

# **Merlion, Changi Airport Control Tower ranked as popular, important 'heritage sites' by Singaporeans: Study**

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***Today***, 15 August 2019

The Merlion, Changi Airport's Control Tower and the Singapore Botanic Gardens were the top three "heritage sites" that young and old Singaporeans ranked as the most well-known and physically appealing.

This is the finding from a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), which was released on Wednesday (Aug 14). Titled Perceptions of Singapore's Built Heritage and Landmarks, the study sought to understand public opinion towards built heritage.

Last year, it surveyed 1,515 Singaporeans aged 18 to 70, who rated the three sites highly in many instances — based on their awareness, knowledge and memories of the places, as well as the physical appeal and perceived importance of these sites.

Participants were divided into three age groups: 18 to 28, 29 to 48, and 49 and above.

They were told to rate 53 sites, which were above 30 years old and included a mix of those that were and were not conserved, at risk of demolition, were already demolished and were significant to different social groups.

The study found that in the case of the Merlion, it was an example of how "promotional programmes and initiatives led by the state", especially educational ones, had a significant influence on respondents' perceptions of sites.

The study's authors Natalie Pang, Seah Chia Shih Paveena and Wong Kwang Lin noted that although the Merlion has "little functional utility to the average Singaporean, and it is unlikely that most people visit it regularly", respondents across the age groups evaluated it as "one of the most memorable, well-known, aesthetically appealing and important sites".

"This is probably because of its prominence in branding Singapore as a tourist destination, and in the conscious promotion of a unique Singaporean identity," they said.

This finding also seems to mark a shift in perceptions in the last 20 years, since previous studies have found that only a minority of Singaporeans considered the Merlion "an embodiment of Singapore heritage or liked it as a monument", they added.

The authors noted that an earlier study from 2003 had anticipated this warming of sentiment. That study had said that despite the hollow fable behind the Merlion — and maybe because of the hollowness of its meaning — it would perhaps grow to be an apt symbol of national identity in a nation bent on economic success.

## **PERCEIVING NATIONAL IDENTITY**

During the study, the respondents were also asked, among other things, for their views on the value of heritage as well as their attitudes towards heritage conservation and national identity.

With built heritage widely viewed as significant to the formation of national identity, the researchers wanted to further examine the relationship between "heritage activism" and citizens' perceptions of national identity in the Singapore context.

Heritage sites, they said, were perceived not just as old buildings and landmarks, but “representations of a collective”.

For example, senior respondents may directly link the significance of heritage to their own lived experiences, in turn enhancing their sense of national identity.

For those aged 49 and above, there was also a link between national identity and the physical appeal of symbols of nationhood and development.

This means that those who see symbols of nationhood and development as aesthetically pleasing are likely to have a stronger sense of national identity.

These were sites representing important aspects of Singapore’s development into a modern nation-state, including infrastructural development such as the Benjamin Sheares Bridge and those with international links such as the Changi Airport Control Tower, Tanjong Pagar Railway and Clifford Pier.

In comparison to the two younger groups, older respondents were also found to be more influenced by notions of symbolic significance and personal memory.

For instance, People’s Park Complex appeared as one of the top 10 most memorable sites for this group, likely related to how the respondents used to spend their time there and it was a recreational spot

## **COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

For the 29-to-48 age group, there were also those who had memories of sites with symbolic meanings and values to Singapore, and were thus likely to have a stronger sense of national identity.

The Changi Airport Control Tower could be seen as a “narrative marker of collective memory” that reminded people of key events such as the opening of Changi Airport.

Many of the respondents in this age group, who were around 38 to 48 years old at the time of the survey, would have been children when Changi Airport opened in 1981, the authors noted.

“They (were) likely to have visited Changi Airport since, and have seen how the airport grew in passenger numbers and flights, and won many international awards over the years.

“Given the significance to national identity and sovereignty attached to these sites, these respondents’ memories of such sites may boost their sense of national identity,” they added.

Over the years, some of the sites in the study had also changed their purpose.

The Singapore Art Museum — which was the former St Joseph’s Institution — became a publicly accessible place for leisure and the arts in 1995.

This is why it was in the top 10 most important, well-remembered and well-known among respondents aged 18 to 28, but not for the older age groups.

Then, there were sites such as Singapore Science Centre, Fort Canning and Fort Siloso which were seen to be associated with each other when rated by the youngest group and the middle group aged 29 to 48.

This was because of their experiences during Learning Journeys, a programme that was introduced in schools in 1998, where students make field trips to key national institutions or heritage sites as part of broader National Education efforts to foster national identity and teach “the Singapore story”, the researchers said.

This means that these respondents may be more aligned with the sense of national identity promoted through such efforts.

## **UNPREDICTABLE**

The youngest group was the only one whose sense of national identity was more elusive and could not be predicted through the domains associated with knowledge, memories, physical appeal and perceived importance.

It suggests that these domains did not contribute to strengthening national identity in any straightforward way, or that national identity may be conceived differently for this group of respondents, or that national identity could be more directly associated with other sites that are not covered in the survey.

IPS senior research fellow Natalie Pang said that this study is the first of its kind in Singapore and has not concluded yet. The researchers intend to establish a framework on how Singaporeans appraise built heritage in the country.