



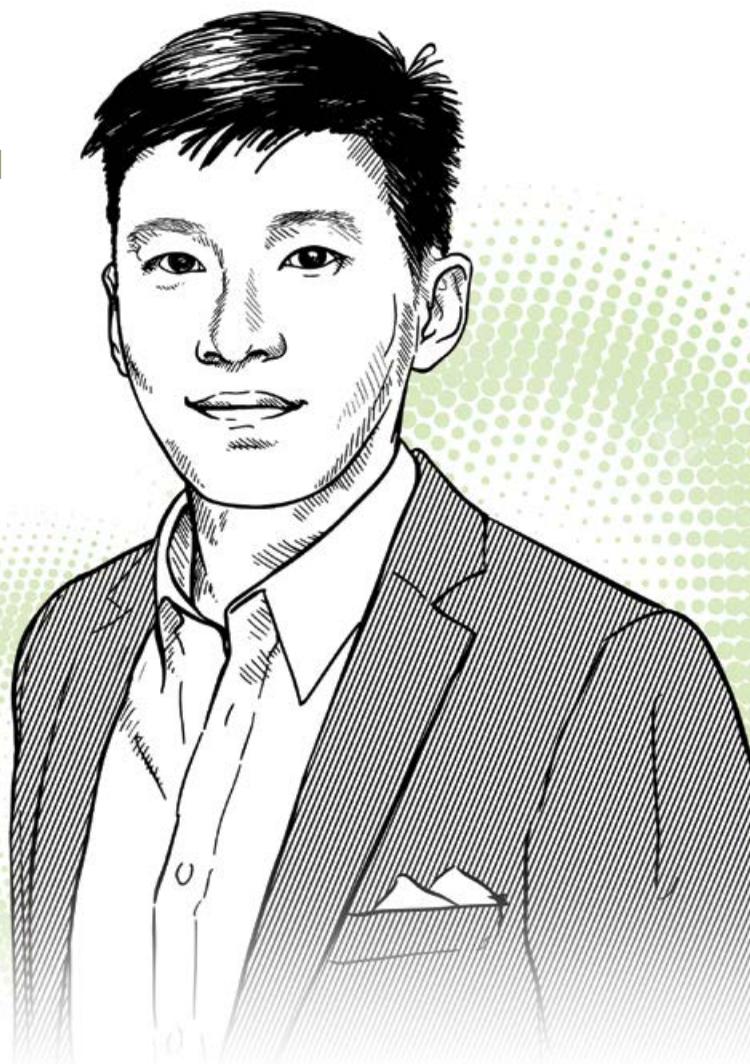
OPINION

Viewpoint: Kennie Ting

Festivals Bond People to Places Meaningfully



Festivals could reframe
the meaning of places and
make them relevant to a
wider audience.



When large festivals are authentic, collaborative and organised from the ground up, they create vibrant and well-loved public spaces, argues **Kennie Ting**, Group Director of Museums, who oversees major festivals run by Singapore's National Heritage Board, including the Singapore Night Festival, Singapore Heritage Festival and River Nights.

For two weeks each year, Bras Basah, a district in Singapore's city centre, is transformed into one mega public space by a phenomenon known as the Singapore Night Festival. The various plots of unused state land and private green space are activated with curated programmes and activities. Streets and sidewalks become linkages between these "outdoor stages", so to speak, rather than the barriers they usually are.

The Singapore Night Festival has, in its nine years of existence, grown to become Singapore's premier outdoor night spectacle. Its footfall has risen exponentially from 40,000 to a steady state of 600,000.

Seven in 10 festivalgoers come to the area *specifically* for the Festival, and the satisfaction rate amongst festivalgoers is 88%.

Large-scale festivals like the Night Festival are able to inject vibrancy into public spaces when the programming is authentic and ground-up.

The Festival, organised by the National Museum of Singapore, achieves this by programming on the principle of partnership—each of the major stakeholders in the area contributes their own programming (and therefore their own unique "voice" and identity) to the

Festival. The number of festival partners has grown from a mere six in 2008 to more than 70 in 2016, as the Festival grew in profile and significance. The stakeholders range from arts and community groups, an alternative arts space (The Substation), arts schools, religious institutions, the National Design Centre and the National Library.

The result is an eclectic programming mix, featuring elaborate street processions, big light installations, alongside somewhat more intimate performance art pieces, community-oriented variety shows, graffiti art and grungy, local alt-rock. This is an extensive range or repertoire that only a festival held on a mega scale could accommodate. The Night Festival is thus accessible and edgy, local and international, and appealing to everyone, be it young families with children, cosmopolitan art aficionados, or free-spirited youth.

The Night Festival's focus on local audience draws a footfall that is consistently more than 80% Singaporean citizens and permanent residents.

Its festival programming is first and foremost targeted at Singaporeans because of the

shared memories locals have of the area. This used to be a historic schools precinct, with the largest concentration of major schools once located here. A generation of Singaporeans grew up going to school here, and have fond memories of spending time here at their former school premises, many still existing as National Monuments and conserved buildings. They also remember the many landmarks that were once here, including the hugely-mourned former National Library and the former Bras Basah Park.

The heart of the festival always takes place in the green space between the National Museum of Singapore and the Singapore Management University—even though it is inconveniently bisected by a major thoroughfare, Stamford Road. The location of the heart of the festival here is strategic because this was where Bras Basah Park was located—before it was excised to build the university.

Large festivals create vibrant spaces when they highlight and enhance the distinctive character of the area, making any physical disadvantages (like busy street crossings) of the place irrelevant.

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The Night Festival, in particular, has evolved a hybrid, historic-contemporary, old-new outlook due to its specific locale. The Bras Basah area is perhaps the most historic precinct in Singapore, with the highest concentration of national monuments, conserved buildings and places of worship. These historic buildings are used as a set and backdrop to often startlingly contemporary or “street”-culture oriented light and outdoor installations, as if to say to visitors: *heritage is not dead in the least, but very much alive, dynamic and cutting-edge*. Hence festivals could reframe the meaning of places and make them relevant to a wider audience through such creative collaboration and programming.

The buzz of major festivals can extend from the physical realm to the virtual one: there

were more than 6.3 million impressions (i.e., views, likes, shares, comments and post clicks on the Festival website, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and other social media channels) and a high online engagement rate of 12% (as opposed to an industry benchmark of 1%) for what is at its essence a festival promoting and celebrating a *heritage* precinct.

What one can conclude from the case of Nightfest (as the public now calls the festival colloquially), is that big festivals are critical to creating vibrant, well-loved and well-used public spaces, insofar as the festival builds on the strengths of the public space in question—what makes this space distinctive and unique—in its programming and brand identity, and focuses on servicing and delighting the local community first. ○