Institute of Policy Studies

Inspiration from Hong Kong's 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 the size of three 3-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.

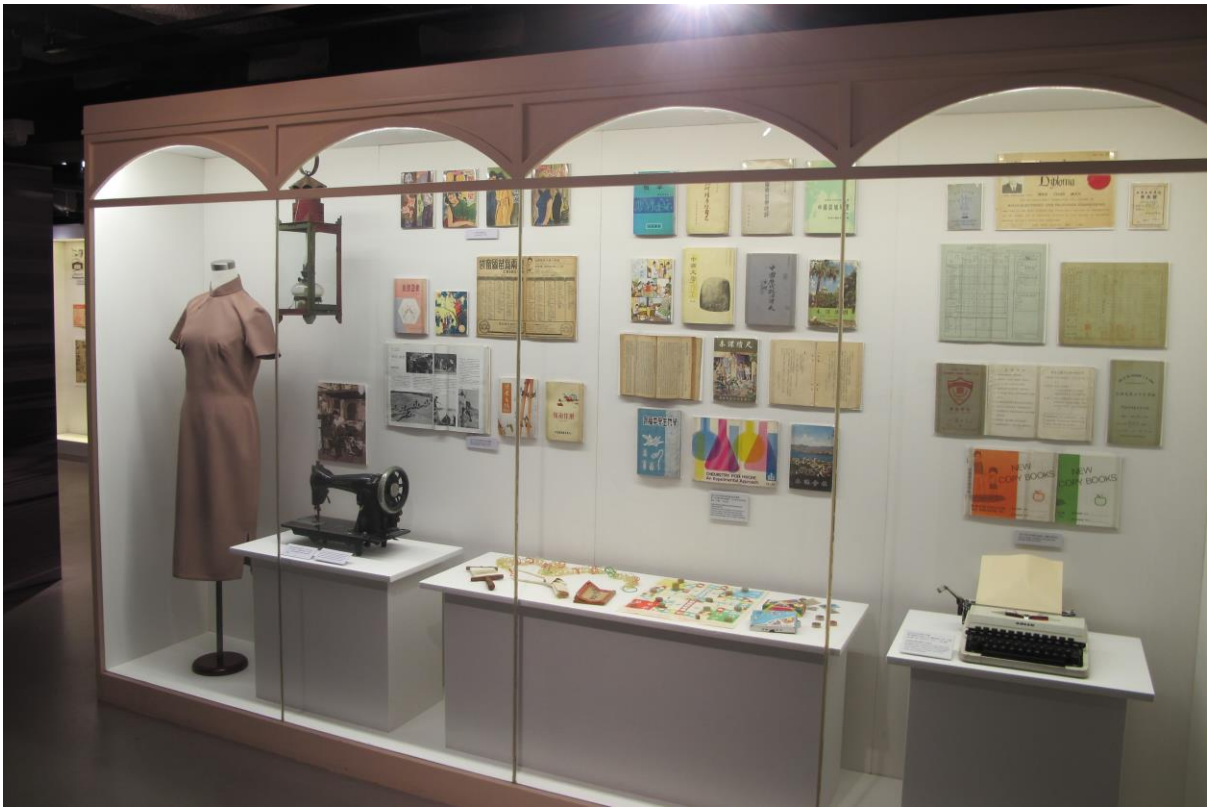
There is only one community museum that opened in 2013. At the opening of Our Museum @ Taman Jurong, the area's Member of Parliament, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, spoke of how Taman Jurong had a unique place in independent Singapore's history. "This was where the first flats were built 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 celebrate the lives and interests of ordinary residents.

Privileging the Commoner Narratives

Located in the working-class district of Sham Shui Po, the Mei Ho House is one of Hong Kong's earliest public housing projects, built to shelter the people left homeless after a fire destroyed the Shek Kip Mei squatters in 1953.

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 squalid living conditions in the 1950s to its relative prosperity in the 1970s.



The Heritage of Mei Ho House museum showcases artefacts donated by former residents. Neither expensive nor rare, these exhibits — including household utensils, football match tickets and a Chinese restaurant paper bag — are cherished personal mementoes that epitomise the owners' fond memories of yesteryears.

Complementing the artefacts are former residents' anecdotes, where a familiar figure is film director John Woo whose famous works include *A Better Tomorrow*. He recalled the days when his family slept on the streets and depended on emergency relief. He also worked as a restaurant delivery boy when not watching Cantonese movies at the Paramount Theatre in Mongkok.

But the museum's stars are ultimately the ordinary residents. There is a certain Lai Wai Lun who, as a student, was too poor to afford public transport. His story reads: "Sometimes he would run to school to avoid being late… the Lai brothers were trained under poverty to be good sprinters."

Other stories of residents sleeping near staircases and "under a starry sky in a cool night" further illuminate the Hong Kong spirit of tenacity against adversity. Lest one suspects the museum of romanticising poverty, the narratives do portray the nuanced, bitter-sweet life of an impoverished community accustomed to prostitution, gang fights and scuffles between neighbours over the use of public taps.

Empowering the Community

The Wanchai House of Hong Kong Stories likewise showcases memorabilia celebrating the city's popular culture as well as artworks by residents. 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.

The art pieces may come across as amateurish but to the artist involved in the project, what matters most is the residents' enjoyment in the art-making process.

Also important to the artists and volunteers running this museum-cum-arts space are empowering the residents and exposing them to pressing issues that transcend their neighbourhood.

The museum's wooden stools and benches are crafted by a retired carpenter who saw himself as useless as he could no longer put his skills to good use. Sensing his despair, the museum's staff encouraged him to conduct carpentry workshops for young people. The overwhelming response motivated him to set up a studio to pass his skills to future generations.

My museum visit coincided with the student-led Occupy protests, and newspaper clippings on the protests were pasted on the museum's walls to initiate conversations on the related issues. Earlier, an intergenerational workshop was held for the residents to discuss their impressions of the Hong Kong police force whose image had been tarnished by their heavy-handed treatment of the protesters. I was informed by the same artist that the younger residents were surprised by the older residents' positive impressions of the police as they had lived through an era when police corruption was rampant.

Judging from the sharing of pizza, wine and jokes among the residents, volunteers and artists, a sense of community clearly resides in this museum. English language lessons are

also conducted every Wednesday and music concerts take place regularly, with residents and indie bands sharing the stage while cafés nearby contribute food and drinks.

The community evoked in the Heritage of Mei Ho House is however one that no longer exists and I wonder how many of the visitors who breezed through the exhibits were former residents themselves.

The contrasting observations made at these museums suggest that 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 the 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 either 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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