

Why We Need more Community Museums

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Residents of Queenstown have come together to set up a heritage museum in the former wet market at Block 38, Commonwealth Avenue, which the government gazetted for conservation last year.

The residents want to showcase artefacts, old photographs and maps to chronicle the estate's 100-year history and house an activity space for residents. Currently, the civic group, My Community, which is leading the push for the museum, is trying to get the HDB to allocate 178.5 sq m (just under three three-room flats), or the entire first floor of the market, to the museum.

Community museums, which display art, document a neighbourhood's social history and offer public spaces where people can interact, are not commonplace in Singapore. But they should be.

There is only one community museum that opened in 2013. At the opening of Our Museum @ Taman Jurong, the area's Member of Parliament, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, spoke of how Taman Jurong had a unique place in independent Singapore's history. "This was where the first flats were built in the late '60s and early '70s to house workers in the new Jurong industrial estate and their families," he said in a Facebook post. He added that community museums could also become new arts spaces that people could own and enjoy in the neighbourhoods.

Hong Kong holds useful lessons for Singapore in this regard. It has an eclectic landscape of museums dedicated to teaware, trains and horse racing, which celebrates the lives and interests of ordinary residents.

Located in the working-class district of Sham Shui Po, the Mei Ho House is one of Hong Kong's earliest public-housing projects. It was built in 1954 to shelter the people left homeless after a fire destroyed the Shek Kip Mei squatter area a year earlier. Legendary film director John Woo, known for films such as *A Better Tomorrow*, grew up there.

Today, the H-shaped Mei Ho House has been conserved and converted into a youth hostel. A section in the building, occupying two levels, serves as a museum to chronicle the estate's journey from squalid living conditions in the '50s to relative prosperity in the '70s. The museum showcases artefacts donated by former residents: Neither expensive nor rare, these exhibits include household utensils, football match tickets, and a Chinese restaurant paper bag.

Complementing the artefacts are anecdotes by former residents. There is a certain Lai Wai Lun who, as a student, was too poor to afford public transport and had to run to school. The exhibit's commentary quips: "The Lai brothers were trained under poverty to be good sprinters."

Other stories of residents sleeping “under a starry sky in a cool night” portray the bittersweet life of an impoverished community accustomed to prostitution, gang fights and scuffles over the use of public taps.

Likewise, the Wanchai House of Hong Kong Stories showcases memorabilia celebrating the city’s popular culture and residents’ artwork. One project invited children living in Wanchai — part of which is a red-light district immortalised in the film, *The World of Suzie Wong* — to visualise their neighbourhood in the next 20 years.

My museum visit coincided with last year’s student-led Occupy protests, and newspaper clippings on the demonstrations were pasted on its walls to initiate conversation about related issues. Earlier, an intergenerational workshop was held for residents to discuss their impressions of the Hong Kong police force, whose image had been tarnished by their heavy-handed treatment of the protesters. Regular music concerts and English classes on Wednesdays bring residents to the museum frequently.

Both the Wanchai House and Mei Ho House museums are different — the former is a second home or favoured hangout, the latter stands in memorial to Hong Kong’s spirit of tenacity in the face of adversity.

The relevance of both museums suggests there is no universal model for community museums. A community museum hardly exists or functions independently of its wider social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Often, its scale, roles and contributions are shaped by the assumptions and actions of those running it.

Had artists and volunteers not conscientiously engaged the *kaifong* (neighbours in Cantonese), the Wanchai House of Stories might have ended up resembling its Mei Ho counterpart, simply functioning as an exhibition space.

A community museum is also a work in progress, constantly fine-tuned from a long-drawn process of interaction and negotiation among the various stakeholders — policymakers, curators, volunteers, residents, funders, and even visitors.

A community is not without friction, and if there is any lesson to be gleaned from these museums, it is for community museums to not shy away from discussing critical and potentially controversial issues. It is through discussions that challenge our values and viewpoints that we develop tolerance and empathy as a society.

The Queenstown museum, which is expected to be ready in 2020, can even recount through its exhibits and oral histories the eventful journey of how it came to fruition. Singapore’s landscape has undergone rapid changes as the city modernises, and residential areas expand to accommodate a growing population. Community museums are useful markers of an area’s heritage and character, and serve to encourage residents to co-create art for their community.

The two Hong Kong community museums are privately funded. The Mei Ho House Museum was established by the Hong Kong Youth Hostels Association, while the Wan Chai House of Hong Kong Stories received sponsorship from the Hongkong Bank Foundation.

In contrast, Our Museum @ Taman Jurong is the product of a partnership between the National Heritage Board, Taman Jurong Citizens' Consultative Committee, Taman Jurong Community Arts and Culture Club and the People's Association.

This should encourage those who want to set up community museums in Singapore. Instead of driving the project on their own, they can mobilise the different quarters of society to contribute their valuable resources to the endeavour — funding from corporations, know-how from artists, government agencies and civil society, and artefacts, artwork and stories from residents.

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