

REVITALISING OUR CITY THROUGH ARTS AND CULTURE

Speech by Ms Grace Fu,
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at the Culture Academy's Annual Conference 2017

Our Speakers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning. I am happy to join you at the Culture Academy's second annual conference. This year's theme is Reviving and Revitalising Cities and Spaces Through Arts and Culture. Such platforms by the Culture Academy enable us to build new networks, deepen our relationships, and share our ideas among Singapore's cultural leaders. We are also privileged to have with us distinguished speakers from Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. For our overseas participants – a warm welcome to you! As we take a closer look at our cultural spaces and communities, let me share with you my thoughts on how the arts and culture have enabled the building of communities. I will use some examples from overseas, to illustrate how revitalisation efforts have led to a greater sense of identity and revitalisation of spaces.

All over the world, societies have harnessed the ability of the arts and culture to revitalise cities and spaces, through what we now call place-making. This is because the arts are “universal languages” which can transcend immediate differences to help build bridges across cultures and communities, while connecting us to our roots. Many other countries have also used arts and culture as part of urban revitalisation efforts, to create a sense of pride and identity among

their peoples. But the question I would like to lay down for us today is how we in Singapore can revitalise our spaces in a way that would endear them to fellow Singaporeans? I will share three thoughts on this question, which I hope will be useful to you in the conference programme.

Place-making Profiles the Distinctiveness of a City

First, it is important to recognise the ability of the arts to deepen our sense of national identity and belonging. I recently visited the West Kowloon Cultural District – a project that seeks to establish a vibrant cultural hub in the heart of Hong Kong. The largest arts and cultural project in Hong Kong, the West Kowloon Cultural District will span 40 hectares, which is about 50 football fields. It will have performing arts venues, museums, exhibitions, along with green open spaces and parks right by Victoria Harbour. The CEO of the West Kowloon Cultural District, Mr Duncan Pescod, said, “We are determined to create a cultural hub where the local art community can be inspired... we want everyone to see the progress we are making in creating a world class cultural district that Hong Kong people can be truly proud of.”

In Singapore, we have the Civic District, home to important stories in Singapore's historical,

architectural and cultural heritage. Through place-making, we have transformed some of our historic buildings, and given them a new lease of life. For example, the National Gallery Singapore, located in the old Supreme Court and City Hall, houses the largest public collection of modern art in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Singapore's first Parliament House, which stands on the site where the Temenggong of Johor used to occupy, is now The Arts House, home to the Singapore International Festival of Arts. Right next to it, we have the Asian Civilisations Museum, the only museum in the region devoted to exploring the artistic heritage of Asia. Just across the river, we have the beloved “Durian” – the Esplanade, known for its top-notch performances and cultural festivals such as *Huayi*, *Pesta Raya* and *Kalaa Utsavam* which are timed together with the Lunar New Year, Hari Raya Puasa and Deepavali. Each of these places is rich in history, but together, they can transform an entire district into a showcase of our distinctiveness and uniqueness to both Singaporeans, as well as our friends from other parts of the world. How can we make that happen?

Place-making Creates Shared Spaces, Promoting Diversity and Inclusivity

Second, the arts and culture can play a key role in bringing people of diverse backgrounds together. Place-making can create common spaces for people to gather, share and understand their experiences. For example, *Le Centquatre* is a community cultural centre in Paris, where you can find artists, youths, and the public participating in a variety of cultural pursuits. The place is anchored on a building that used to house the city's undertakers, hearses and horses. After redevelopment, it is now a community space that caters to all artistic disciplines – theatre, dance, music, and also other forms such as culinary, digital and urban arts. Located in a part of Paris with a concentration of migrant communities, *Le Centquatre* is also a place where social services (such as family counselling) are offered. *Le Centquatre* acts as a business incubator for social and cultural

enterprises, as it believes in being a centre of research, innovation and experimentation through creation. It is making arts and culture accessible to all, bringing communities of diverse ethnicities together and incubating new jobs through culture and design.

In Singapore, we too try to create community spaces for different audiences to come together to encourage mutual understanding and strengthen community ties. The National Arts Council's Arts in Your Neighbourhood initiative, and the People's Association's PAssionArts are brought to our shopping malls, hawker centres, HDB void decks and community clubs. Our community artists, musicians and interest groups make use of these common spaces to showcase their art and share their stories with their friends and neighbours. Everyone – young or old, amateur or professional – can participate and be inspired by arts and culture, as attendee, volunteer or performer. But can there be more? Can there be sustained activities?

Building an Endearing Home Together with the Community

Third, the process of place-making can encourage the community to actively co-create a space that they can identify with. *Le Carreau du Temple* in Paris was originally a thriving second-hand clothes market, with about 1000 traders in the 1950s to 1970s. However, business decreased significantly over time, resulting in empty buildings. Fortunately, the local city government responded to the wishes of residents in the neighbourhood, and redeveloped it into a new multi-purpose centre for arts, culture, sports and food. *Le Carreau du Temple* now partners some 50 associations to conduct lifestyle classes for the community, with a commission set up to select teachers for the classes and keep costs affordable. It also has residencies for budding artists within their studios and auditoriums, as a way of supporting the local scene. During its place-making process, *Le Carreau du Temple* was recognised for engaging and consulting the community extensively.

We, too, believe in the importance of involving our stakeholders and community in our place-making efforts. We want to create spaces that serve the needs of Singaporeans. The government has worked with public and private stakeholders on place-making activities over the years, including key arts and heritage events. For example, you may have been to the annual Singapore Night Festival, organised by the National Heritage Board and held in the Bras Basah Bugis district. Since its first edition in 2008, the number of stakeholders involved in the festival has grown by more than 10 times. These stakeholders have also shifted from being passive venue providers to active community partners, joining the NHB in co-creating the festival for Singaporeans to enjoy. But have we gained ownership? Can more local co-creation be facilitated?

Our Efforts have Contributed to a Vibrant Arts and Culture Scene

Our collective efforts appear to have borne fruit. Over 5 million people visited our national museums and heritage institutions in 2016. The number of non-ticketed arts and culture activities is at its highest level, while attendances of non-ticketed events exceeded 9 million. Put together, these positive trends suggest that we are on the right track in developing a more vibrant arts and culture scene.

We can do more in revitalising our city and spaces through place-making. We must continue to engage our stakeholders and to do so more deeply, to build on our existing efforts. As seen from some of the examples that I have shared, we need sustained engagement and purposeful programming to effectively make a place.

To accomplish this, I firmly believe that we need to invest in capability development, and learn from best practices locally and overseas. Our institutions must work effectively with each other, and look beyond bringing audiences or visitors into their respective institutions. We have made our respective institutions places for

culture, but together with the people, we can make Singapore a cultural place. It must be a place where culture is a part of our lives, part of our social narratives, part of our ethnic identity yet interacting with others to bring forth a new Singaporean identity. This process will require from you thought leadership, focused attention and strong teamwork. The conference will be a good place for these elements to take root.

Thank you once again for joining us today. I wish you all a fruitful conference!