

SURVEY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF SINGAPORE'S BUILT HERITAGE AND LANDMARKS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Survey on the Perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage and Landmarks seeks to understand public opinion towards built heritage in Singapore, drawing on an opinion poll of 53 heritage sites. Given that scholarly and policy-centred discussions of heritage value and conservation are usually centred on the perspectives of experts, the report focuses on how average Singaporeans perceive the meaning, purpose and value of built heritage, and how these perceptions influence the sense of national identity.

What makes Singaporeans of different ages think of a site as valuable or historic? How can we form more meaningful relationships with our built environment in general, including places that may not be officially considered heritage sites?

Methodology

For each of the 53 sites, respondents indicated whether they were aware of the sites, and if so, how they rated the sites in terms of four domains: knowledge, memories, physical appeal and importance.

Responses were compared across three age groups: 18–28 years, 29–48 years and above 48 years. Next, underlying variables were identified which may drive respondents' evaluations of the sites in general. These were then used to examine the relationship between heritage and national identity for each age group.

Key Findings

- *Public perceptions of heritage sites are often varied, and efforts to promote heritage should account for age as one important factor which affects respondents' point of view.* Personal memories and societal narratives are likely to influence whether certain places are valued as heritage sites, and if so, how. As these experiences and social contexts are different for respondents of different ages, contrasting perspectives were often observed when the function of a site had changed over time. For example, the former St. Joseph's Institution, which became the Singapore Art Museum in 1995, was regarded as one of the most important (6th), well-remembered (9th) and well-known (7th) by the youngest group of respondents. However, for the two older groups, it was not ranked as highly in relation to other sites.
- *Recent contestations over conservation may resonate more with the two younger groups of respondents than those aged 49 and above.* In recent years, public debates around conservation and advocacy movements have largely played out in online

spaces. This may explain why some of these hotly debated sites were more important to the younger respondents than those aged 49 and above, who are less likely to participate in these online spaces. The Toa Payoh Lorong 6 Dragon Playground and Bukit Brown Cemetery are two examples. They were evaluated as more important by the two younger groups than the oldest group of respondents, even if they were not necessarily more well-remembered.

- *Programmes and initiatives led by institutions, especially educational ones, have a strong impact on public perceptions across all age groups.* Sites identified as iconic symbols of Singapore in efforts to promote tourism or national identity, such as the Merlion, were generally given favourable ratings in all four domains by respondents of all age groups. Furthermore, factor analysis suggests that the two younger groups of respondents associated some sites with each other because of the experiences of school field trips, including Fort Canning, Singapore Science Centre and Fort Siloso. To these respondents, these three sites were also more well-known, well-remembered and important than they were to the respondents aged 49 and above.
- *National identity for the two older groups of respondents was influenced by notions of symbolic significance and personal memory, but factors predicting strength of national identity among the youngest group were more elusive.* The youngest group aged 18–28 was the only one for which none of the factors derived from this sample of sites significantly predicted their sense of national identity. This suggests that the relationship between perceptions of heritage and strength of national identity is less straightforward for respondents under 29. Alternatively, for them, national identity may be more directly associated with other sites which are not covered in this sample.

Defining and managing heritage in Singapore has to account not just for ideas of historical and architectural value, but also the social life of sites – how they are used, thought of and talked about in an everyday context. For policymakers and heritage activists, this means that there is a need to strike a balance between educating the general public about how experts have identified heritage value in certain sites, and incorporating the views and experiences of the wider public into definitions of heritage to begin with.

Meanwhile, each individual living in Singapore has a stake in built heritage too, and can benefit from incorporating it more consciously into social life, by understanding more about its history and actively shaping it in the present. This can translate to a stronger sense of collective solidarity, as reflected in the positive relationships between valuing heritage and national identity found across all ages.