policy emphasizes the social and cultural benefits of art and culture rather than economic benefits per se (Lim), with “nurturing a strong civic culture” and “enhancing a cohesive society” being two of the MCCY’s focus areas for 2017 as announced by Minister Fu in her speech in March 2017 (Fu). This cultural policy can be viewed in light of a growing desire of people to participate in decisions concerning their living environment, as noted in the discussion of socio-political factors above, demonstrating an emerging impetus for placemaking in Singapore.

Economic Environment and Placemaking as a Tool of Tourism Development

In compact and prosperous Singapore, boasting world-class infrastructure, there are very few disinvested and declining areas whose economic challenges could be resolved by placemaking. Therefore, there are no purely economic issues that call for creative placemaking but, rather, it is the strategy’s potential to bring economic benefits by promoting tourism and benefitting local businesses.

For example, one of the areas with the most active place management program involving all major agencies is Civic District. The historic birthplace of modern Singapore has gradually lost its meaning and identity, as first key business and administrative functions and later touristic attractions migrated elsewhere, resulting in a great decrease of visitorship to this area. In 2014-2015, following the efforts of several previous years, the historic part of Civic District was ultimately redefined and repositioned via culture-led regeneration and adaptive reuse of its historical buildings as a “foremost cultural destination”, deliberately coinciding with the nation-wide celebration of SG50. Since then, the area has become a site of very active place management efforts aiming to “bring greater vibrancy through outdoor programming and revitalized space” (“COS 2016”). Being a widely marketed tourist destination, linked to newer cultural and touristic developments around Marina Bay (“Central Area”), the area, which is the least populated in Singapore according to Singstat, is envisioned as a cultural and leisure destination for international and local tourists.

As Brenda Yeoh noted in her article “Globalizing Singapore” as early as 2001, to make Singapore more attractive for visitors and entrepreneurs, the urban environment will need to develop symbolic landscape cues and urban cultural dynamism. Using Philip Kotler’s terms, successful placemaking efforts can make Singapore more “visitable” and “investable” (Kotler et al, 2). This motivation seems to at least partially inform both the “Global City for the Arts” policy, which had already tapped into the larger agenda of using ‘soft’ infrastructure to make Singapore more appealing to investors, and the current placemaking agenda in the central districts of Singapore.

PLACEMAKING ECOSYSTEM, KEY PLAYERS AND EMERGING PARTNERSHIPS: IS THERE A PLACE FOR A DIALOGUE?

Having established a clear connection between the broad national policies, most notably nation building and promoting Singapore as an attractive destination, and the specific placemaking objectives in Singapore, the author would like to continue discussion about relations of power by looking at how, for whom and by whom this agenda is implemented in concrete placemaking initiatives. Being a carefully designed and thoroughly planned strategy, supported by a robust government infrastructure, Singapore placemaking has an interesting geographical dimension. Each major government agency, except for HDB, was designated as a lead agency for one or several city areas earmarked for place management in accordance with the government’s vision for their identity, according to a presentation by URA’s Head of Place Management at the 2016 Roundtable. All such precincts are located in the central area of Singapore that is a key location for business,
tourism and leisure. None of these districts has a sizeable population, and HDB is not acting as a lead agency for any of placemaking precincts, which is also revealing in terms of actual level of local residents’ engagement in placemaking. Besides the public sector, which is represented by agencies, statutory boards, local-level community organizations like town councils, museums, etc., and which as discussed above, is orchestrating, coordinating and largely funding most of the placemaking efforts in Singapore, there is a small but growing number of other players in the placemaking ecosystem.

Local business associations are among increasingly important players, which again is a result of a strong government will to involve private sector in financing and managing placemaking initiatives as discussed further in the chapter.

In each of the precincts, the designated lead agencies not only envision, coordinate and manage place management initiatives on their own, but also actively collaborate with local business associations to advance the place management agenda, which includes “creative positive experience for residents, users and visitors”. The associations vary in size, in average counting anywhere from 15 to 60 member organizations, but, as a rule, comprise private businesses such as developers, building owners, retailers, F&B and entertainment operators, cultural and non-profit organizations that are either located or have certain business interests in a precinct. The map of precincts with indication of the respective business associations and coordinating agencies is provided below.

Illustration 2. Map of central areas earmarked for place management. Source: Hoe

Selective analysis of webpages shows that the associations mainly see their role in place management as upkeeping of the area, maintaining its attractiveness for customers and tourists through events and marketing efforts, as well as supporting and fostering collaboration among members and with government stakeholders and other associations. These conclusions about the role the associations see for themselves in development of the precincts are generally in line with
how Mr. Chen of URA defined place management that is realized by the associations together with respective government agencies as “operational in nature”, focusing mainly on management of basic elements of a space such as pedestrian and traffic accessibility, safety, cleanliness, wayfinding signage, etc.

The most recent and noteworthy trend in place management governance in Singapore is the introduction of a new model of private-public partnership, the Business Improvement District concept by URA in 2017. BIDs, that can be found in U.K and USA, are “business-led and -funded bodies formed to improve a defined precinct area” (“Business Improvement”), and this development clearly marks URA’s and other government agencies’ desire to move towards greater engagement of private stakeholders of the precincts in place management and placemaking. The first BID was formed in 2017 by Singapore River One (SRO) business association for the Singapore River precinct, encompassing such areas popular with visitors and tourists as Boat Quay, Clarke Quay and Robertson Quay. Answering the question whether and how SRO leverages arts and culture to activate public spaces in the precinct in an interview conducted for this research, Michelle Koh, SRO’s executive director, noted that as a BID, SRO develops long-term strategic plans for events and programs adding soul to the precinct and engages artists to re-define Singapore River as one of the key landmarks for public art and performances. She mentioned that SRO has been working with partner organizations like NAC, independent artists and schools to improve visitors’ experience through arts and performances and public art installations. SRO has also been trying to collaborate with arts organizations such as SRO’s members Singapore Repertory Theatre, Asian Civilizations Museum and The Art House to incorporate their programming (as best possible) into the precinct’s festivals as well. It can perhaps be argued that, despite some obvious lack of local community consultations and engagement, the sense of ownership and better knowledge of the precinct’s needs and cultural opportunities as well as conducting consultations with at least local businesses if not with residents (of whom there are relatively low numbers anyway), represent some of the advantages of this BID as a pilot project of extending place management decision making and the realization mandate to a private sector-led partnership.

Unlike in other countries with more developed civic and arts activism, arts and creative professionals and professional associations in Singapore still play a small role in initiating, providing funding and helping implement creative placemaking projects. Few existing examples include non-profit design organization Participate in Design that has pioneered participatory design in Singapore (Yeung) and, working mainly with communities in their living environment, have played a role in over 20 participatory design projects across Singapore since 2010 (“Designing”), and Shophouse&Co, a placemaking agency that works with both public and commercial sector entities such as property developers (“Shophouse&Co”). Cultural sector professionals and the visual and performing arts sector still have a relatively modest role in ongoing placemaking efforts in Singapore, compared to Western examples. In Singapore, their involvement is largely limited to community arts under People’s Association Passion Arts or commissions for other government-led efforts such as projects mounted by the agencies.

However, and this is probably one of the most promising directions for the future development of placemaking efforts, students and academics from educational institutions, in particular arts, design and planning-related departments and have been involved in a number of past and ongoing creative placemaking projects realized by government agencies and boards. Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) students have partaken in urban prototyping project Park(ing) Day coordinated by URA (SUTD), while LASALLE College of the Arts (LASALLE) students have been gaining hands-on arts management experience in Artwalk Little India placemaking initiative since 2015, and National University of Singapore (NUS) academics and students have participated in research and
workshops on the impact of the built environment on community bonding with residents of HDB estates as part of the Neighborhood Renewal program.

Illustration 3. Free guided tour of the new murals created as part of Artwalk Little India 2018.

Photo by the author

Artwalk Little India, a multi-disciplinary art festival run in one of the areas that Jein described as “a sensitive urban zone, with issues of social mixity and in need of cultural rehabilitation” (88) since 2015, is perhaps the only example of consistent placemaking efforts realized by a partnership between a university and the government, represented by STB, and supported by private sector sponsors’ donations. But even in this relatively small-scale initiative that is effectively run by Arts Management students of LASALLE and whose every edition requires a certain commitment from local shopowners to provide their wall space for new murals to be painted by the artists, the local community of Little India is essentially excluded from the circle of stakeholders and is barely present as an audience of the festival’s performances and events.

To summarize the discussion of the placemaking ecosystem, it is currently dominated by government agencies, although there clearly is a desire for more flexibility and support for privately-driven placemaking and involvement of the private sector, whose importance was already acknowledged in 2009. But, due to the role of the public sector as an initiator and a sponsor of placemaking initiatives and the pronounced lack of community-led initiatives and even intermediaries, whose role elsewhere is usually performed by NGOs and creative non-profits, until recently there were not many examples of public-private partnerships on the level of single initiatives, beyond formal cooperation with precincts’ business associations. This is also closely related to the limited number of creative placemaking initiatives using arts, culture and authentic community engagement to fulfill objectives other than destination marketing and visitor spending increase, in particular in centrally located areas of Singapore. Another hallmark of Singapore’s placemaking is that most initiatives currently take place in central areas that are the least populated,
and essentially exclude local residents. The actual collaboration typically occurs between
government stakeholders and local businesses and business organizations, and is aimed at achieving
predominantly economic objectives of attracting visitors and increasing spending, thus having little
or no concern with developing local communities, identifying and serving their interests. Emphasis
on the central area also means that efforts to enliven and activate public spaces are, with few
exceptions of HDB-run projects, happening outside HDB towns where over 80% of Singaporeans live.

Another potential peril of government stewardship and top-down culture-driven strategies in the
otherwise potentially bottom-up organically developing placemaking initiatives is that the
Singapore’s lead agencies tend to favor larger-scale events and festivals that provide stronger
marketing and publicity potential island-wide and also appeal to tourists. Blockbuster events, such as
festivals and art exhibitions in sensitive urban areas, such as Little India, or massive cultural and
heritage entertainment events like the annual Night Festival held in Bras Basah area where the local
resident community is hardly participating, are bound to a localized rearticulating of the popular as a
cultural commodity, in terms equivalent to other global cities, as argued by Jein (93). As a result,
instead of finding and highlighting the uniqueness and values of communities and spaces in already
“whitewashed” public spaces of Singapore, these placemaking efforts may contribute to further loss
of cultural and spatial identity.

Overall, placemaking in Singapore appears to remain a mainly government pursuit. Although there is
a clear tendency to transfer more responsibility for placemaking financing and its outcomes, which
are chiefly understood as economic gains and positive visitor experience, to local business
associations, the key decision regarding the framework and directions of placemaking are still taken
by Singapore government. That leads the author to question the core motifs in the use of
placemaking as an urban regeneration strategy meant to develop a more cohesive society and
enliven public spaces, using government’s own terminology. Although placemaking initiatives are
well-organized and well-funded they appear somewhat devoid of the placemaking’s essential
elements which are the genuine community ownership and the open and dialogue about concrete
needs and interests of actual resident community, not just economic interests of retailers and other
private businesses in central areas of the city.

CONCLUDING NOTES: NATIONALIZATION OF SINGAPORE’S PLACEMAKING AND SPACES OF HOPE

Placemaking and creative placemaking in Singapore have taken the form of both a policy and a
practice over the last 10 years, and, just as discussed in Western placemaking literature, it is
intrinsically related to unique local social, economic, spatial and cultural conditions. The actual social
and spatial challenges targeted by placemaking in Singapore are drastically different from those
described by Western practitioners, and similarly different is the level of civic activism that
placemaking theorists consider essential for authentic bottom-up placemaking initiatives.

These conditions have largely shaped the first key dimension of Singapore placemaking practice,
which is explicit government leadership in placemaking efforts. It is true that Singapore government-
led placemaking strategies were devised to achieve many of the same objectives that were
described by placemaking theorists and practitioners: triggering positive changes in physical
streetscape, social and economic fabric. Although Singapore’s policymakers employ placemaking
rhetoric that is similar to core Western definitions, the dominant role of government, reliance of
government infrastructure and funding and, importantly, exclusion of resident population from
planning and implementation of many state-led placemaking initiatives entail serving the broad
national agenda rather than localizing the impact by focusing on concrete issues of people and
neighborhoods.
Tourists, both local and international, remain one of the key target audiences of placemaking efforts in the ten centrally located placemaking precincts in Singapore, reflecting the degree to which the twin mechanisms of global transportation and cultural tourism have facilitated a new urban self-consciousness of a young and economically successful nation with regard to the ‘appearance’ of the city-state from outside. A pronounced emphasis of placemaking strategies in Singapore on increasing “attractiveness” of spaces for visitors and physical and culture-led renewal is manifested in active involvement of STB and URA in managing a number of placemaking precincts, which can be described, in Jein’s words, as the need to officially reclaim and reorder sensitive urban zones, generating a coherent and positive promotional image for easy international consumption in response to global rise of cultural economy (88, 93).

Robust and sustainable cross-sector partnerships and especially involvement of the local private sector (endogenous investors) as stakeholders in placemaking efforts is considered not only an essential element of successful placemaking but a condition for improving local economies (Borrup 12). The interconnectedness of placemaking’s mission, the level of stakeholders involved and the engagement of private sector are clearly observed in the case of Singapore placemaking efforts, but, as with resident communities, the ownership of placemaking processes by private sector is somewhat impaired by lasting hegemony of the government. Existing model of private sector involvement implies that private stakeholders are represented mainly by local business associations, and the involvement of individual sponsors and private stakeholders is fairly uncommon. The government repeatedly expresses desire to increase private stakeholders’ engagement and (co)funding of placemaking and place managing efforts, and so far it is manifest in the introduction of URA’s BID scheme tasked with primarily operational objectives of reducing costs of precinct management and increasing footfall “through targeted marketing, hospitality and events” (“Business”), which, again, does not imply community-focused engagement. In rare cases where individual private sponsors of placemaking efforts are involved, such as in Artwalk Little India, having a government agency backing the project is one of the critical factors for private sector participation as sponsors, along with alignment of the event agenda and the donor’s business objectives and strong previous performance of the event in terms of visitorship and media coverage.

Government, rather understandably, is interested in pursuing the national agenda, and there is hardly anything wrong with that. But when it comes to placemaking domain, the state’s uncontested ownership and leadership along with mainly public funding available for placemaking, may be leading to a certain nationalization of the objectives and levels of partnership as opposed to a more appropriate localization of issues on the level of geographically defined neighborhoods that otherwise would be resolved with the help of the very same communities and locally-based private stakeholders.

The brief observation of power relations between the state, citizens and private sector in Singapore placemaking attempted in this paper, reveals certain contradictions between the placemaking objectives, announced in the policy documents, and actual methods of placemaking. These contradictions connect back to the questions about the agenda and rationale of placemaking initiatives raised in the introduction. The potent transformative ability of placemaking or any other form of community-based urban regeneration can be impaired if the initiatives are not rooted in actual dialogue and the needs of resident communities and instead the forms, methods and desired outcomes of placemaking are prescriptive and heavily orchestrated by “the government, who knows better”, if the author may borrow from an interview title in “Participate in Design” publication. Essentially the role of communities in placemaking in Singapore is currently reduced to that of spectators and not owners of the initiatives. This leads the author to question participatory nature of Singapore placemaking model and to ponder further on whether there is even a room for
placemaking initiatives in Singapore that is not closely tied to the national agenda of cultural identity construction and economic generation?

However, there are spaces of hope that may help Singapore placemaking develop into a more community-centered practice, truly building strong bonds between people and places with help of arts and culture.

For one, there is an active participation of university students in planning and realization of initiatives that vary from centrally located to ones focused on collaboration with residents in HDB estates. Training the next generation of cultural managers, designers and other potential participants in future placemaking efforts, along with strengthening cross-generational connections can be considered not only a method, but an important outcome of creative placemaking, as discussed by Markussen and Borrup.

Another possible development direction is the arrival of BIDs as local placemakers. It is true that current placemaking efforts by these organizations are mainly limited to destination marketing, events and promotions aimed at attraction of visitors and increase of spending, on top of operational activities. However superficial these marketing efforts may appear in the context of authentic placemaking, they can gradually succeed in building connection between people and places. Considering that Singapore historic center, the main site of ongoing placemaking efforts, is fairly compact and walkable, and most importantly that the total size of citizen population is just about 3.4 million people not including tourists and non-citizen residents (“Population”), the audience of the most popular of such events may be viewed as an actual community, an extended one. Providing that BIDs succeed in building connections with local arts organizations and incorporate more arts and cultural content that is authentic and unique to an area in their placemaking efforts, they can organically grow into regeneration strategies that are truly owned by local stakeholders.

The third opportunity is devising strategies to engage the private sector in ongoing placemaking efforts in Singapore’s heartlands that are led by HDB with involvement of design and co-creation consultancies and universities. These efforts directly engage local communities in decisions concerning their living environment such as design of public spaces and community gardens, and therefore are the closest it gets to encouraging community engagement, building resiliency and/or improving quality of life in a geographically defined community. Perhaps, involving local business owners or other donors and sponsors with a clearly defined stake in neighborhood development is a possibility to nurture actual organically evolved public-private partnerships where local residents, businesses and other parties can come together to initiate positive change in their neighborhood.

Private sector is an integral part of society, and empowered civic society that is ready to initiate and be involved in placemaking initiatives can, as argued by Cho, constitute a viable alternative to existing state-led approaches (“Cities” 11). Whether and when it may happen in Singapore is a subject of further analysis changes in qualitative and quantitative elements of the placemaking landscape over time.

Concluding the paper, it is perhaps necessary to reiterate that as placemaking in Singapore is an ongoing process, the discussion in this paper does not aim to result in any definitive conclusions or to attempt direct comparisons with other placemaking practices, but merely serves as documentation of observations made at this stage of the placemaking policy and practice evolution.
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