

Adib Jalal

Co-Founder of Shophouse and Co

Adib Jalal is a place-maker, design curator, and community organiser whose life and work is a continued exploration of making our cities creative and inclusive places to live in.

He is currently the Co-founder and Director of place-making studio, Shophouse & Co, a consultancy that helps developers and communities create programmes and interventions that bring positive social and economic impact for the space and community.

Previously, Adib was the Festival Director of Archifest (2012 to 2013) where he restructured the festival to its current form by introducing the Archifest Pavilion competition and other content pillars alongside a new visual identity. Prior to that, he had stints as a lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic's School of Design, as a multi-disciplinary designer at award-winning design studio, FARM, and as the Founding Editor of FIVEFOOTWAY, one of the pioneer blogs about Asian cities which he co-founded in 2007. Passionate about nurturing communities, Adib also lends his time as a design mentor alongside contributing to his neighbourhood's grassroots organisation.

Adib holds a Bachelor (Hons) Architecture from National University of Singapore.

The Catalytic Effect of Creative Place-making

Place-making is a people-centred approach of building up the character and quality of a place. It is an organic process that involves the community, private, and public stakeholders to create a vibrant place that is sustainable. Specifically, in the field of “creative place-making”, this process leverages on the collective creativity of artists, creative practitioners, creative entrepreneurs, and regular citizens, to innovate new possibilities for the city and its urban spaces.

As a private place-making consultancy, Shophouse & Co considers the vitality of the city and its urban spaces core to its work. Playing the role of facilitator amongst various stakeholders, we use our projects as platforms for creativity to thrive and add social, cultural, and economic value to the urban space.

This presentation will showcase selected creative place-making projects that were designed to inspire and demonstrate possibilities for the urban space with a view to spark long-term change. These projects will also illustrate how they were used as a platform for various stakeholders to express their creativity and be involved in the re-imagination of their city and urban spaces.

THE CATALYTIC EFFECT OF CREATIVE PLACE-MAKING

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What is Place-making?

'Place-making' is the people-centred approach towards the development of the character and quality of a place, space or land. It is both a process and an attitude in urban development; one that recognises the dynamic nature of cities and its communities, and one that puts utmost importance on the benefit and welfare of the people.

Place-making is often employed without first qualifying the character of the land. Property owners and developers commonly want a place to be "highly vibrant and exciting"; however, this may not always be desired.

For example, the character of the land could be inherently quaint, peaceful, and laid-back. In such a scenario, we need to ask if our actions and projects add value to this quality, or if it ends up destroying what is present. 'Vibrancy' might not be the answer for such a place!

We also need to further investigate the nature of the 'place' that we are 'making' because it risks excluding the existing community. Instead of place-making, we end up place-taking. A place-maker has to question himself, "What kind of place am I trying to create?"

Place-making or Place-taking?

In 2017, my studio, Shophouse & Co embarked on a study of existing place-making frameworks from around the world in relation to our own projects. This study was distilled into what we call the 'Qualities of a good place'. What we found is that these qualities are people-centric; often featuring a direct relation with one's positive physical, mental, and emotional relationship with the location. That is the key to good place-making and we hope to publish insights to this study at a later date.

As a studio, we approach place-making in a discipline-agnostic manner: this means we leverage the tools, skills, and output of various disciplines to create good places for people to live, work and play. Over the past five years, Shophouse and Co has executed a wide-range of deliverables: from one-off to recurring events, design and building of pavilions, street furniture and producing strategic plans and guidelines; all of it with the intent of enhancing the relationship between people and their physical space.

The fact is, not all beautiful public spaces are good places, and not all events are place-making programmes. Unfortunately, the industry is still young and we often see private and public land managers and owners being seduced by the 'image of place-making' such as public art

installations and street closures, and neglected to critically question if and how these improve the quality of a place and the communities in it. We bear the responsibility of asking questions such as, "How will the local community benefit from these projects?", "How will drawing a large crowd improve a sense of belonging and authenticity?". Place-making must always be about community.

The Role of the Built Environment in Place-making

Well designed spaces and buildings can do many things for our sense of place. It can make us feel welcomed and comfortable, delight our senses, instil a sense of pride and belonging, communicate a neighbourhood's identity and history, and more.

Physical spaces and objects can also affect our behaviour and communal interaction. For example, a public space without public furniture would not welcome people to linger. At best, it would be a space to travel through. Likewise, a public space without shade would be a wonderful urban planning gesture, but of little use to the community especially in a tropical country such as Singapore. It might be a venue for intentionally planned events, but never for informal and spontaneous use by the community.

Through the lens of place-making, buildings, and urban spaces are in themselves not the city. They are merely the props and backdrop for our lives. It is through shaping our built environment sensitively, encouraging the community to use it, that we can then build up a relationship between people and place, ultimately making it not just usable but loveable.

The Role of Arts and Culture in Place-making Efforts

'Arts & Culture' does not happen in a vacuum nor emerge out of nothingness but instead emerge over time through the interaction of people and with the city they live in. It is therefore a manifestation of the richness and

diversity of ideas and bonds in the communities. A city with a vibrant art and cultural scene is a sign of active citizenry, thriving with strong entrepreneurial and creative spirit. Ultimately, these are the layers of human expression that add depth and meaning to the experience of our cities - all of which are hallmarks of great places.

However, arts & culture require space and time to emerge, and public spaces have a very important role to play in this.

Public spaces are where we, as a society and a city, manifest our capacity to embrace diversity. It is where we can choose to live our lives outwardly, and through this expression, enable bonds to form and exchange of ideas to occur. As communal platforms, public spaces also offer us the luxury to linger, and simply 'Be'. It is where we can pause, establish a connection within ourselves, the urban environment around us, and other people in it; and in these moments enable gestation of the creative spirit.

Through the cultivation of public life, we can set up the conditions for arts & culture to emerge in an authentic and organic manner, and making our public spaces great places for people is a step in that direction.

Place-making Singapore

Singaporeans are now actively pursuing their need for a sense of belonging, and holistic wellbeing. We crave to deepen our connection with the city and with each other. We are pursuing the aspiration of an environment that enables us to thrive as we live, love, play, and work. As Edward Glaser says in his book *Triumph of the City*, "Now more than ever, the well-being of human society depends upon our knowledge of how the city lives and breathes" (Glaser, 2012).

Also, as a city-state, we cannot afford to get our city development wrong and we are now at a point in human history where competition between cities is intensifying due to rapid urbanisation and advancements in mobility

of people, goods, and information. While we have reaped the benefits of rapid development over the past decades, the way for us to remain relevant and competitive in the future is to elevate Singapore from a liveable city to a *loveable* city.

These challenges are best addressed through place-making; the process which puts people at the centre of the urban development. Through this approach, Singapore can tap on local knowledge and resources to create lovable environments and solutions that are authentic and provide people with a strong sense of ownership. Also, as place-making is an inherently collaborative and multidisciplinary process, Singapore could find itself innovating original and sustainable ideas for the city that will make it a thought leader of urbanism in the world.

The Future of Place-making

Measuring the impact of place-making is a tricky affair, something that is perhaps best encapsulated by what Sociologist, William Cameron said: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (Cameron, 1963).

While there is a need to measure for diagnostics and impact-measurement, we also need to be highly aware what this data is telling us. Is the data acquired a proxy for an outcome, or are these the data points we need to optimise for? Is the value representative of the immediate impact of a project, or is that the long-term outcome that we desire?

If we only measure the performance of our urban life through financial metrics such as consumer expenditure or occupancy rates; marketing metrics such as social media following; or urban efficiency such as traffic throughput; then our city will end up being optimised for that. However, if we believe that great places are all about the relationship between people and their built environment, then we need a robust framework that embraces

the idea of ‘multiple bottom-lines’: where public life is measured alongside these other metrics.

Place-making is a rapidly emerging field and there are few urban practitioners working on this front. Urbanist Jan Gehl is one such rarity, with his Public Life Data Protocol (Gehl Institute, 2018). Over at Shophouse & Co, we have our own proprietary framework which is better able to capture the nuances of a tropical Asian city. Many of these frameworks embrace both qualitative and quantitative data, and draw also on research methodologies from disciplines such as anthropology to measure the broad impact of place-making efforts.

Conclusion

Discussions about our urban future in recent times have often revolved around concepts like Innovation, Disruption, Smart Cities, Resilience, Arts & Culture, and Liveability; but Place-making might be the most important one. Its multifaceted nature lends itself to be a thread to tie these challenges together, and more importantly, the attitude towards urban development that ensures the community is firmly at the heart of the next evolution of our city. As Jane Jacobs, pioneer in the field of place-making wrote in her 1958 essay, *Downtown is for People*, “There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans” (Jacobs, 2018).

About Place-making in the Park, Telok Ayer Park

Located in Singapore’s busy Central Business District, Telok Ayer Park sits at the intersection of the Telok Ayer heritage district, Singapore’s CBD, and the popular Amoy Street Food Centre. With its shady canopy afforded by the mature trees, it has all the potential to be a place of respite for those who live, work, and play in the CBD but instead, merely used as a transitory route.

After studying the site through observations and conversations with users, Shophouse & Co derived and tested their ideas that would encourage people to linger and use the park during their lunch-time break. By embracing

the Light, Quick, and Cheap methodology, the studio brought in movable furnitures for users, interactive art installations to create points of interest, and even a pit stop for the food delivery cyclists who are active in the district.

These interventions were received positively by the local community and the ideas shared to a wider audience during Singapore Design Week, and also with the agencies in hope that some will be adopted and incorporated for future development.

Images courtesy of Shophouse & Co.



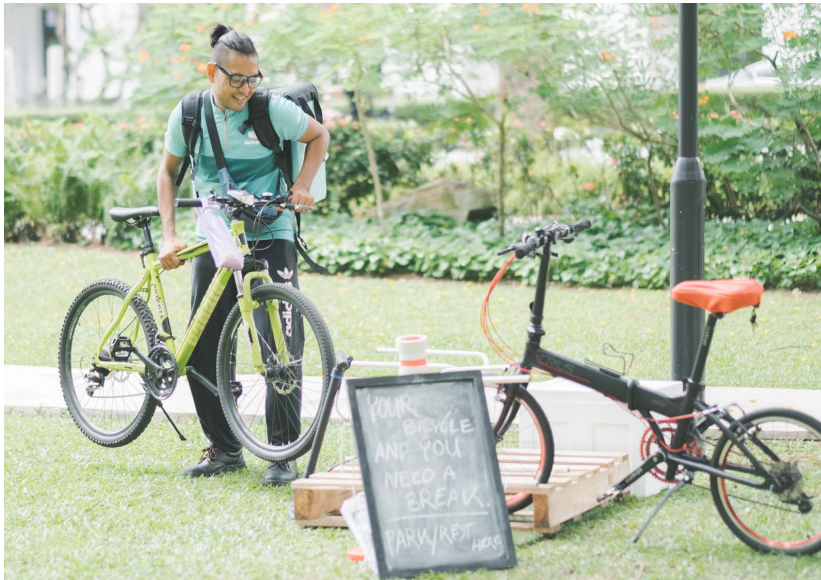
An interactive balloon-popping de-stress station.



Overview of Telok Ayer Park during prototype day in real-life lunchtime conditions.



Members of the public utilising our crates as temporary tables.



A prototype of a bicycle pit-stop with bike pump, parking, and water station.

About Transitional____, 115 King George's Avenue

Transitional____ by Shophouse & Co is a platform that unlocks the potential of vacant spaces in transition to a new lease of life. Each edition of the project is an opportunity for creative entrepreneurs to test ideas, spark collaborations and ultimately live up and prototype new ideas for the space.

115KG is a building at King George's Avenue nestled in an area with hardware suppliers and hotels as its neighbours. It was transitioning from its industrial past to a new lease of life as a home for creative entrepreneurs, but it was a transition that was uncertain due to the existing character of the neighbourhood. Inspired by the raw richness of the area, Shophouse & Co then prototyped a hybrid retail-workshop-communal space by using industrial materials from the neighbourhood and with the support of various

local independent businesses who were keen to test new concepts.

Other than the physical transformation, a variety of creative programmes were also organised over the 6-weeks prototype to introduce a new demographic to the neighbourhood. This was done in partnership with creatives in the area, and also emerging creative entrepreneurs such as Naiise who were then only prototyping their second physical pop-up store.

Not long after the prototype ended, the unit was leased to a tenant who was inspired by our prototype, and realised its potential as a hybrid creative space with a F&B component.

Images courtesy of Shophouse & Co.



Overview of 'Transitional____01' designed to reflect the industrial heritage of the neighbourhood.



View of the pop-up retail section by online shopping platform, Naiise.



A workshop by one of the creative partners.



Before the conversion of 115KG building.

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