

## PREFACE

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This international conference discussed the role of arts and culture in the revitalisation of cities, how arts and culture can breathe new life into familiar environments and create liveable places for citizens and communities.

The speakers ranged from Singapore's culture minister, arts festival directors from Australia and Malaysia, an Australian museum director, an assistant chief executive of Singapore's National Arts Council, a contemporary artist from Indonesia, and a Singapore architect/place-maker. The case studies ranged in scale from small interventions to the urban scape and pop-ups which have had the effect of incubators, to arts centres, annual arts festivals, a new museum and cultural policy.

All the speakers were in agreement on the importance of urban revitalisation through arts and culture as a building block for social cohesion, place-identity (whether at the level of the neighbourhood, the city or the nation), and the promotion of civil society.

The key ingredients for a successful revitalisation programme are summarised below.

### **Multi-Disciplinarity**

The diverse perspectives brought to the conference by the speakers underlined the importance of a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional approach to any revitalisation programme. Many different kinds of skills are needed to revitalise spaces, places and cities, and through that process – as pointed out by Ms Grace Fu, Singapore's Minister for Culture, Community and Youth – to build communities. Arts practitioners, policy makers, sources of funding support, social scientists and activists, all have a part to play.

### **People-Centred Approach, Listening To The Community**

An important point made by several of the speakers, and implicit in all the presentations, was that any revitalisation proposal must start with the intended beneficiaries, the community of citizens. The community is a stakeholder that needs to be engaged, and listening to the citizenry ensures that there are benefits for them and not only for elite consumers or those who need to show a return on cultural investment. Another interesting point that emerged was that listening to communities can also be a way of deriving content that will give the cultural offering a more distinctive local or even unique character.

Several speakers emphasised that the listening needs to take place not only pre-implementation, but on an on-going basis, given that populations in many parts of the developed world are becoming increasingly diverse, with corresponding changes in values and preferences, even in rural areas – like the Shepparton example - that were formerly relatively homogenous.

However, communication on its own was not sufficient but there also needed to be some sort of structure that enables people to feel empowered to make a difference. In other words, the way in which the community is engaged, the mechanics of consultations and the way feedback is gathered and fed into the decision-making process is clearly of vital importance here. To help broker this process, one suggestion put forth was that more people could be trained to mediate between the various stakeholders so that a win-win situation could be reached with diverse stakeholders who may have varying and competing demands.

Such mediators would also be useful in the Singapore example cited, where traditional cultural practices are being promoted as a means to bolster national identity.

### Acting Locally as well as Globally

On the other hand, it was clear from the presentations and discussions that cultural initiatives in an interconnected world also needed to act at the global level. So the programming for an arts festival for example, should address local interests and preferences but also bring in international performances. Doing so brings new perspectives to engage and inspire local audiences and arts practitioners. It also enlarges the audience base for any initiative, thereby increasing its popularity and chances of commercial success.

The Adelaide example illustrated the evolution of emphasis in programming over time from international to embrace the local, and now regional.

### Retaining the original character and soul of a place

A recurrent concern in the papers and discussions was that in the process of revitalising a space or area, the original character of an area and its community might be eroded or even changed beyond recognition. The process of gentrification of old neighbourhoods was a case in point, as was new developments that are not sympathetic or well connected to their social and physical settings. The case described, where a property developer engaged place-making professionals to help shape the public space within a new development that would fit the social and cultural needs of the local community, would surely have had a positive impact on the sense of public ownership of the facility. Several of the speakers stressed the need for the private sector to be more actively involved in such place-making initiatives.

### Strong Commitment and Funding

Any arts and culture related urban revitalisation initiatives usually benefit from strong commitment from civic or national levels of government, together with incentives, supporting schemes, funding and where needed, legislation.

A contrary example was the one of Yogya, where in a relatively low-cost environment, it was possible – despite the absence of government funding - to establish an artist-led arts centre with funding from foundations.

However, it was noted that funding always comes with strings attached. Any kind of financial assistance, whether public or private, invariably includes conditions, deliverables, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) etc that have to be met. There was clearly concern over the issue of funders' control. One way forward might be to acknowledge and accept the constraints and be smart as to the ways in which the recipients of funding can push the envelope. Funders are clients, and matching the project to the client is also a needed skill.

### Infrastructure

The importance of good infrastructure came in for some differences in perspective. Well-equipped performing spaces are certainly good to have. Yet the lack of such infrastructure need not be an impediment, as suggested by the example of Penang. Innovative use of urban space as performing arts venues can open up parts of cities that citizens have never seen, or make them see their city in a new light, thus promoting a greater sense of identification with place.

On the other hand, some speakers felt that cities which already have good cultural infrastructure need to look beyond programming those spaces to assess how they can activate public spaces as a whole.

### Measuring Success and Impact

Due to the limitations of time, little was presented on the impact assessment of arts and culture revitalisation initiatives. This is surely an important part of the equation, even though it is generally acknowledged that in-depth assessment (beyond the usual indicators such as footfall, revenue and polling research) is complex and often difficult to interpret. Perhaps for this reason, there seems to be a general lack of longitudinal studies that gauge the impact of arts- or culture-themed urban revitalisation initiatives over time.

Interesting in this regard are the examples where successful pop-ups became catalysts or incubators for more permanent cultural offerings. These cases argue in favour of a more organic, more measured pace of implementation - facilitating the set-up, assessing its impact, allowing momentum to gather and seeing where that takes the enterprise.

### Sustainability

All of the above will contribute to sustainability. Assistance and support, listening to what the community wants and values, mediating between various stakeholders, promoting a sense of community ownership, encouraging incubators, good branding and a unique proposition, follow-up and research, all come into play.

Understandably the conference focused on the success stories – and there was much to learn from them. Initiatives that did not fare as well as expected were conspicuous by their absence. Admittedly such research would require resources that are often not available, but without such data, we will not fully understand what it is that makes certain initiatives successful, and others not.

The conference ended on a positive note with general agreement that arts and culture are essential ingredients of any urban revitalisation programme, and tribute being paid to dedicated sector professionals, practitioners, and the stakeholders they serve with the support of committed government, private and people sectors.