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Creative placemaking in Singapore: A critical reflection

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CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN SINGAPORE:

A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Introduction

All across the globe, there has been increasing recognition of the transformative power of creative placemaking to revive the economic and cultural life of cities. Singapore is no exception. Since 2008, the Singapore government has been engaged in a concerted effort to placemake Singapore into a culturally-vibrant cityscape with "heart and soul". However, despite its increasing global popularity, what constitutes creative placemaking and its processes remain vague and tenuous. Notably, scant critical attention has also been paid on how Singapore has tried to adopt this global buzzword, and its impact on the localised dynamics of urban spaces and arts practices.

Drawing on personal reflections from my pedagogical and research experiences, this article will illuminate the current challenges obstructing creative placemaking from being truly embraced and embedded within the urban life of Singapore. Importantly, this article will highlight creative placemaking as an important turn in Singapore's urban planning and policy, and advocate for the importance of higher education teaching as a critical means to enable this turn.

Fuzzy Concepts

Creative placemaking focuses on arts-led, place-based, community-oriented development through multi-sectoral partnerships (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). In particular it champions the arts and creativity as critical elements to improving the quality and vitality of a place (Hoe, 2019). However, as an emergent form of policy and planning practice, its swift adoption has led to much confusion and consternation over its constituents, tenets and actual impact.

This lack of a clear understanding of creative placemaking is one key challenge facing its adoption in Singapore. This is mainly because the official term used in urban planning policies is "place management." The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) defines place management as "a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to improving precincts and making them more attractive for the benefit of its users" (Hoe and Liu 2016). Today, place management is a whole-of-government urban rejuvenation policy, which aims to enliven and transform Singapore into an inclusive cityscape that fosters a strong sense of place attachment, community and belonging. It is under this umbrella policy of "place management" that creative placemaking emerged as a buzzword in Singapore. Apart from creative placemaking, this umbrella also includes other terms like place marketing, place maintenance, signage, wayfinding, events and programming. This conflation of diverse terms under one large umbrella term has resulted in a lack of clarity and confusion in terms of what creative placemaking actually entails.

This lack of clarity has trickled down to actual policy implementation and practice, as well as pedagogical training. Many real-life projects as well as student project proposals tend to propose transient arts programming as an expedient means to activate spaces in the name of placemaking. One real-life example is the dependence of arts festivals to activate cultural precincts such as Bras Basah.Bugis, Kampong Glam

and Civic District. For instance, the anchor place-making programme for the Bras Basah.Bugis precinct is the Singapore Night Festival, which is an annual precinct-wide nocturnal arts festival known for its light art installations. Other placemaking projects that rely heavily on transient arts programming include car-free events that celebrate street closures, and once-off arts events to activate disused buildings and public spaces. While these ephemeral arts programmes should be commended for broadening arts access to wider publics and demonstrating the latent capacities of the arts to inspire vernacular creativity, arts programming should not be celebrated as the quintessential exemplar of creative placemaking.

The Pitfalls of "Prove It"

The lack of clarity about creative placemaking is worsened by the need to substantiate return on investment. The new resources and opportunities for creative placemaking come with the pressure to report clear results and outcomes. Increasingly, both real-life and student project proposals are also expected to demonstrate their operational feasibility and project expected socio-economic returns. This has resulted in the utilisation of quantitative data as key performance indicators, as well as a reliance on tried-and-tested measures as standard operating practices. This is evident in how footfall is still used as a benchmark for success for placemaking projects. Consequently, to increase footfall, placemaking projects tend to rely on cliché hacks such as the inclusion of instagrammable elements such as trendy "hipster" food and light projections to attract audiences.

Hence, one has to manage expectations in terms of evaluating the impact of creative placemaking. As Ann Markusen (2013, p. 297), the original co-author behind the white paper that sparked off the global popularity of creative placemaking, questions: "how can we expect projects that hope to change the culture, participation, physical environment and local economy to show anything in a period of one, two, three years?" Existing case studies from the fields of urban planning, arts participation and community engagement have demonstrated that changes in place entail long periods of time. Finding data to chart change and impact over time adequately and successfully is also an existing challenge.

Hence, instead of instrumentalising the arts as an expedient tool for immediate quantitative data as evidence of elusive outcomes like vibrancy and buzz, those initiating and/or funding creative placemaking projects should be cognizant of the importance of the process, and encourage the project team to spend time in the identified sites and with their communities to truly understand how the arts will be able to meet real needs and will not compromise existing traditions and practices. As architect William Lim (2012) reminds, the city must be recognized as one that is in a "state of incompleteness", with spaces that are interminate and open to continuous unforeseen changes and unplanned growth.

Conclusion: Making Space for Creative Placemaking

This article has briefly highlighted challenges confronting creative placemaking in Singapore, from definitional problems to evaluative and measurement conundrums. Despite the aforementioned challenges, the growing popularity of creative placemaking is an optimistic turn in Singapore's urban policy, planning and pedagogical training. The growing number of creative placemaking projects particularly by artists and arts organisations – such as Cassia Kaki, an arts-based community project that engaged the relocated seniors at Cassia Crescent by ArtsWok Collaborative – demonstrates the generative potential of creative placemaking to deepen sense of place and belonging to Singapore. Importantly, it also enables exposure and immersion in the arts at the most ordinary spaces and unexpected everyday moments.

One way to better integrate and expand the field of creative placemaking into the social and urban life

of Singapore is through pedagogical training, particularly in terms of including it into higher education curriculum that is interested in the role of arts and culture in urban life. The teaching of creative placemaking is a form of inter-disciplinary and engaged cultural research that is collaborative, cross-sectoral and cosmopolitan. A hands-on and engaged teaching space, like the Youth-Topia studio project conducted by SUTD, offers a productive and supportive environment to interrogate, unpack and work through difficult conversations about how contemporary practice like creative placemaking exists in the newness of the world. The context-specificity of creative placemaking demands that students do not engage in rote learning but are exposed to different ways of thinking and doing things. Rather, the community-engaged practices of creative placemaking ensure that students are confronted by real-world research problems that are engaged with social life and experience, and are exposed to the differing practices, stories and histories of urban life. The higher education space thus enables positive spill-overs including human capital, knowledge transfer and exchange. Most importantly, by equipping students to become self-reflexive cultural citizens, pedagogical training in creative placemaking moves us closer to a future of equitable, caring and sustainable communities in which everyone has a voice and agency to address and contribute to community-defined outcomes and enabling a sense of place.
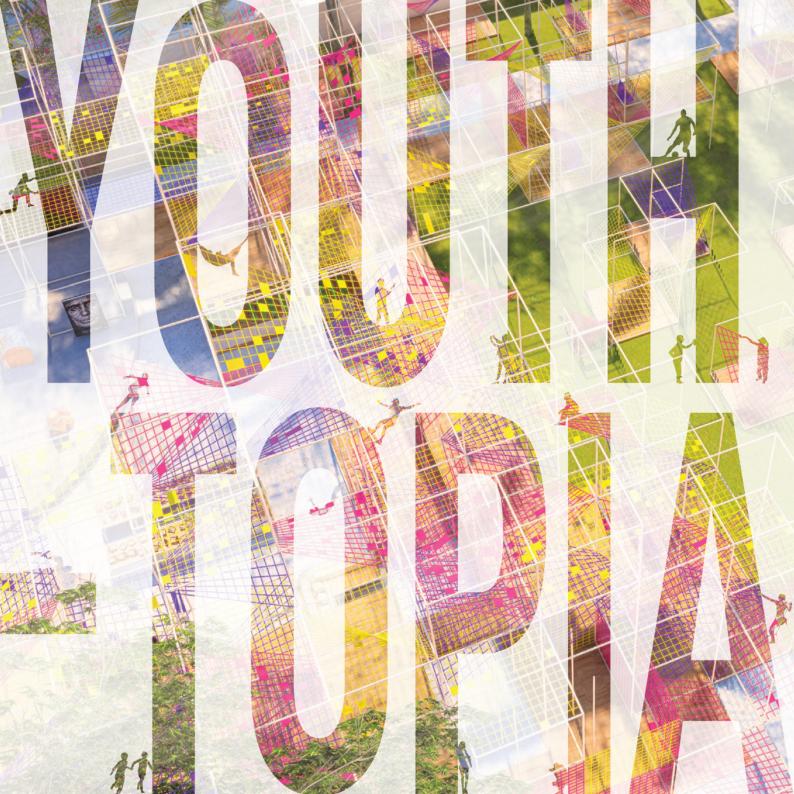
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