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Getting to the Heart of Great Public Spaces

Published in Straits Times, 2016 January 7.

By HOE Su Fern; Jacqueline LIU; and HOW Tan Tarn

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has flagged the start of car-free Sundays in the Civic District and Central Business District this year.

This move to make the area people-friendly is part of a \$740 million plan, announced in the 2015 Budget, to revitalise the Civic District and transform it into “an integrated arts, culture and lifestyle precinct”. Highlights of the plan include the Jubilee Walk – an 8km trail that wraps around landmarks from the National Museum to the Esplanade – and the newly opened National Gallery Singapore.

These efforts are part of an ongoing initiative to brand Singapore as an ideal place to live, work, and play in. In recent years, art installations, night festivals and concerts have been staged across Singapore’s downtown precincts, livening up public spaces there.

Historic buildings like the old Supreme Court and City Hall have been restored, with more green spaces created, and more street lights and way-finding signs installed. The URA has termed this “place management”, and has worked with agencies, including the Singapore Tourism Board, National Arts Council (NAC), National Heritage Board (NHB) and National Parks Board (NParks), since 2008, to do this.

Has the place management approach to creating great public places worked?

The Civic District was first earmarked as a civic and cultural hub in 1988. Since then, much has been invested in improving the bricks and mortar of Singapore’s city centre to provide spaces for culture, entertainment, shopping and good food.

However, the recent injection of government funds indicates a recognition of the need to encourage a greater level of activity and affinity for the district.

Then, there is also the example of the Substation, a fringe arts centre conceived by late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun. Positioned as the “Home for the Arts”, the Substation was the first of its kind dedicated towards nurturing “local voices” and incubating local works.

Since opening in 1990, it quickly became a lively meeting point and a hothouse for new ideas – artistic or otherwise. Its allure went beyond exciting arts activities to being an accessible and egalitarian social space. Its surroundings – The Garden, Fat Frog Cafe, the old S11 coffee shop, National Library and MPH bookstore – provided much-needed spaces for exchanges, collaborations and relaxation. Together, these factors transformed the Substation from a disused space into a much-beloved place buzzing with creative energy and colour generated by the community that used and occupied it. It was messy, less than spick and span and, perhaps, a bit unpredictable.

Ironically, government plans to improve the city centre – which included demolishing the National Library building, constructing a tunnel at Stamford Road, creating a retail corridor along Armenian Street and centrally locating the Singapore Management University – killed off much of its original vibrancy. Today, the area around the Substation is quiet and, perhaps, more known for commercial spaces. It has ceased to be a hub for most of the arts community. One can say it struggles to retain its relevance as a true “Home for the Arts”.

This is not to say that place management should be abandoned as an urban planning strategy. Perhaps, what is needed is an acknowledgement that some of the most buzzing and vibrant places are in fact, self-made. Since the 1960s, cities from New York to Melbourne have done what they call “placemaking”.

This is where disused or underutilised spaces are transformed into lively and authentic places that people are attracted to, and have ownership over, as a community. Many have also relied on the arts and culture to build connections between people and places through a community-driven process known as “creative placemaking”.

Successful examples of creative placemaking include artist Theaster Gates’ conversion of a derelict bank building in a low-income Chicago neighbourhood into Stony Island Arts Bank – a cultural venue with a hybrid gallery, community centre and libraries.

Another is the work of Assemble, a London-based architecture, design and art collective that won the 31st Turner Prize for using art and design to improve houses, and the lives of residents in a troubled part of Liverpool.

Both place management and placemaking have similar goals in transforming spaces into places that have a distinct identity and life. Where they differ is that place management is top-down, deliberately planned, and results-oriented. Placemaking tends to be initiated from the ground-up, is community-driven, and process-centred.

Can place management here shift to prioritising “heartware” over “hardware” and, perhaps, be less focused on results? This will mean allowing more public spaces to be shaped by the people who use them, and looking beyond foot traffic and visitor-spending numbers to assess the vibrancy of a place.

As joint place managers for the Civic District, NAC and NParks are installing public art and opening up more green spaces such as Esplanade Park. This provision of more open spaces offers opportunities to local artists and other creative-types to stage activities and events, promote their work and causes, and engage communities. To take this idea further, the place managers can consider working with artists to develop pop-ups and creative incubators in underutilised areas or spaces that the artists find inspiring – whether they are empty storefronts or vacant lawns.

It is the collective spirit and sense of belonging that makes the “X-factor”, or soul, of a place.

When such a place evolves organically through community or private efforts, the Government should enable its growth, rather than plan and manicure it to sterility. This requires a rather different mindset – one that is more open, tolerant, trusting and risk-taking.

The writers research arts and cultural policy at the Institute of Policy Studies. This piece is inspired by the proceedings of the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy: Roundtable on Place Management and Placemaking in Singapore on Nov 13 last year. The roundtable featured presentations on place management efforts by three government agencies – the URA, NAC, and NHB – and was attended by more than 45 policymakers, arts practitioners, consultants, and business owners.