

CLC LECTURE

The Art of Making Spaces for the Arts

Written by Alvin Chua, edited by Justin Zhuang

While the Singapore government has played a key role in defining, unlocking and activating spaces for the arts and culture, should this top-down strategy give way to a more a more bottom up approach?



The panel of experts discuss about the art of making spaces for the arts. Source: Mike Enerio

That was a key question amongst panellists at the “Spaces for Culture and the Arts in Singapore” book launch lecture and panel discussion organised by CLC on 31 October. The panel also touched on how government planning for arts and culture spaces has evolved, the role of curating such spaces, and the impact of such policies on local arts companies.

Urging the audience to look beyond the state’s role in shaping arts spaces was Kenneth Kwok, the assistant chief executive of the National Arts Council (NAC). He recognised the importance of not over-programming places the agency oversees and pointed to the many ground up initiatives by artists and art groups.

“There needs to be an opportunity for the public and the community to co-create some of the programming that goes into these spaces, so that they don’t become locked into a specific use as determined by institutions or agencies,” he said.

Fellow panellist Michael Koh echoed similar sentiments when he wondered if Singapore would open up more central urban spaces for the public to take ownership of these spaces. For instance, Tokyo’s



Cajon Jamming at the Empress Lawn, Civic District. Source: Choo Yut Shing, Flickr

Ueno Park and Melbourne’s Federation Square are vibrant public spaces that emerged not from programming but “natural humanistic tendencies”, he said.

“In Hanoi, they close the whole area around Hoan Kiem Lake and streets leading to it. Something that we in Singapore don’t dare to do, but in Hanoi they’ve done it not just one Sunday a month, but every Saturday and Sunday,” said Koh, a CLC Fellow and former chief executive officer of the National Heritage Board. “Can we Singaporeans have such spaces? Will we activate them? Dare we activate them? That’s a critical question.”

In his presentation, Koh also outlined how the provision of arts and cultural spaces in Singapore has been closely integrated with urban planning. This is built on a belief that culture defines the distinctiveness of a city and brings people together.

“Culture and the arts, and their spaces, are neutral bonding platforms. People of all ages, all walks of life come together to enjoy a performance, to share a memory. That actually produces social resilience,” he said.

The critical role of curation

Besides carving up space in a city, curating it is just as important for the success of an arts space, said panellist Lee Tzu Yang, the chairman of The Esplanade Co. Ltd. Drawing from his experience overseeing Singapore’s iconic performing arts centre, Lee said one needs “a whole mid-office and back office to work with the artists so that audiences can appreciate their work”.

He drew parallels between curating an arts space and traditional retail,



The Esplanade Aneex Studio is a cosy space for different types of activities. Source: The Esplanade Co. Ltd

explaining how they both involve building a brand for audiences “to indulge or satisfy their expectations” and return time and again. The Esplanade’s high utilisation is testament to its successful curation.

“Spaces are only successful if they are curated, and curated to an extent. They develop an identity, and encourage the audience and artists to identify with it,” said Lee, who was also the founding chairman of the School of The Arts, Singapore’s first national specialised arts school. “From a public policy perspective, it makes sense not just to look at buildings and providing physical space, but also at place-making, investing in content and curation for the arts and culture.”

This also involves finding opportunities to present arts and culture outside of purpose-built venues, said Lee, who added that doing so would go a long way towards making the industry sustainable in Singapore. This point was acknowledged by Kwok, who recognised the need to foster partnerships beyond the government sector and expand the possibilities for artists.

Space to grow

Also on the panel was Gaurav Kripalani, director of the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT), a group that has benefitted from Singapore’s efforts to make space for the arts and culture. The Arts Housing scheme allowed the theatre to build an arts centre at Robertson Quay, as they could lease the land with an 80% subsidy from the government and raise the remaining costs themselves.



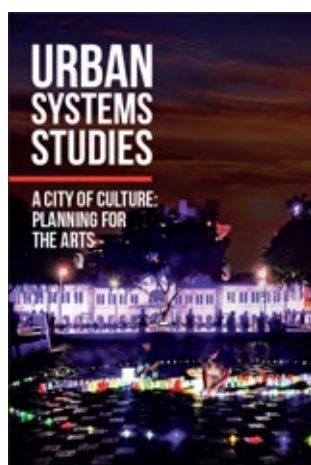
The Arts Centre, home of the SRT. Source: Zachng87

“That was a major tipping point. It gave us a home and a branding,” he said.

This was followed by a commission in 2002 to stage a musical for the opening of The Esplanade. It was not only a great honour for SRT, but a “game-changer” as putting up *Forbidden City* helped the group go from “a half-million-dollar annual deficit to a half-million-dollar profit”.

“Nobody had produced work on that scale — we had done big musicals before, but we’d never done anything in a 2,000-seat theatre for an extended period of time,” said Kripalani.

“That changed the way we staffed, the way we programmed, it made sure we had a reserve. It could not have happened until we had (The Esplanade as a venue to perform). By doing a show for a three-week period, we were finally able to make money on a show.”



[Download](#) an online copy of CLC’s new Urban Systems Studies book “A City of Culture: Planning for the Arts” to find out more.

This book charts Singapore’s development in urban planning and programmes for the arts and culture sector, and illustrates how long-term planning and collaboration across stakeholders remain critical to the making of a city of culture.

About the Speakers



PANELLIST

Lee Tzu Yang

Chairman,
The Esplanade Co Ltd

Lee Tzu Yang is Chairman of the Esplanade and was the Founding Chairman of School of the Arts, Singapore (SOTA). He led the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (report Jan 2012). He was an Advisory Board Member of the Centre for Liveable Cities.



PANELLIST

Gaurav Kripalani

Director,
Singapore Repertory Theatre;
Festival Director,
Singapore International Festival of Arts

Gaurav Kripalani is the Artistic Director of the Singapore Repertory Theatre and has produced over 100 plays during his 21 years with the drama group. He was among the first to champion the use of outdoor spaces for the arts in Singapore, and originated productions under "Shakespeare in the Park". Gaurav has recently taken on the role of Festival Director of the Singapore International Festival of Arts, and will take on the next three editions from 2018 to 2020.



PANELLIST

Michael Koh

Fellow, Centre for Liveable Cities;
Former Chief Executive Officer,
National Heritage Board

Michael Koh has 25 years of experience in the public service including 7 years as CEO of the National Heritage Board and 4 years concurrently as CEO of the National Art Gallery. He was also the former Director of Urban Planning & Design at the Urban Redevelopment Authority where he spearheaded the planning and urban design of the new mixed use Downtown at Marina Bay, revitalisation of Orchard Road as a shopping street and creation of an arts and entertainment district at Bras Basah Bugis.

About the Speakers



PANELLIST

Kenneth Kwok

Assistant Chief Executive,
National Arts Council

Kenneth Kwok is Assistant Chief Executive at the National Arts Council where he oversees community engagement as well as strategic planning and research. His work involves establishing partnerships to activate more public spaces such as the Civic District for arts programming.



MODERATOR

Dr Suriani Suratman

Senior Lecturer,
Department of Malay Studies,
Faculty of Arts and Social Science,
National University of Singapore

Dr Suriani Suratman is Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore, Department of Malay Studies. Her research focuses on Malay ethnic identity and the (re)production of portrayals of Malays and gender relations and the issue of (in) equalities in Malay families and households. As an artist, she studied pottery under the tutorship of master potter Iskandar Jalil between 2001 to 2005 and now has her own studio space at the Jalan Bahar Clay Studios. Dr Suriani is currently a Board Member of the National Heritage Board, National Gallery Singapore and NParks.

About CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>