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Laden with great expectations: (re)mapping the arts housing policy as urban cultural policy in Singapore

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Abstract

The arts and artists need space to thrive. However, as much of the land in Singapore is state-owned, the finiteness of space – literally and figuratively – remains a key challenge. Yet there is a rich variety of arts infrastructure in Singapore today, from exhibition spaces to performing arts venues and state-subsidised artist studios. This infrastructure comes at a cost - these arts spaces are positioned as policy interventions capable of achieving a broad confluence of cultural, urban, economic and social outcomes for Singapore.

This article aims to provide an understanding of how arts spaces in Singapore has been framed and legitimised as a strategic means to pursue multiple policy goals. In particular, this article will focus on the Arts Housing Policy, which was formally introduced in 1985 as an artist assistance scheme that provides subsidised work spaces to artists and arts groups. Over the years, the policy has evolved into an urban cultural policy expected to achieve urban rejuvenation goals.

Through tracing the governmental structures and organisational processes behind the evolution of the Arts Housing Policy from an artist assistance scheme into an urban cultural policy, this article will demonstrate how and why arts housing spaces have become encumbered by the institutional layering of potentially incommensurate policy agendas, assumptions and aspirations. This article contends that a micro-level analysis of the bureaucratic structures and processes behind policy development will enable a more nuanced understanding of the tensions and incongruities between local artist needs and urban cultural policy goals in Singapore.

Keywords: Urban cultural policy, Cultural planning, Arts spaces, Policy transfer, Policy mobility, Arts governance, Singapore

1. Introduction

All across the globe, there has been an unprecedented boom in arts and cultural infrastructure, where billions of dollars have been directed to the building, expansion and renovation of arts and cultural spaces such as museums, theatres, and artist studios. This is mainly because cultural policy has been reified as an antidote urban cultural policy that is able to deliver an expansive range of outcomes from urban regeneration to economic revival and social inclusion (Evans, 2005; Grodach & Silver, 2013; Kong, 2007)(Stevenson, 2004). This in turn places pressure on arts practitioners and

organisations to deliver these outcomes alongside developing and sustaining their artistic practices.

Yet, the astronomical urban investment in the arts has not been supported or matched by robust research on the ability of the arts to contribute to urban (re)development goals (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010b). Notably, scant academic attention has been paid to the governmental structures and processes behind the valorisation of urban cultural policy as a seemingly magical antidote to urban challenges and concerns. As Grodach and Silver state, the understanding of the politics of urban cultural policy requires the comprehension of the “role of constituents in shaping policy” (2013, p. 7).

This article is a timely critical intervention as it seeks to provide a grounded understanding of how arts spaces in Singapore have been framed and legitimised as a strategic means to pursue multiple urban policy goals. Like other cities, there has been an aggressive investment in arts and cultural infrastructure by the state, from the opening of the SGD600 million (USD435 million) Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in 2002 to the adaptive re-use of conservation buildings into work spaces for arts practitioners and organisations.¹ However, in a city-state with finite land, these arts facilities and spaces have become encumbered by an expansive brief policy expectations including stimulating economic development, improving city imaging and branding, increasing conspicuous consumption, and enhancing the local quality of life.

In particular, this article will focus on the Arts Housing Policy, a cultural policy that provides work spaces to arts practitioners and organisations at subsidised rental rates. Since its introduction as the Arts Housing Scheme (AHS) in 1985, the Policy has helped provide more than 220 arts practitioners and organisations with places to practice and develop their art without needing to worry about paying rents at market rates.² Notwithstanding, this provision has come with increasing expectations on the Policy to serve as an urban rejuvenation strategy that will transform Singapore into a liveable and vibrant city. In December 2010, the Policy was updated by the National Arts Council (NAC) to include a new version – the Framework for Arts Spaces (FFAS) – which has resulted in a greater emphasis on arts housing tenants to collaborate and bring about new creative synergies, as well as participate in placemaking and community engagement. As this article will explicate, despite existing research highlighting a mismatch between urban policy agendas and the needs of arts housing tenants, the expectations for the Arts Housing Policy to deliver non-arts related outcomes persist. The rationales behind these expectations have also remained unknown.

This article will hence trace the evolution of the Arts Housing Policy into an urban cultural policy, with a focus on the governmental structures and organisational processes involved in the development and operationalisation of the Policy. To do so, this article will draw on content analysis of archival policy documents and qualitative interviews with policy makers who have had a direct involvement in the development of, and changes to, the Arts Housing Policy.³ The content will be analysed together to

¹ The conversion from SGD to USD was based on currency exchange rates on 9 May 2019.

² It is worth noting that this is not an official number provided by the National Arts Council but one determined through personal research.

³ The data was obtained as part of a multi-sited ethnographic study on the impact of the Arts Housing Policy on arts practice and development from 1985 to 2015. I

identify and examine the varying variables behind the development and implementation of the Policy.

This article is organised into four sections. The first section surveys existing research on urban cultural economies to highlight the necessity to develop a more nuanced understanding of the place-specific governmental structures and organisational processes behind the development of cultural policy into urban cultural policy. The second section contextualises the emergence of urban cultural policy in Singapore and the positioning of the Arts Housing Policy as an instrumental tool for urban rejuvenation. This section will also surface existing challenges and tensions faced by arts housing tenants to deliver urban policy goals. The third section will provide an historical account of the origination and evolution of the Arts Housing Policy, with a focus on the bureaucratic structures and processes that led to the Policy being laden with expectations to stimulate urban rejuvenation. In particular, this section will demonstrate how, in order to secure space in a pragmatic, land-scarce city-state, the Arts Housing Policy was transformed from an artist assistance scheme to an urban cultural policy. The fifth section will conclude by critically reflecting on the stakes, outcomes and tensions arising from the layering of potentially incommensurate and dissimilar policy agendas, assumptions and aspirations on the Arts Housing Policy.

Ultimately, this article is a timely engagement with the often masked processes, actors and agendas that have driven the cultural spatial restructuring of Singapore's cityscape. In doing so, it is a humble starting point to enable more nuanced and incisive understanding of the impractical challenges and tensions facing the arts and artists in Singapore in their attempts to deliver an expansive brief of urban cultural policy expectations.

1.1. The rise of cultural policy as magical antidote to urban problems

Since the 1980s, the realm of cultural policy has been expanded beyond the creation and protection of national culture and heritage, to the investment and distribution of culture as an “expedient resource” that will spur development and resolve cross-sector concerns (Yudice, 2003). As noted by Stevenson, Rowe and McKay, cultural policy has been “increasingly conceived as capable of achieving a range of social and economic outcomes, including nurturing identity and difference, fostering social inclusion, and developing the creative and economic infrastructure of towns, cities and nations” (2010, p. 249). A key impetus behind this reframing is the post-industrial investment in the arts and culture as a tool for urban (re)development (Evans, 2001; Kong, 2007). This has resulted in an unprecedented boom in arts and cultural infrastructure across the globe, where billions of dollars have been directed to the building, expansion and renovation of cultural institutions and arts spaces (Kong, Chong and Chou, 2015; Mccarthy, 2006; Mommaas, 2004; Strom, 2002).

Today, there is a rich wealth of literature on the reframing and reification of cultural policy as urban (re)development policy by governments across the globe (Caust, 2003; Strom, 2003). The early scholarship affirmed the importance of symbolic and aesthetic factors in driving urban (re)development through studies on now commonly-used strategies such as the staging of cultural mega-events such as blockbuster exhibitions

conducted this study from June 2015 to February 2016 with financial support from the National Arts Council (NAC) Singapore.

and festivals, and the building of cultural mega-structures such as flagship museums with what Claire Bishop calls “starchitecture”, a phenomenon where “the museum’s external wrapper has become more important than its contents” (2013, p. 11). The archetypal example is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, where a grandiose cultural facility designed by a globally-renowned architect is used as the anchor tenant and icon for an urban regeneration project (Grodach, 2008; Grodach, 2010; Plaza, 2000, 2006).

Notwithstanding, despite the global transfer and serial reproduction of urban cultural policy, there has been little grounded evidence and documentation on the efficacy of cultural policy and its cultural infrastructure in delivering its expansive brief of policy goals, particularly the social and community objectives. As pointed out by Evans, the attention and amounts of investment in culture-led urban development are in inverse proportion to the strength and quality of evidence that the arts and culture have brought sustainable benefits to a city’s citizens and publics (2005, p. 960). Where evidence is emerging, culture-led urban development projects have faced strong criticism for fostering unequal development and gentrification that benefits mostly upwardly mobile professionals (Peck, 2005; Scott, 2006). For instance, a comparative study on cultural development strategies pursued by municipal governments in the United States conducted by Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris (2007) found a bias towards strategies that address economic goals rather than social and educational goals. This has led to a recurrent call for nuanced and context-specific research that highlight local contingencies in shaping and giving meaning to policy (Drake, 2003; Evans, 2005).

This article thus aims to enhance current understandings of urban cultural policy by unpacking the place-specific governmental structures and organisational processes behind the institutionalisation and operationalisation of cultural policy as urban (re)development policy. As Grodach and Silver have pointed out, the broadening of the remit of urban cultural policy has meant that “multiple place-specific issues, conditions, channels, actors and resources” will interact in different ways to produce varying outcomes (2013, p. 9). In particular, urban cultural policy is increasingly affected by an array of heterogenous actors and organisations that work outside departments of culture and within their own respective policy fields.

Unfortunately, the role of non-cultural factors and stakeholders in enabling culture to influence urban change remains under-scrutinised. Sharon Zukin’s (1982), work on “loft living” provides valuable insights on this seminal yet often overlooked role of non-cultural variables. While her book remains one of the most seminal and comprehensive accounts of the changing role of the arts and culture in contemporary urban development, the classic reading is centred the role of artists as agents of urban and lifestyle change. A more nuanced reading will reveal the critical role of non-cultural partners and policy in enabling and sustaining the conversion of disused industrial buildings into artist studios. Zukin distinctly highlighted the changing of zoning regulations as more influential than subsidies for arts production in enabling areas like SoHo to be zoned into an artists’ district (Zukin, 1982, p.116–118). She also noted how artists relied on the generosity of private foundations such as the Kaplan Fund to purchase and rent space in the disinvested industrial neighbourhoods of New York (Zukin, 1982, p. 113–114).

A more recent study by Andy Pratt (2009) on Hoxton Square in London also draws attention to the importance of non-cultural factors in enabling its transformation into a

cultural quarter. According to Pratt, relaxed planning controls enabled the transformation of what had previously been zoned as a light manufacturing area into a mixed-use quarter including artists' studios (2009, p.1052). Like Zukin, he also features funding from non-cultural sources such as the European Regional Development Fund and Lottery funding as a key resource that enabled the refurbishment of the cultural buildings in the area (2009, p. 1049).

These two works by Zukin and Pratt outline the influence of non-cultural actors and organisations on the workings of contemporary cultural policy and infrastructure. As the next section will demonstrate, this influence is markedly important for the operationalisation of urban cultural policy in a city like Singapore where the arts and culture have not been conspicuously featured in the official national narrative.

1.2. The instrumentalisation of the arts housing policy as urban cultural policy in Singapore

Like other cities, Singapore has also subscribed to the ideology that the arts and culture are expedient resources that will be able to resolve multiple local urban challenges. This instrumentalist treatment of the arts has led Terence Chong to argue that to understand arts institutions and cultural policy in Singapore is to understand the "bureaucratic imagination of the arts", a term he uses to describe the "selective and rudimentary application of art and its imagined qualities" by politicians and bureaucrats as "a creative solution to perceived socio-political or economic challenges" (2014, p. 20).

Chong's argument is consistent with existing writings on the arts and culture in Singapore, which have criticised the instrumentalisation of the arts for economic regeneration and global competitiveness (Berenson, 2003; Kong, 2000, 2012; Lee, 2004; Chong, 2010). Notably, the harnessing of arts housing spaces to serve as an urban cultural policy and deliver socio-economic policy goals has been a subject of much scrutiny. Kong (2009), (2015) has analysed arts housing spaces in relation to urban policy buzzwords such as creative industries, creative cities and creative clusters, and their ability to bring about the presumed benefits of pursuing these policies. Meanwhile, Chang (2014, 2016) has focussed on the socio-spatial characteristics of arts housing spaces within ethnic and cultural districts like Little India.

Together, their research has usefully surfaced tensions and incongruities within these arts housing spaces, particularly in terms of policy expectations, artist needs and spatial limitations. Based on his ethnographic fieldwork on the arts housing spaces in Little India, Chang has argued that the shophouses in which these tenants occupy are not "ideal for artistic purposes", and there is "a clear mismatch between the needs of artists and what the shophouses could offer" (2014, p. 319). This is strikingly evident in terms of the spatial constraints of the arts housing spaces. Chang found that the arts housing tenants were not able to use their space for rehearsals as the shophouses were too narrow and small. The old structures of the ageing shophouses also frequently created problems such as leaks and termites. These operational constraints are also experienced at the newer arts housing spaces. As Chang has pointed out, Goodman Arts Centre, was not entirely refurbished and retrofitted when it opened in 2011, and does not meet the basic amenity needs of artists such as cargo lifts, sprung floors and sound proofing (2018, p. 106).

Kong also revealed spatial challenges in the arts housing spaces she analysed. Her study uncovered that many of the artists in Telok Kurau Studios, an arts housing building for visual artists, were unable to “fully utilise” their arts housing spaces due to spatial constraints. Additionally, despite policy expectations on arts housing tenants to collaborate and/or engage their neighbourhood, Kong found that clustering visual artists together in one arts housing building did not result in any fruitful or positive relationships amongst the artists, and yielded “no accruing externalities, socially or culturally” (2015, p. 202). As she contends, there is no causal relationship between geographical propinquity and the development of positive social relations” (Kong, 2009, p. 73).

Although these studies raise valuable questions about the actual capacity of cultural infrastructure like arts housing spaces to resolve urban concerns such as sociality and urban rejuvenation, they do not explain deeper systematic questions about why and how the Arts Housing Policy materialised as an urban cultural policy, or why these spaces were even allocated as arts housing spaces if they are in reality unsuitable for arts practice. To do so, the next section will review the bureaucratic structures and processes that led to the development of the Arts Housing Policy into an urban cultural policy.

1.3. The quest for land: The evolution of the arts housing policy into urban cultural policy

The investment in arts and cultural infrastructure is a fairly recent phenomenon in Singapore, especially in arts housing spaces. This is because the post-colonial governance of Singapore has always been based on a developmental model of modernity, where economic development, survival and success are prioritised as the logic of government intervention and management (Perry, Yeoh and Kong, 1997). As Chua (1995, p. 59) states, “the economic is privileged over the cultural because economic growth is seen as the best guarantee of social and political stability necessary for the survival of the nation”. This developmental logic of economic survival, along with an acute anxiety to optimise scarce land resources, resulted in the view that the arts and culture were not basic needs, but rather luxuries the city-state could ill-afford. As Kong and Yeoh cogently explain:

From independence until the late 1970s (and some would argue into the mid-1980s), landscapes of the arts were conspicuous by their absence because the arts were accorded low priority, given the view that scarce national resources should be diverted to develop Singapore's fledging economy, reflecting the ideology of pragmatism and survival (2003: 174).

In particular, there was a pertinent lack of work spaces for arts practitioners and organisations to practice and develop their craft. According to Juliana Lim, an ex-policy maker from the then-Ministry of Community Development (MCD) who developed the AHS, a survey of performing arts groups conducted in 1983 found that many were nomadic groups renting spaces at various spaces like homes, schools and other temporary spaces (personal communication, September 29, 2015). The survey also found that this lack of a base and the general unavailability of proper work facilities limited the productivity of the arts groups. However, as Lim recalls, the government refused to provide any assistance to alleviate this shortage as there was a misperception that the existing performing arts venues were more than sufficient:

In the early 1980s, we went to the Ministry of Finance for money for rehearsal and workshop spaces. Our request was rejected. I remember being asked why artists needed these spaces when they already had theatres. My reply was that months of preparatory work are needed before every performance in the theatre and this work has been happening in the homes of artists and whatever space they could find (personal communication, 29 September 2015).

In November 1985, AHS was finally approved as an official cultural policy. This policy was officially described as an artist assistance scheme, which allows any arts practitioner and organisation to apply for an available space. This openness continues till today but they have to meet a set list of criteria, which includes demonstration of artistic excellence and sound governance. Once selected, all non-profit tenants would automatically be eligible for the government rental subsidy of 90% of the market land rate.⁴

However, in order to implement the policy, the MCD needed to source for available land for these arts housing spaces. This lack of readily-available land for the arts is a perennial challenge that continues to plague arts governance in Singapore today. As the management of land is not the purview of the MCD, this meant that the operationalisation of the Arts Housing Policy is hence inevitably dependent on, and affected by, land-related policies and activities.

The most seminal and formative catalyst was the release of Vision 1999 in January 1985, which is a national policy released in January 1985 that aimed to transform Singapore into a city of excellence by 1999, which was defined as a “developed country” with a “cultivated society”.⁵ Vision 1999 was a policy response to the overall improvement in standards of living in Singapore. By 1980, Singapore had achieved rapid industrialisation and sustained economic growth, with real per capita income doubling in the 1970s. With this change in socio-economic status, the Singapore government turned the focus to quality of life issues, which resulted in the need to (re)generate Singapore into a vibrant and liveable cityscape suitable for both work and play. Essentially, Vision 1999 recognised that cultural activities and facilities would enable this transformation of Singapore into a culturally vibrant society.

Vision 1999's identification of the cultural infrastructure as a key policy driver resulted in the release of the Cultural Plan 1985 in March 1985. The Cultural Plan was a five-year blueprint released by the MCD to promote cultural activities and enabled a doubling of the then-S\$5 million annual budget for such activities.⁶ Vision 1999 as a

⁴ When FFAS was introduced, this subsidy was reduced to 80%. It must also be noted that apart from paying rental, arts housing tenants are also responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the space and its building. This means initial renovation costs and additional monthly charges. Under the AHS, tenants have to pay utilities charges, Management Fees and contribute to a Sinking Fund managed by the NAC. Under the FFAS, tenants have to pay utilities charges and a Service Charge to the NAC-appointed Place Manager.

⁵ Vision 1999 was first introduced to the public as part of the campaign strategy of the ruling party – the People's Action Party (PAP) for the 1984 General Elections. As the winning and ruling party governing Singapore, Vision 1999 was then formalised into government policy in 1985.

⁶ Over the years, the governing body for arts and culture in Singapore have changed names. In 1985, the body was known as the Ministry of Community Development (MCD). It should also

stimulus that enabled the growth of arts and cultural funding, is further evidence of Singapore's "bureaucratic imagination of the arts", where the arts and culture are instrumentalised as pragmatic solutions for broader national developmental goals (Chong, 2014, p. 20).

A key objective of the Cultural Plan 1985 was to provide more systems of aids for artists and arts groups:

The new blueprint aims to shift the promotion of the arts into higher gear, from organising events to providing more facilities and training for artists and arts administrators and nurturing young talent to build a core of artistic creators, not just performers (Hoe, 1985)

One of the areas identified for aid was a chronic shortage of space suitable for both rehearsals and performances. The Arts Housing Policy is a direct output of the Cultural Plan 1985, as it aims to provide arts groups with a base to work from, so that they could proliferate their arts activities and play a role in developing a culturally-vibrant Singapore.

The formulation of Vision 1999 and the Cultural Plan 1985 empowered the MCD to start discussions with the Land Office for spaces, and to benefit from land-use policies.⁷ According to Lim, Vision 1999 gave the MCD bargaining power, which resulted in the Land Office officers directly sharing a "seemingly endless supply of buildings" that could be used as arts housing spaces (personal communication, September 29, 2015). This supply of buildings was an outcome of the Decentralisation Plan by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which was a strategic push to develop self-sufficient regional new towns outside the core centre of Singapore. This led to the relocation of many of the schools that were built in the central areas during the colonial days of Singapore to the housing estate towns outside the city centre. Consequently, most of the buildings offered for the Arts Housing Policy were these disused schools. This explains why six out of eight of the arts housing spaces acquired during the first phase were old school buildings in central Singapore, including Telok Ayer Primary School (which became Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre in 1985) and Stamford Primary School (which opened as Stamford Arts Centre in 1988).⁸

be noted that the National Arts Council (NAC) was only established in September 1991. It was formed through the amalgamation of the Cultural Division of the Ministry of Community Development, the Singapore Cultural Foundation, the Festival of Arts Secretariat and the National Theatre Trust. Today, it is a statutory board under the purview of the "Ministry of Culture". After its formation, the Ministry of Community Development transferred the implementation of the Arts Housing Policy to NAC.

⁷ In 2001, the Land Office merged with other land-related offices such as the Singapore Land Registry to form the Singapore Land Authority (SLA).

⁸ The other schools include Selegie School (which was used by Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1990), Telok Kurau West School (which was first used as the campus of LASALLE College of the Arts in 1992 and reopened as Telok Kurau Studios in 1997), Anglo-Chinese School (which opened as One-two-six Cairnhill Arts Centre in 1992), and Rangoon Road Primary School (which opened as the home of Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society in 1993). It is also worth noting that this tradition of allocating disused schools to the Arts Housing Policy has continued. The two buildings acquired under the FFAS are also former school buildings: Goodman Arts Centre is the former site of the Tun Seri Lanang Malay Secondary School, and

Although this enabled the provision of space, it also ensued in the Arts Housing Policy being formulated into a policy that does not develop new purpose-built facilities, but as one that converts “vacant but structurally sound government buildings” into arts housing spaces (Lim, personal communication, September 29, 2015). This explains the aforementioned mismatch between artist needs and the suitability of the arts housing spaces.

Importantly, Vision 1999 enabled the formal recognition of the need to allocate land for arts housing spaces. As the then-Chief Planner of the URA, Liu Thai Ker, shared,

Singapore is unlike other cities. Singapore being a city-state means that the whole island is a city. We have virtually no hinterland. In many cities, the artists can create arts colonies in the hinterlands, even without zoning control. Whereas in Singapore, the government controls every piece of land, so you cannot just go and set up something [...] Our artists have nowhere to go. Therefore, we have to go out of our way to identify building sites for artists to work in, at special non-commercial rates (personal communication, 14 April 2016).

This resulted in the 1991 Concept Plan – which is Singapore's long-term strategic land use and transportation policy that is reviewed every ten years – reiterating Vision 1999's recognition for the need for “facilities to help a culturally-vibrant Singaporean society to grow” (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991, p. 26). It formally identified the need to allocate land for a variety of arts infrastructure that will enable creativity, from arts exhibition and performing venues as well as working spaces; that is, land for arts spaces became a legitimate touchstone for policy action. As the 1991 Concept Plan states, “various vacant buildings, many of which are in conservation areas, will be restored for use by cultural groups as rehearsal and working spaces. These ‘artists’ villages’ will increase the spirit of creativity and provide a place for artists to express themselves” (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1991, p. 27).

This formal statement is a significant turning point for the Arts Housing Policy. As Rolf Hugoson (1997, p. 323) notes, the introduction of an activity as an official policy affects its governance. Accordingly, this articulation of the need to allocate land for arts spaces as an official goal of an urban planning policy transforms arts spaces into a programme of urban governance; that is, arts spaces become targeted as an urban problem that can be inscribed, calculated and acted upon. As Hugoson (1997) points out, there are expectations that policy goals will generate outcomes that can be accounted for. Hence, although this formal recognition of the need to designate land for arts housing spaces resulted in the allocation of conservation buildings as arts housing spaces, it also added expectations on these arts housing spaces to generate outcomes that urban planning policy can account for. In a city-state where arts have never been a top national priority, the URA needs to account for, and expect returns from, the allocation of prime land to the arts. As Liu shared, the URA needed to ensure that there would be a beneficial return to justify “using such valuable properties in the city centre for arts housing” (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

Effects of this turning point started intensifying from the second batch of arts housing spaces, particularly the pressure to demonstrate space optimisation of the land allocated

Aliwal Arts Centre was converted from the former Chong Cheng and Chong Pun School buildings.

to arts housing spaces. In Phase Two of the AHS, which lasted from 1992 to 1995, seven out of the nine buildings acquired were conservation buildings located along Waterloo Street. Like Phase One, which benefited from changes in urban planning efforts, these conservation buildings were the direct result of the 1986 Conservation Masterplan, which earmarked 10 conservation areas and gazetted more than 3200 buildings for conservation. But unlike Phase One, the earmarking of these buildings as arts housing spaces was initiated by the URA rather than the MCD.

In order to justify the land allocation, the URA developed the concept of “adaptive re-use”, where the allocation of buildings for arts housing came with the expectation that arts housing tenants would revitalise both the buildings and the surrounding areas through “injecting new uses into old buildings” (Liu, personal communication, 2016). This expectation was corroborated by Khor Kok Wah, an ex-NAC staff who was involved in the implementation of AHS from 1991 to 1997, who shared:

They [URA] wanted the arts to help in that conservation. Because of the conservation philosophy, which is that there must be new users. The old users are no longer economically viable. Many of them are dying trades and so on. So, you needed to inject new uses. So what new uses? So the arts came into play. And arts were supposed to be revitalising. So I think they thought the arts would give character and identity and culture and so on (personal communication, 10 December 2015).

The bureaucratic targeting of arts housing spaces as expedient resource for urban rejuvenation became more sophisticated in Phase Three. During Phase Three, which took place from 1996 to 2005, 20 out of the 25 properties added to the scheme were conservation shophouses in historic districts previously earmarked for conservation under the 1986 Conservation Masterplan, namely Little India, Chinatown and Robertson Quay. Importantly, this was a period during which urban policy in Singapore was being heavily influenced by the creative industries discourse, whereby cities around the world were competing to become global creative cities through the development of creative clusters (Kong, 2012). Correspondingly, the arts housing properties acquired during this phase were not “disparate sites” but clustered systematically into “belts of cultural activities” where tenants were allocated spaces closer to one another (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000, p. 55). Both cultural policies and urban policies identified how “artists and arts groups occupying such prime locations will need to strive to add vibrancy to these areas” (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000, p. 55). Consequently, the upper storeys of a row of eight buildings along Smith Street, and two buildings at the nearby Trengganu Street in the historic conservation area of Kreta Ayer, were allocated to become the Chinatown Arts Belt in 1998. In 2001, ten units of shophouses along Kerbau Road were allocated to form the Little India Arts Belt. To further encourage creative synergy, there was also a deliberate attempt to select tenants who would ideally fit the profile of the historic districts. For instance, most of the initial tenants for the Chinatown Arts Belt were groups practicing traditional Chinese art forms such as Chinese opera, seal carving and calligraphy.

In 2009, the URA developed a National Place Management Framework, which argued for the importance of placemaking as a new approach for urban policy. Briefly, this Framework has reoriented the focus of urban planning onto enabling local vibrancy, where expected outcomes include neighbourhood revitalisation and community engagement (Hoe, 2019, 2020; Hoe & Liu, 2016). Like Phase 3 of the AHS, this shift

towards placemaking is influenced by global policy trends. Since 2010, governments across the world from the United States to London and Melbourne have identified placemaking as a key urban cultural policy that promote people-centred and community-driven urban planning (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010a; Grodach, 2017; Courage & Mckeown, 2019).

Significantly, in the same year, the NAC undertook a review of the AHS and concluded that there was a need to develop an entirely new approach to the Arts Housing Policy. This review resulted in the establishment of the new Framework for Arts Spaces (FFAS) in December 2010.⁹ According to Benson Puah, who initiated the review as the then-Chief Executive Officer of the NAC, the FFAS would better enable arts housing spaces to do placemaking, as this would ensure that a arts housing space would not be a “dis-amenity to the neighbourhood” but be “a community connector that would change the tenor and the dynamics within the neighbourhood” (personal communication, April 7, 2016).

This intensified importance placed on arts housing to serve as an urban rejuvenation tool is evident from the change in tenant assessment criteria. Previously, under the AHS, the selection criteria was mainly based on artistic merits, level of artistic outputs and growth potential (National Arts Council, 2010). Under the FFAS, the eligibility criteria as well as the assessment for renewal, were amended to include contributions to placemaking and community engagement efforts (National Arts Council, 2010).

Thus far, the FFAS has enabled the opening of two new arts housing spaces – Goodman Arts Centre and Aliwal Arts Centre. To enable placemaking, the buildings include “shared facilities” and common spaces. A place manager has also been appointed to manage the day-to-day upkeep of the facility and compound, as well as to create programmes for public outreach and community engagement. However, these shared facilities are in fact only available through rental. Meanwhile, the common spaces tend to be either higher-end cafes or outdoor areas without shade. Notably, the FFAS has resulted in higher tenant rental rates and monthly service charges to cover the costs of common resources such as the cleaning of common areas, security and insurance of public risk. Consequently, FFAS tenants have expressed unhappiness and worry especially since the service charges tend to be higher than the highly-subsidised rentals (Nanda, 2017). Artists have also questioned the affordability that the original policy was intended to safeguard (Nanda, 2017).

Overall, this section has critically examined the evolution of the Arts Housing Policy. Not only has it shown how the Arts Housing Policy is an evolving product influenced by global policy transference; it is also shaped by larger state discourses and agendas, as well as unique domestic factors such as changes in the socio-economic status of the population, the dominant state ownership of land and the high land costs. More importantly, this section has demonstrated how changes to the Arts Housing Policy have been made in accordance to urban policy changes rather than artist needs. In order to secure land, the arts housing policy has been transformed from an artist assistance and

⁹ The introduction of the FFAS has meant that the Arts Housing Policy now functions in two tiers: the AHS and the FFAS. In general, candidates applying for the new spaces introduced after the formulation of FFAS have to abide by the FFAS terms and conditions. Although it was originally intended for the FFAS to replace the AHS, the Arts Housing Policy still functions in two tiers today and no public explanation has been given for this co-existence.

support policy to an urban cultural policy that is expected to demonstrate space optimisation by delivering a range of urban rejuvenation outcomes from re-purposing conservation buildings to injecting vibrancy to the surrounding neighbourhoods.

2. Conclusion: who pays the price for space?

This article has critically reviewed the formative years behind the development of the Arts Housing Policy to explicate the bureaucratic processes and organisational structures that have reframed the Policy from artist assistance scheme to urban cultural policy. In a pragmatic city-state where land scarcity has become a national narrative, the Arts Housing Policy uses the language and logic of urban rejuvenation to ensure land allocation and to embed the place of the arts within the cityscape. This language and logic are the result of Singapore importing and attempting to capitalise on global urban cultural policy trends such as the creative industries and placemaking, along with the need to align the arts along broader non-cultural state agendas. This has resulted in the policy administrators permutating the key terms and phrases used to describe the policy, so as to legitimise the policy allocation of land. For instance, in Phase 3, the new arts housing spaces were described and designed to be “belts of cultural activities”, which were in line with the state’s then-quest to establish the creative industries policy and reap the economic benefits of its related concept of creative clustering.

Although each phase of the policy has enabled more arts housing spaces, it has also layered on increasing expectations on the arts housing tenants and spaces to deliver urban rejuvenation outcomes. These expectations has resulted in the dependency and susceptibility of the Arts Housing Policy to broader changes in urban planning. This dependency continues to affect the Policy today, and is not likely to diminish. As Kathy Lai, former Chief Executive Officer of the NAC explains,

there is finite gross floor area (GFA) for arts housing spaces. We do not have any news that it will be increased. This means that artists need to be more creative and ensure that the people who own the space see the value of having arts activities there. (personal communication, 16 March 2016).

In fact, according to the latest arts masterplan released by the NAC, the limited resources allocated to the arts means that there will be a fervent need to “maximise utilisation of highly subsidised arts spaces” (National Arts Council, 2018). As the previous section has demonstrated, space maximisation and optimisation have resulted in arts housing spaces and their tenants being expected to deliver a range of urban rejuvenation outcomes.

Yet, as both Chang, 2014, Chang, 2018 and Kong (2015) have found, the arts housing spaces have not been able to generate spillover benefits such as artistic collaborations between tenants, community engagement and the production of aesthetically-vibrant and lively environments. This inability of arts housing spaces to rejuvenate their surrounding environments has also been noted by Lai, who admits that the arts housing spaces are mostly “quiet and feel too sterile” (personal communication, 2016). More recently, artists have also questioned the compatibility of the placemaking agenda, which has bureaucratically shifted the Arts Housing Policy from providing private sanctuaries for art-making to public spaces for outreach and engagement (Hoe & Liu, 2016). On the ground level, Chang has also noted a disconnect between local reception and the placemaking ambitions of arts housing, as Goodman Arts Centre regularly

receive hostile complaints about noise and road congestion by residents in the adjacent landed properties (2018, p. 110). These findings indicate that the Arts Housing Policy may not be suitable as an urban cultural policy, and that the extant expectations placed on arts housing tenants to deliver urban policy outcomes such as placemaking, community engagement and neighbourhood revitalisation may be tall, unrealistic orders.

This article is hence a timely engagement with the often masked processes, actors and agendas that have resulted in this heightened pressure on the Arts Housing Policy to function as an urban cultural policy and deliver urban rejuvenation rather than arts-related outcomes. Significantly, this focus on the need to secure space and the subsequent opportunistic amassing of spaces explicate why, despite existing studies that have surfaced incongruities between the arts housing tenant needs and policy goals, the Arts Housing Policy continues to provide spaces that are not necessarily the most ideal spaces for artistic practice (Chang & Lee, 2003, 2016, 2018, pp. 429–445). Not only has this resulted in the accumulation of disparate properties with little consideration of their suitability for artistic practice, there were no pre-studies evaluating whether the spaces and their surrounding neighbourhoods are suitable for arts-based urban rejuvenation.

Ultimately, this article has also contributed to the existing literature on urban cultural policy by demonstrating the importance of examining the place-specific governmental structures and organisational processes behind the institutionalisation and operationalisation of cultural policy as urban (re)development policy. As this article has shown, an analysis of these structures and processes illuminates possible tensions and contradictions that might arise from the conflation of urban and cultural policies, as well as reveal the high expectations placed upon artists to deliver urban outcomes.

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