



Counterpoint: Adib Jalal

Small Projects are Closer to the Community

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Small-scale urban revitalisation projects can make a big impact as they are more people-centric, argues **Adib Jalal**, co-founder of Singapore placemaking studio Shophouse & Co.

Think of urban revitalisation in Singapore and large-scale, government-led initiatives come to mind. Public agencies have led the city's urban transformation since the 1960s, including a monumental multi-agency clean-up of the then-polluted Singapore River in the 1970s. The Housing & Development Board's Remaking our Heartland programme to renew housing estates since 2007 is another example.

These programmes usually aim for large-scale physical change, and are often capital intensive as a result. Their breadth and long-term nature necessitate a clear road map, resulting in grand master plans crafted by a select group of politicians, policymakers, planners and other major stakeholders. This approach is exclusive as it places responsibility on a few individuals to decide a single vision for the masses, and relies on the government for resources. It is also susceptible to single points of failure as the entire project follows the same plan.

An alternative approach considers urban revitalisation as a series of small steps focusing on placemaking: an organic, people-centred approach of developing the character and quality of a place. Guided by a general trajectory, each step acts as a scaffold for whatever comes next. These small-scale initiatives are best achieved through collaboration with the community and can contribute to urban revitalisation in different ways—from reducing risks through prototyping to engaging the community and catalysing further action.

First, the limited size and thus contained impact of small-scale projects offer opportunities to prototype ideas to revitalise spaces while mitigating risks. For example, Shophouse & Co carried out placemaking experiments at Telok Ayer Park over a day in January 2017 to trial ways to make parks in the Central Business District more comfortable for visitors during lunch hours. Ideas such as a mobile bicycle pit-stop for delivery cyclists and portable tables were tested by the community, who provided feedback that will inform future long-term infrastructural improvements. Thus, small-scale urban experiments can offer valuable user insights to reduce the risks associated with resource-intensive decisions.

Beyond the realm of ideas, small interventions could also make revitalisation efforts more inclusive by encouraging collaboration with stakeholders. The relatively small scale of the project helps individuals, groups and companies visualise how they can make a tangible difference to the vision, thus making them more open to joining the revitalisation process. When the community feels empowered to contribute assets, resources and insights, this strengthens their sense of belonging to both the process and its outcomes. As a result, not only is the hardware of the neighbourhood being revitalised, its heartware also gets a boost.

In 2013, Shophouse & Co took over an empty, neglected commercial unit at King George's Avenue to prototype new ideas to revitalise the space. As we shared our vision for it to become a part-retail, part-workshop and part-communal space, various entrepreneurs, artists and creatives came forward to offer their support. Companies sponsored hardware improvements such as fans, artificial turf and even a kitchen carpentry unit, while creative practitioners conducted programmes such as silkscreen printing workshops to activate the space across eight weeks. This collective effort empowered the community to take ownership of the intervention and instilled a sense of pride in the project. One of the partners even leased the unit and continued the vision with a mixed-use space that contains a bar, restaurant and creative workspace.

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Lastly, what is perhaps most potent about a small-scale intervention is its ability to catalyse other projects for sustainable urban revitalisation. Considered as sparks, small projects offer tangible evidence to show the community that positive change is coming. While some of these sparks will end up as nothing more than a fizzle, those that register as “quick wins” will start to trigger a reaction—stakeholders begin to believe in the revitalisation and a groundswell starts to form. One famous example is the pedestrianisation of Times Square in New York. Introduced as a six-month pilot programme in 2009, the temporary road closure and introduction of movable chairs saw an immediate spike in foot traffic and usage of public space. Its visible impact was key in overcoming the stakeholders’ initial scepticism. Eventually, the initiative garnered enough support for the city to adopt it permanently in 2010.

Also, despite being small, projects that start from the ground up have the potential to generate a deep sense of ownership and authenticity that no amount of capital investment can produce. Just look at how a once under-utilised plot of land in Aljunied Crescent was transformed into a well-loved community space after a participatory design firm, community groups, residents, grassroots leaders and other stakeholders came together to share their ideas and work towards a common vision for the space.

E.F. Schumacher was referring to economics when he wrote *Small is Beautiful*, but maybe we should look at small-scale urban interventions the same way too. They can drive an inclusive process towards a brighter possibility for our urban areas, but only if we start believing more in the power of the community than just the few in a committee to improve our city. 