

IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series Two: Roundtable on Place Management and Placemaking in Singapore

By Jacqueline Liu, *IPS Research Assistant*, and
Shawn Chua, *IPS Project Manager*

OVERVIEW

In Singapore, the government has adopted a strategy it calls “place management” to inject “heart and soul” into the city. These efforts include greening the streets, providing benches, and closing roads for pedestrian access, public activities and arts-centred events such as the [i Light Marina Bay](#) festival and the [Singapore Night Festival](#). Cities like New York to Paris have also attempted a similar strategy known as “placemaking” to develop human-centred places and improve the quality of life for their residents. “Creative placemaking”, a related concept, has also emerged to refer to the use of arts and culture to animate public spaces and neighbourhoods. However, despite their growing popularity, place management and placemaking remain vague concepts.

On 13 November 2015, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), together with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), organised a roundtable entitled [“Place Management and Placemaking in Singapore”](#). It sought to understand how place management is defined and to discuss its successes, challenges and the role of the arts and creative industries in such strategies.

Chaired by IPS Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How, the roundtable featured presentations on place management efforts by three government agencies — the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB). Attended by more than 45 policymakers, arts practitioners, consultants and business owners, the roundtable also discussed whether top-down efforts were sustainable and authentic compared to ground-up initiatives, and raised questions on how privately-driven placemaking efforts could be further encouraged and supported.

This is the second roundtable in the [IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series](#) — a platform to discuss arts and cultural policy-related issues in Singapore.

OPENING REMARKS

The roundtable was opened by IPS Special Research Advisor, Arun Mahizhnan, and Director of SAM, Dr Susie Lingham. Both shared how this roundtable was part of an important partnership between IPS and SAM to create a place for contemplation and discussion on placemaking and place management. Placemaking transforms the abstract concept of space into a place with identity, Dr Lingham said. She urged participants to be

empowered to think, discuss and trust one another to create Singapore as a place and a home.

PRESENTATIONS

Place Management

by Mr Jason Chen, Director of Place Management, URA

Mr Chen presented an overview of place management efforts by URA, the coordinating agency for place management in Singapore.

Place management is defined as a coordinated, area-based, multi-stakeholder approach to improving precincts and making them more attractive for the benefit of its users and transforming them into destinations, he said. Place management began in 2008 when a Place Management Coordinating Forum (PMCF) was established with URA as the lead coordinator. A National Place Management Framework has also been jointly developed with key stakeholder agencies, including the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), the National Heritage Board (NHB), and the National Arts Council (NAC). The three strategic objectives of the National Place Management Framework are:

1. Enhance the precinct;
2. Ensure sustainability of the precinct; and
3. Build strong communities.

In Marina Bay, the URA spearheaded place management initiatives such as installing deck chairs and providing event spaces at The Promontory. It has also produced events such as the Marina Bay Singapore Countdown on New Year's Eve and the i Light Marina Bay festival. For the Singapore River precinct, URA formed an intermediary known as the [Singapore River One Precinct Association](#) to oversee place management initiatives.

Ground-up initiatives and community support are crucial in ensuring the sustainability of place management efforts, Mr Chen said. "Freeloaders" – stakeholders who benefit from the efforts of others without contributing — were one of the challenges faced. However, this could be overcome with legislation through a formal place management model known as the Business Improvement District (BID) model where each stakeholder is obligated to contribute to overall place management efforts.

Placemaking the Civic District — Where Worlds Meet

by Ms Rebecca Li, Deputy Director of Precinct Development, NAC

Ms Li shared that NAC and National Parks Board (NParks) have been the agencies place managing the Civic District. NAC facilitates partnerships and consultations with private and public institutions to create an identity for the district and to coordinate programmes, she said. Their [efforts](#) also include creating more green spaces, improving pedestrian connectivity and installing public art, all aimed at creating a place that the "man in the street" could identify with.

Bras Basah.Bugis (BBB) — Be Inspired. Be Creative. Be More.

by Mr Kennie Ting, Director of Development, NHB

As the designated place manager of [Bras Basah.Bugis \(BBB\)](#), NHB aims to cultivate strong partnerships with public and private stakeholders to activate the precinct and to inject more “street life”, Mr Ting said.

For the Singapore Night Festival, for example, NHB has leveraged support from stakeholders to increase vibrancy in the BBB precinct. Since its first edition in 2008, the number of stakeholders involved in the Night Festival has increased. The number of visitors rose from 40,000 visitors over one weekend to 680,000 over two weekends. Stakeholders have also shifted from being passive venue providers to partners who actively co-programmed the festival. He concluded his presentation by sharing that the Night Festival’s relative success and popularity was a result of an eight-year effort by NHB and the National Museum of Singapore to engage stakeholders.

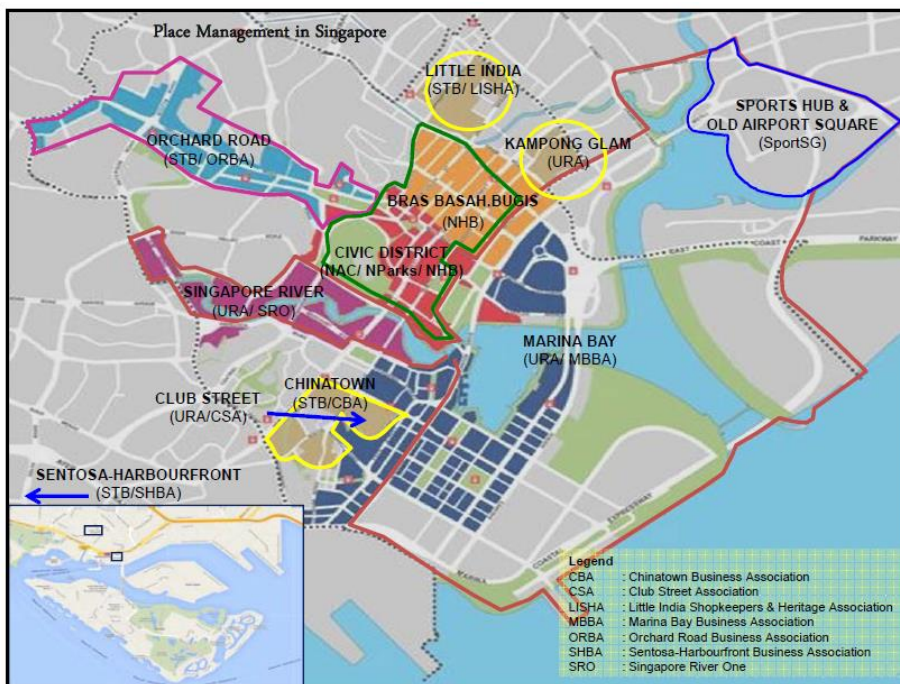


Figure 1: Areas in the city centre that have been earmarked for place management

RESPONDENTS

IPS Research Fellow Dr Hoe Su Fern was the first respondent. She provided the historical context and an overview of various approaches towards placemaking elsewhere and place management in Singapore. Activities geared towards improving or transforming a precinct, otherwise known as “place intervention strategies”, share similar desired outcomes for “vitality”, “liveability”, “vibrancy” and “buzz”. However, such terms are nebulous and expansive, and hence, challenging to implement and evaluate effectively. Dr Hoe urged for more clarity and better appreciation of nuances between outcomes and approaches towards placemaking and place management. She also questioned whether place management and

placemaking were fundamentally different approaches, and if placemaking was even possible in Singapore, especially in making authentic places.

Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director of Drama Box, was the second respondent. He highlighted the importance of sustainability in placemaking efforts. Key to this sustainability is creating a sense of connection between the community and the space. There is also a need for viable and equitable places where all residents regardless of socio-economic class are able to have a sense of belonging. He argued that this can only be achieved through a ground-up process of engaging with the community and called for the creation of spaces shaped by social interaction rather than transactional spaces shaped by commerce. He cited the example of his company's community arts project called, "[Both Sides Now](#)". The project featured exhibitions and plays that broached the taboo topic of dying. Held in Toa Payoh and Yishun, the project attracted passers-by who "played games" and talked "animatedly" with relatives, friends and strangers on the issue of living and dying. In this sense, the project eventually "turned a space into a place" where people could gather and share advice and their stories.

OPEN DISCUSSION

More support for privately-driven placemaking efforts

Several participants called for greater engagement between government and private stakeholders who have initiated placemaking efforts. One said most efforts were driven top-down by government, but felt that private ground-up initiatives were also important and should not be ignored. Another agreed and highlighted the difficulties of sustaining such efforts due to rising costs and urged for government support.

Need to invest in critical programming through capacity building for arts and cultural practitioners

Some participants noted that the government relies too much on infrastructural changes in place management. It should focus more on, for example, the quality of programmes that could activate and maximise the potential of spaces.

One participant said that programmes should have a lasting impact on participants and audiences. These programmes are often celebratory but should also challenge, educate and prompt citizens to think critically about their surroundings, relationships, and issues. There is a need to invest in capacity building for arts and cultural practitioners to create and organise such programmes, another said. Therefore, the government should not just work with institutions and businesses but should also involve artists, arts managers and curators in the decision-making process.

Need to preserve and sustain authentic places

Some participants suggested a need to preserve the authenticity of a place in placemaking and place management. With the government taking the lead in developing or redeveloping spaces and districts, such spaces tend to be over-regulated and too carefully manicured, resulting in sterile places.

One participant cited Mustafa shopping centre in Little India as an example of an authentic place. It has grown, although in a haphazard or chaotic manner, to become a confluence of different cultures and nationalities. Another participant said that some spaces should be set aside for contemplation and respite from the city. He called for a more “minimalist” approach where citizens are free to claim the space as their own.

Some participants raised the issue of place sustainability. The rapid and excessive change to spaces in Singapore has resulted in a sense of “rootlessness” amongst residents, one said. Many efforts often remove “spatial anchors” that provide “familiar frames of reference” for users of the space. As such, there is a need to balance between retaining the pre-existing layout and characteristics of the space and introducing new elements to improve the physical aspects of the space.

Residents should also have a say in how public spaces are used, a participant said. There must be genuine engagement and consultation with all stakeholders. For example, the food street at Smith Street was created in Chinatown to restore street life in the area. However, were the hawkers in the surrounding food centres consulted about how it might affect their businesses, one questioned.

CONCLUSION

All three presenters rounded off the discussion by saying they would engage a wider range of stakeholders, including artists, to work together to achieve mutual understanding and a common vision for places and precincts in Singapore.

A full report of the presentations, discussion, and ideas exchanged at the roundtable will be published on the [IPS website](#) in January 2016.

A follow-up seminar on placemaking in Singapore is planned for mid-2016.

Jacqueline Liu is a Research Assistant (Arts) at IPS. Shawn Chua is a Project Manager at IPS.

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