THE POWER OF STORIES ON SITE:
HISTORIC SPACES AS THE STAGE
FOR SITE-SPECIFIC ART AND PERFORMANCE
IN YANGON AND SINGAPORE

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

When historic buildings serve as both the inspiration for and the stage on which art and performance occur, the resulting site-specific works turn the attention back onto the site itself, creating a rich, deep understanding for viewers and participants. Such works can be powerful examples of creative placemaking, sitting as they do at the intersection of architecture, art, public engagement and cultural heritage. They can be catalysts for economic development or create resounding political statements. Such works can also influence policies on participation, planning and public access.

This thesis examines a series of site-specific art events in historic spaces in Yangon, Myanmar, and Singapore, and the impact these works had on participatory planning, public policy and access to the commons. Using a case study model, the thesis contextualizes the critical issues faced by residents: access to public spaces in Yangon and housing and redevelopment in Singapore. It then explores how site-specific works, united around a single issue and set in similar building types, i.e., civic spaces and housing, were shown and performed in a relatively brief period, creating a critical mass that helped influence change.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Originally from a small town in upstate New York, Gretchen Worth received her undergraduate degree in journalism in a small town in central Ohio. Soon after, she left the rural farmlands of America for the teeming cities of Asia, where she has spent most of her professional career. As a co-founder of a regional media company with offices throughout Asia, Gretchen has lived in Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok, and has traveled widely through North, South, East and Southeast Asia.

In 2005, Gretchen volunteered with an organization, known today as Restoration Works International (RWI), that works with communities to help them restore their heritage spaces and places. Working on projects in Mongolia's steppes, Nepal's high plateaus and India's dense cities, she saw firsthand how preservation of a community's important historic space can help spur economic development and empowerment, and reinforce a sense of cultural pride within the residents.

It was her experience with RWI in these communities halfway around the world that brought her back to upstate New York to Cornell University's graduate program, where she pursued two graduate degrees in historic preservation planning and global development.

With all that she has gained through her Cornell graduate experience, combined with her private sector and NGO management skills, Gretchen plans to continue working with communities to help them realize the many benefits historic preservation can deliver when engagement and inclusivity are at the forefront of the effort.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deep thanks go to those I have worked with through my association with Restoration Works International. They are a wonderful and motley bunch: female crew members, Buddhist monks, committed architects, taciturn project managers, subsistence farmers, migrant labor advocates, curious neighbors, talented craftspeople and welcoming innkeepers. Few of them realize they were the impetus for my decision to leave my life in Asia and enroll in graduate school at an age when many are starting to think about retirement.

Thanks also to Lynne Distefano and Lee Ho Yin at Hong Kong University's Architectural Conservation Programmes. Always ready to "talk shop" over coffee, lunches and dinners, they shared their views and their vast network of contacts. My constant envy of their work and projects was a big motivation in my decision to enroll in graduate school.

Becoming a student again was something I was utterly unprepared for—and I loved it more than I could have imagined. That is in large part due to the Cornell faculty, especially Michael Tomlan and Jeff Chusid in the Historic Preservation Planning department. Their combined intellectual brain power inspires awe, but it was our wide-ranging Asia conversations I was especially glad for. I'm thankful as well for my fellow students who made the experience so wonderful.

Every day I am grateful for my Asia Friends, whose support for and curiosity about this endeavor warmed my heart. Extra special thanks to Cait Murphy; fortunately for me she is both an extraordinarily generous friend and an editor nonpareil, and I (and this thesis) benefit mightily.

Lots of thanks go to my family, who didn't bat an eye when I decided to return to upstate New York after so many years away they thought I was never coming back. They welcomed my homecoming heartily and celebrated my graduation enthusiastically in the inimitable spirit of our family's first Cornellian, my dad, William E. Worth (1928-2013).

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INTRODUCTION

Buildings are filled with stories of the people who have inhabited them and the layers of history and meaning those people have created. When those buildings serve as both the inspiration for and the stage on which the stories are told, the resulting site-specific art works turn the attention back onto the site itself, creating a rich, deep understanding for viewers and participants. Such works can be powerful examples of creative placemaking, sitting as they do at the intersection of architecture, art, public engagement and cultural heritage. They can be catalysts for economic development or create resounding political statements. Such works can also influence local policies on participation, planning and public access.

Such has been the case in the Southeast Asian cities of Yangon, Myanmar, and Singapore. In Yangon, the public's right to the commons has long been denied, in this case the historic civic buildings of the dense urban core. Residents in Singapore grapple with the meaning of home in a city-state in which vast amounts of housing are being demolished. In each city, a series of installations and performances have taken as their inspiration the buildings and the memories they hold. The artistic works contained and addressed the stories and shared concerns of those who imbued the structures with meaning. As a result, the evocative examples of site-specific art and performance became part of the ongoing dialogue helping to bring about positive change to policies that impacted urban residents and their interactions with the built environment.

Statement of Purpose

Site-specific installations and performances incorporating the building and its stories can travel beyond creative placemaking to achieve wider-ranging results. This thesis examines the impact of site-specific art events in historic spaces in Yangon and Singapore, and the influence these works have had on participatory planning, public policy and access to the commons. Using a case study model, the thesis contextualizes the critical issues faced by residents: access to public spaces in Yangon and housing and redevelopment in Singapore. It then explores how site-specific works, united around a single issue and set in similar building types, i.e., civic space and housing, were shown and performed in a relatively brief period, creating a critical mass that helped influence change.

Scholars, critics and curators have noted the recent shift in site-specific artistic practice toward community engagement,[1] whether through viewing, participating or playing a creative role in the work's conception. There has been little focus, however, on site-specific works that occur within historic sites and draw on the spaces themselves as both the inspiration and the stage. Less attention has been paid to the influence of such works and their power to move beyond creative placemaking into the policy arena. Even less scholarship is available regarding these practices and outcomes within Asia.

I hope this thesis can inspire more preservationists and planners, activists and artists, grassroots organizations and cultural institutions to recognize the potential in combining the historic built environment, artistic events that respond to that environment, and meaningful community engagement. At the least, such efforts act as an effective

[1] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

method of creative placemaking; more so, they can help transform preservation planning, policy and public access practices for the greater benefit of citizens.

Terminology

Art. Site-specific. Community. Historic. Participation. These words escape simple, universal definition, and the same is true when they are strung together in various combinations to discuss site-specific art in historic spaces in which the community plays an important role. Shifts in definition also reflect shifts in the practice of site-specific and engaged art.

In tracing the development and changing meanings of site-specific art, scholar Miwon Kwon notes a move over time from site specificity to community specificity,[2] and that "the task of imagining altogether new coordinations of art and site is an open-ended predicament."[3] Nonetheless, she defines site specificity "as the cultural mediation of broader social, economic, and political processes that organize urban life and urban space."[4]

One could say that the site-specific art and performance examples included in this thesis are akin to creative placemaking, a term coined by urban planners Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus. The two define creative placemaking as a process by which "partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around

[2] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2002), 6.
[3] Ibid, 9.
[4] Ibid, 3.

arts and cultural activities."[5] The benefit, say Markusen and Gadwa Nicodemus, "animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired."[6]

The site-specific works included here are worthy examples of creative placemaking, yet they have done more than simply animate a space. They have significantly impacted policy and planning. Chapter 1 includes a further discussion of terminology as it relates to the intersection of site-specific art, historic spaces and community engagement.

Methodology

The research for this work relies on books and scholarly articles about the history of site-specific art and performance in Asia, Europe and the US, and reviews of many of the artists and their works. After narrowing the focus to Yangon and Singapore, the histories of both cities provided additional context, especially through government policies and actions regarding public space and housing, respectively.

Since so many of the installations and performances were temporary and had occurred before my thesis work had begun, a great deal relied on local media reports from both Myanmar and Singapore; information produced by the artists and cultural organizations responsible for the works was also valuable. Blogs and social media posts by both government officials and citizens were useful as well; in Singapore, particularly,

[5] Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010), 3. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf.
[6] Ibid.

there are numerous citizen bloggers writing about heritage, memories and the built environment.[7]

Limitations

The site-specific art and performances are not being evaluated on their artistic merits but on messages they sought to deliver and the engagement they engendered among their viewing and participating communities.

I am not Southeast Asian by birth, although I lived and worked in the region for nearly three decades; for some of that time, Singapore was my home, and when it wasn't, I traveled there frequently. Since my first trip to Myanmar in 1996, I have visited often, including to an inaugural heritage conference in 2012 organized by Yangon Heritage Trust. As a result, I am familiar with many of the sites that were the settings for artworks and performances, such as Singapore's public housing estates and private homes and Yangon's civic buildings, including the Secretariat, which I was able to tour in 2012 while it was still closed to the public.

Singapore is one of the most studied cities in Southeast Asia, and there is seemingly a limitless amount of scholarly research published on an infinite number of topics, many relevant to my thesis. I was unable to examine the entirety of this work due to its volume and my time constraints. The opposite is true of Yangon, where, after decades of isolation and a hobbled education system, scant academic research exists.

Of the Yangon and Singapore exhibitions and performances included in the case studies, I attended only one, "The Yang Family." As a result, it is impossible to gauge,

[7] Kevin Blackburn, "The 'Democratization' of Memories of Singapore's Past," *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 169, no 4, January 2013, 431-56.

firsthand, participants' views and reactions to the works, and I have had to rely on media accounts and videos of attendees. When quantitative data, such as number of attendees, is available for these works, it is included. This tracking, however, is typically in short supply. In fact, the use of qualitative and quantitative methods to adequately evaluate the impact of arts and culture events is an acknowledged challenge throughout the world.[8]

Although I was unable to attend many of the works included here, I am familiar with the immersive and participatory audience experience that site-specific works offer. In addition to "The Yang Family," I have been mesmerized by "The Saga" at San Antonio's San Fernando Cathedral in the US, enthralled by the works that comprise the Benesse Art Site in Japan, and elated at Christo's "Floating Piers" in Italy. I am familiar with artists creating this type of work, such as my friend Prateep Suthathongthai and his site-specific work in northeastern Thailand, mentioned in Chapter 1.

Figure 1. From left, Kadoya House, the first of Benesse Art Site's Art House Project, is the setting for a collaborative installation entitled "Sea of Time '98;" Christo's "Floating Piers," his 2016 installation at Lake Iseo, Italy, attracted an estimated 1.2 million people over 16 days; "The Saga" is a 24-minute projection video art piece that tells the history of San Antonio by incorporating architectural elements of the city's San Fernando Cathedral. (*Credit: Kadoya House from Benesse Art Site, Christo and "The Saga" from the author, 2016.*)

[8] Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska, *Understanding the Value and Arts and Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project (*Wiltshire, UK: Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2016), 9.

Chapter Overview

This thesis, which contains three chapters and a conclusion, focuses on the Southeast Asian cities of Yangon and Singapore and the site-specific works that have occurred there. In both cities, these works have addressed issues central to the changing urban fabric and their impact on residents.

Chapter 1 discusses the role of historic sites as shared territories among citizens, and the transformational power of art and performance that are set in these spaces. It introduces examples of site-specific works in urban and rural settings around Asia; some served as acts of creative placemaking, while others highlighted contested heritage sites, made political statements or served as the catalyst for economic development. The chapter also provides the historic context for the Yangon and Singapore case studies that follow by comparing their similarities, including their shared histories of colonialism, authoritarian rule and censorship.

Chapter 2, the Yangon case study, explores the authoritarian one-party state and its politicization and practice of co-opting public space, specifically that in the central core of the city. It examines a number of site-specific works set in historic civic buildings that were until recently closed to citizens. This thesis contends that as a result of the collective efforts of those who sponsored, created and attended these works, the formerly closed spaces are once again publicly accessible.

Chapter 3, the Singapore case study, examines the city-state's post-independence development through a housing lens. As the forces of globalization have taken hold, Singaporeans have experienced rapid change in the built environment and have found their homes at risk of demolition. This chapter describes the many instances of site-

specific works that addressed the meaning of home, and how, taken together, they became part of a larger call for increased participation and more inclusive policy making regarding housing and heritage.

The conclusion summarizes the circumstances and outcomes of the art and performances in each city and the reasons the site-specific works were timely and effective in helping to promote social change. The conclusion also raises issues of space relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. As the world emerges from long periods of self-isolation, there is a role for the kind of site-specific art and performance addressed in this thesis. Such works can serve as tools to help citizens regain normalcy and celebrate places that have taken on new or renewed significance. They can help communities push for positive change in their built environments through playing a larger role in identifying what is important in reshaping their cities in what will undoubtedly be a new reality.

CHAPTER 1

BUILDING PERFORMANCES, COMMUNITY BUILDING

Site-specific art and performance can serve as a means of placemaking, a collaborative planning and design approach to celebrating a site while "strategically shap[ing] the physical and social character" of the area.[9] Increasingly in Asian cities, such art and performance has expanded the traditional idea of placemaking to draw attention to a contested heritage site, create a political statement or provide a catalyst for economic development in the name of social transformation.

This thesis examines instances of site-specific art and performance in Yangon and Singapore, two Southeast Asian cities experiencing a changing urban fabric brought on by rapid redevelopment. In both cities historic sites became the setting for art and performances that told stories. In both cities, in a short period of time, works were created that addressed a shared issue, access to the commons in Yangon and the idea of home in Singapore. As such, a critical mass of site-specific works amplified the importance of these issues to a larger community. They became part of a broader effort that resulted in helping to establish the right to public space and more participatory policy-making.

Building Power

Regardless of its size, shape, age, materials or typology, a building is imbued with great power that binds us as individuals to that site by articulating "the experience of our

[9] Markusen and Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking,3*.

being-in-the-world and strengthen[ing] our sense of reality and self."[10] Architecture provides sensorial experiences beyond what one sees: a building's touch, smell and sound serve to link the place more firmly within a person's being. "To at least some extent every place can be remembered, partly because it is unique, but partly because it has affected our bodies and generated enough associations to hold it in our personal worlds."[11]

Buildings become a physical bond among people as well.[12] The same power we experience as individuals interacting with a site unites us with others who share that experience. Buildings hold our memories over years and decades and centuries, providing us with evidence of history.[13] Says scholar Gay McAuley, "Place is a powerful stimulus to memory, and places seem to function as a kind of palimpsest, retaining traces of different periods, different occurrences, and the overlapping histories of occupation that characterise modern societies."[14] The power of place is "the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory,"[15] writes urban historian Dolores Hayden.

The power of place grows exponentially when combined with the power of art that speaks to and about that place, producing a symbiotic dialogue. When the public as audience is invited to join the conversation, all—the place, the stories told through art and

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[10] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 12.
[11] Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 44.
[12] Kristin Faurest, Barry L Stiefel and Katherine Melcher, "Valuing Community Built," in *Community-built: Art, Construction, Preservation and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 211.
[13] Ibid, 212.
[14] Gay McAuley, "Site-specific Performance: Place, Memory and the Creative Agency of the Spectator," *Arts: The Journal of the University of Sydney Arts Association* 27 (2005), 49, accessed January 9, 2020. https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/ART/article/view/5667/6340
[15] Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997) 9.

the people experiencing it—are invested within each other. These shared, redolent experiences create an opportunity for change.

Can You Be More Specific?

The art and performances included in this thesis are site-specific in that they are each a "piece of work which is hybrid of the place, the public and the performance."[16] Located in places that are historic, or locally important, these are works that develop "from a particular place and engage with the history and politics of that place, and with the resonance of these in the present. This kind of work cannot travel, it exists only in the site that produced it."[17] By situating the work within a site, as opposed to a theater or gallery used in a more traditional practice, religious, social and political issues inherent within the site become more obviously inseparable from it.[18]

This thesis argues that there is a deep connection not only between place and art but also among place and art and people, whose role is more than being simply "viewers" of the work. Writing about the importance of the audience, McAuley says:

> In site-specific and site-based performance…the performative experience of place necessarily involves being there, the performers are present in the place and they have a lived, embodied experience of it. Even more importantly, the spectators have to be there too; they, too, are in the place rather than looking at it, or consuming it as pure image, and theirs, too, is a lived and embodied experience. This fact emphasises the inadequacy of the term 'spectator', when so much more than looking is being done and when all the senses are in play. The power of performance as an expressive practice, for both performers and spectators alike, is that it produces more lived experience, rather than images or artefacts.[19]

[16] Nick Kaye, *Site-specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 55.
[17] McAuley, "Site-specific performance," 32.
[18] Ibid, 30.
[19] Ibid, 50.

Pointing to the preponderance of the use of "site-specific" by everyone from community organizers to curators to describe everything from city arts festivals to museum installations, scholar Kwon says that "site-specific" has been "uncritically adopted, applied rather indiscriminately and unspecifically misused."[20] It is sometimes employed interchangeably with terms such as "site-responsive" and "site-oriented," which are not precisely the same. It is often assumed—incorrectly—that site-specific art is synonymous with public art (located in a space accessible to the general public[21]), new genre public art (public art of an activist nature[22]) and community-based art (created in interaction with the community[23]). Some consider site-specific art to be related to applied theater (participatory drama performed in non-traditional spaces[24]) or relational aesthetics (art based on the context of human relations[25]). All these types of work may include site-specific pieces and performances, but they are not tantamount.

Despite the murkiness of its various uses and definitions, scholars and critics agree that the practice of site-specific art has become more political and collaborative, to varying degrees and definitions. Kwon contends site-specific art has moved beyond the artistic genre it was in the 1960s and 70s, practiced by artists including Richard Serra (i.e., *Tilted Arc*), "who never opens up the creative process to a collaboration or dialogue with the community."[26] She labels more contemporary site-specific art a "peculiar cipher

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[20] Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 1.
[21] "What is public art?", Association for Public Art, accessed April 2, 2020. https://www.associationforpublicart.org/what-is-public-art/.
[22] Suzanne Lacy, editor, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).
[23] "Community art," Tate.org, accessed April 2, 2020. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/community-art
[24] Peter O'Connor and Briar O'Connor, " Editorial," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 14 (2009), 471-77.
[25] Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Le Presses du Real, 1998).
[26] Ibid, 83.

of art and spatial politics"[27] because it addresses the "social, economic and political processes that organize urban life and urban space."[28]

Scholar Grant Kester has examined examples of collaborative or collective modes of production, many of them considered site-specific. He notes this type of collective production has become a global phenomenon, largely in reaction to both the uncertainties and the possibilities inherent in this century's neoliberal economic order and the rise of the primacy of capital.[29] Kester believes that art plays an important role in creating new knowledge that facilitates political and social transformation. "It is this sense of possibility, and imminent threat, that animates the remarkable profusion of contemporary art practices concerned with collective action and civic engagement."[30]

Some of the site-specific works included in this thesis can be considered collaborative: community members help to shape the story and, in some cases, to perform it. A few of the works fit the definition of new genre public art with their political messages visible for anyone who enters or observes the site. Others have vestiges of other art forms and practices. All, at their core, are hybrids of the place, the art and the public. And all have been part of transformational change in the cities in which they occur.

Sites Make Statements

Site-specific art and performances that rely on historic spaces as both inspiration and setting can serve as a form of creative placemaking, celebrating a site of community

[27] Ibid, 2.
[28] Ibid, 3.
[29] Grant H. Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.
[30] Kester, *The One and The Many*, 7.

importance. One example of this is located in the city of Mahasarakham in northeastern Thailand. There in a quiet temple courtyard is a Standing Buddha believed to be from the Dvaravati period (6th-11th centuries[31]). Nearby is a much more recent photo mural, "Paying Respect to the Standing Buddha," created in 2017 by Prateep Suthathongthai. Working with university students and members of the temple, Wat Phutamonkol, Suthathongthai photo-printed 150 ceramic tiles depicting students in traditional Northeast Thai-style dress. Holding offerings such as lotus flowers, lit candles and monk robes, they posed in positions that honor Buddhist traditions.[32] The unveiling celebration, captured on video, shows dozens of people of all ages interacting with the art, the temple structures and each other.[33]

The community-based project, says Suthathongthai, created an opportunity for people to research the temple's centuries of history and celebrate their abiding devotion to the Standing Buddha, while introducing contemporary art as a means to capture that ancient history.[34] He writes:

> Photo-stories evident in this mural also brought viewers to comprehend the enshrining of Phra Buddha Mongkhol. More importantly, this project revitalized relation between art and the community. Besides, it also altered temple's roles to a cultural learning center as well as a new tourism site for visitors eager to learn and comprehend history of Phra-Yuen community through art. At last, this new art piece would be a part of this community from this time on.[35]

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[31] "Phra Mongkol Standing Buddha," Tourism Authority of Thailand, accessed December 30, 2019. https://www.tourismthailand.org/Attraction/phra-mongkol-standing-buddha

[32] Prateep Suthathongthai, "Photo Ceramic Tiles," Prateep Suthathongthai's professional website, accessed December 30, 2019. http://prateepsu.com/series/site_specific/site_specific7_video.html

[33] Photo Ceramic Tiles: Ceramic Photos Phutamonkol Mahasarakham Temple, YouTube video, 5:00, posted by Prateep Suthathongthai, accessed August 19, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_vKACBvZSI

[34] Prateep Suthathongthai, "Art and Community: Phra Buddhamongkol Photography Installation in Phra-Yuen Community of Maha Sarakham Province." *Mekong Chi Mun Art and Culture Journal* 4, no 2, Jul-Dec 2018. http://mcmac.udru.ac.th/mcmac_files/vol4_2_08.pdf

[35] Ibid.

Figure 2. Prateep Suthathathongthai worked with students and temple-goers to create "Paying Respect to the Standing Buddha" at Wat Phutamongkol in Mahasarakham, Thailand, in 2017. (*Credit: Prateep Suthathongthai Instagram posts, prateep_su, January 17, 2018 and August 9, 2017*.)

A performance can bring attention to a neglected landmark, while making a deeper statement about the changing landscape. In 2018, Hanoi's centuries-old Quon Chuong city gate was the setting for a dance by Vu Ngoc Khai. The theme: his loss of childhood memories in a rapidly changing city. A virtual reality phone app downloaded more than 10,000 times[36] allowed viewers to access and watch his performance any time they were in front of the gate.

Site-specific works sometimes carry political messages, such as installations and performances that occurred along The Great Wall of China in the 1980s and 1990s that offered "sweeping historiographical contemplations on China's nationhood and cultural

[36] Thuy Hang, "Art exhibition exists forever in public spaces," Vietnam: A view from inside, November 11, 2018. http://ovietnam.vn/entertainment/art-exhibition-exists-forever-in-public-spaces_300561.html

origins."[37] In 1993 at the Si Ma Tai section of the Great Wall northeast of Beijing, Zheng Lienjie created "Binding the Lost Souls: Huge Explosion." Working together, local villagers, students, Zheng and his friends gathered 10,000 crumbling bricks from the bottom of the wall, wrapped them in funerary red cloth, and scattered them along the top of the wall for 300 meters.[38] Writes art historian Gao Minglu:

> Once the ceremony concluded, the artists wrapped their heads in the fashion of the Tiananmen Square student movement and scattered over the bricks paper money once used at Chinese funerals to send the deceased into the next world. There is no indication whether the funeral was meant to commemorate the massacre of students in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, or whether it was meant to mourn the wall or the innumerable bodies from the period of the first emperor that were buried in this vast and ancient grave. Whatever the case, in the political and cultural climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the images of the wounded people and the ruined wall represented Chinese intellectuals' abiding concerns.[39]

Elsewhere in Asia, site-specific art endeavors have been initiated as part of a plan to strengthen a community's economic resilience. Five decades ago, Japan's Seto Islands, polluted from the defunct smelting industry and toxic waste sites, were experiencing population decline and a dying economy. Abandoned houses and disused factories, some centuries old, were scattered throughout the islands. Beginning in the 1990s, artists, sometimes in partnership with residents, began to create permanent installations in vacant houses "weaving in history and memories of the period when the buildings were lived and used."[40] Known as The Art House Project, the number of

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[37] Wu Hung, "A 'Domestic Turn:' Chinese Experimental Art in the 1990s." *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 1, no 3, 8.
[38] "Zheng Lianje: Huge Explosion," Artasiamerica, accessed January 3, 2020. http://artasiamerica.org/works/2670
[39] Gao Minglu, "The Great Wall in Contemporary Chinese Art." Positions: Asia Critique 12, no 3, 777. https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-12-3-773
[40] "Art House Project," Benesse Art Site Naoshima, accessed December 30, 2019. http://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/arthouse.html

houses used for these projects has increased over the years. They anchor the concept of the Benesse Art Site, an extraordinary collection of site-responsive art spread over three of the Seto islands. In addition to the art houses and newly built spaces, structures such as a disused sewing needle factory and a copper refinery have incorporated art that reflects the story of life on these islands. Thanks to the interest these art projects have generated, tourism has become a vital industry and economic activity has increased. Long-fallow rice terraces are being regenerated, and vast acres of strawberries, lemons and olives are being cultivated. Residents have created a not-for-profit tourism association[41] to help shape decision-making and manage the more than 700,000 annual visitors;[42] they work as guides, run shops and cafes and sell their produce. As a result, service sector jobs increased 38 percent between 2000 and 2010.

Figure 3. Residents of the islands comprising the Benesse Art Site participate in community initiatives and art openings.
(*Credit: Benesse Art Site.)*

[41] "Contemporary Art and Tourism on Setouchi Islands, Japan," OECD Studies on Tourism: Tourism and the Creative Economy, OECD Publishing, 2014, 128-139. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264207875-en
[42] Rebecca Stone, "Japan's Naoshima Island: A Portrait of Possibility for Art Tourism," Skift, November 19, 2018. https://skift.com/2018/11/19/japans-naoshima-island-a-portrait-of-possibility-for-art-tourism/

Similarly evocative examples that marry historic architecture, site-specific art and performance, and the public occur regularly throughout Asia. In cities such as Yangon and Singapore, the prevalence of such events has created a critical mass of messages around a single issue, be it access to the commons in Yangon or the meaning of home in Singapore. These artistic efforts, with their messages about the importance of the built environment to the cities' residents, could usher in profound changes in policy, planning and public access.

Yangon and Singapore: Commonality Among the Differences

The thesis chapters that follow are case studies of Yangon and Singapore, Southeast Asian cities that are experiencing rapid change in their urban fabric. In reaction to those changes, numerous site-specific works have focused on issues central to citizens in each city, and played a part in creating change in planning and policy.

At first glance, striving, chaotic Yangon and wealthy, futuristic Singapore appear even further apart than the 1,500 miles that separate them. Myanmar, which falls at the bottom of regional economic rankings, sits in sharp contrast to Singapore, the wealthiest of ASEAN nations. Yangon citizens feel the growing pains of Myanmar's young democratic government, and its struggles with issues including ethnic and minority conflict, education, health care and high poverty.[43] Meanwhile, Singapore, viewed by many as a model of multicultural, multiracial stability, enjoys the wealth that provides a strong social welfare net to its residents and enables the state to take sweeping measures on issues such as climate change and the role of technology.

[43] Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2019).

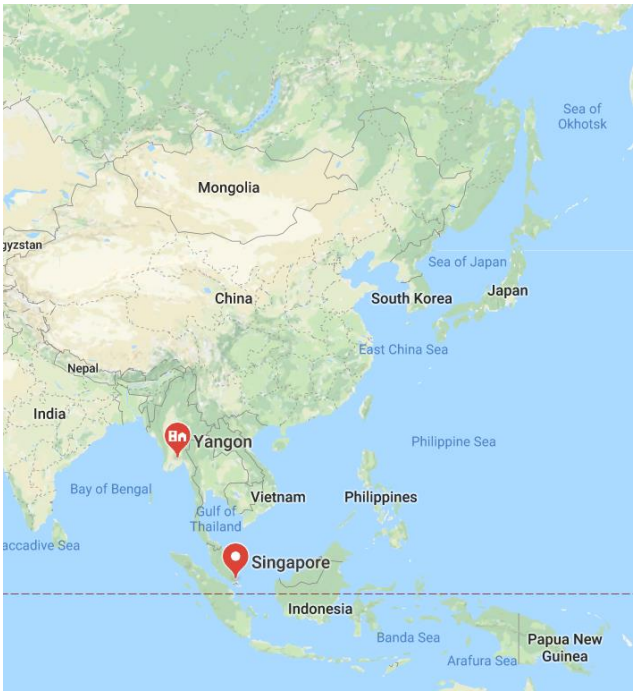

Figure 4: Yangon, Myanmar, and Singapore are similar in a number of ways, including multi-cultural, multi-ethnic populations and land use plans inherited from their time as British colonies. (*Credit: Author*.)

There are also similarities, however. Both Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar, and Singapore are home to 5-6 million residents. They both have diverse populations that have grown over time largely due to the historic flow of migrants from around the Asian continent. Both are former British colonies (Myanmar in 1824-1948, and Singapore in 1867-1963).

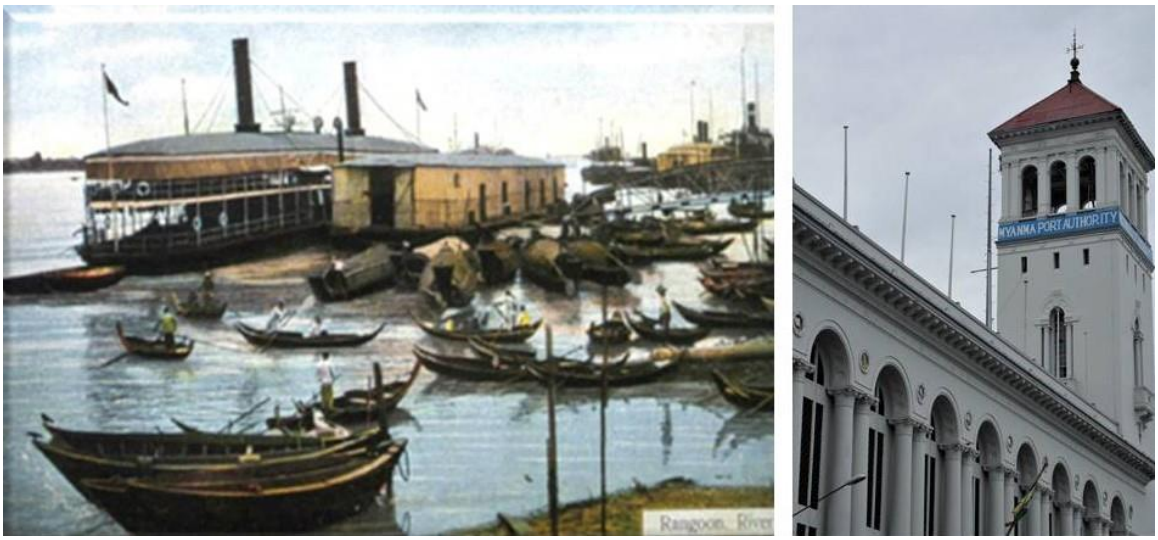

Figure 5: Yangon Port, circa 1885, and Myanma Port Authority Building, built in 1928. (*Credit: Left: Myanmar Port Authority, right: Author, 2012.*)

During the 1800s, both were leading ports, attracting workers from around the region. Their shared British colonial history meant they inherited similar land use and urban planning practices, the results of which are still seen today in the built environments of their central business districts. Both continue to experience population growth and the resulting pressures on infrastructure and housing. Like other Asian cities, the influx of vast amounts of capital linked to an increasingly globalized world has brought rapid change to their urban fabric. And the psyches of their citizens have been impacted by decades-long histories under one-party rule, and the draconian laws and pervasive censorship that occur in such societies.

Both states recognize the power of arts and culture in their nation-building efforts, and seek to maintain control over the national narrative through censorship, or at least the threat of it. And both states have recently instituted some degree of cultural liberalization. Myanmar's cultural liberalization —along with rapid economic liberalization — has dramatically widened the divide between the wealthy and the poor of Yangon, says

historian Thant Myint-U.[44] Singapore's path to cultural liberalization, contends political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan, has been "tortuous because of the contradictory tendencies inherent in the state's drive to transform Singapore into a neoliberal creative city, while simultaneously attempting to maintain the stability of the regime-legitimising hegemonic discourse in the form of The Singapore Story."[45]

In recent years, both Myanmar and Singapore have become more accepting of an activist civil society, but not without difficulty. In Yangon, says Thant Myint-U, a young civil society finds itself in a somewhat futile position, because it is trying to function in a country whose government is ill-equipped to develop policy or re-imagine a rich future for its citizens.[46] In Singapore, says political scientist Amy L. Freedman, "the space for groups to call for significant change to the political order or even to criticize the government remains very narrow. The policies of harassment and legal action against individuals and groups perceived to be a threat to the regime remain in effect." [47]

Fined, imprisoned and silenced, artists in both cities have suffered from authoritarian rule. Those who have not endured such traumas can also be profoundly influenced by the threat of repression. In Myanmar, for instance, there is "a singular political and religious structure that shapes the issues these artists must confront. They have not endured the killing fields of Cambodia, nor the civil war and

[44] Thant, *The Hidden History of Burma.*
[45] Kenneth Paul Tan, "Choosing What to Remember in Neoliberal Singapore: The Singapore Story, State Censorship and State-sponsored Nostalgia." *Asian Studies Review* 40, no 2, 246. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1158779.
[46] Thant, *The Hidden History of Burma.*
[47] Amy L. Freedman, "Civil Society in Malaysia and Singapore," Middle East Institute, September 10, 2015. https://www.mei.edu/publications/civil-society-malaysia-and-singapore

Communist insurgency that tore apart North and South Vietnam. They suffered under their own isolation and military dictatorship."[48]

Figure 6: Burmese artist, political prisoner and pro-democracy activist Htein Lin created "A Show of Hands," plaster casts of hands and accompanying stories of hundreds of political prisoners. He first exhibited the work in 2015 and continues to add new casts. (*Credit: Author, from an exhibition at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 2019*.)

Still, artists in both Yangon and Singapore have persevered, with many conceiving and producing site-specific performance and installations, both independently and in partnership with local communities and civic groups. Some note that site-specificity is a natural continuation of Southeast Asian traditions of oral histories,[49] along with theater performances—Chinese opera, wayang, the Ramayana—that historically

[48] Ellen Pearlman, "After Decades of Silence, Myanmar's Artists Have a Chance to Speak," Hyperallergic, March 3, 2016. https://hyperallergic.com/274037/after-decades-of-silence-myanmars-artists-have-a-chance-to-speak

[49] Gridthiya Gaweewong, "Making Do: The Making of the Art ad Digital Media in Southeast Asia," in *Art in the Asia Pacific: Intimate Publics*, Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King and Mami Kataoka, editors (New York: Routledge, 2014), 62-69.

have occurred in public spaces such as temple courtyards, public squares and schoolyards. Others note that such performances reflect the lack of sufficient artistic spaces in both cities: the Singapore government has funded grand cultural centers, such as the S$600 million Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, to attract international artists, but has not invested in smaller venues appropriate for the more intimate performances of local artists. In Yangon, government spending for the arts is tiny, whether for arts centers or programs.[50]

As both cities ease censorship and move toward a more civic-minded, participatory community, site-specific art events centered on heritage, planning and engagement help drive these efforts forward.

Yangon Artists and Their Public: The Impact of Censorship and Other Challenges

Artists working in Myanmar over the last five decades have faced daunting challenges that include opaque censorship hurdles, lack of an art market beyond tourist art, little state support, and travel and media restrictions that hindered a better understanding of international art trends.[51] During the country's isolationist years of 1974-1988, only three books on Myanmar art were published,[52] and in Yangon, it was not until the mid-2000s that independent art spaces opened that were operated entirely by younger Myanmar artists.[53]

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[50] Ellen Pearlman, "A Brief History of Contemporary Art in Burma," Hyperallergic, July 20, 2017. https://hyperallergic.com/374488/a-brief-history-of-contemporary-art-in-myanmar/

[51] Isabel Ching, "Ideas: Shortlist/Myanmar (Burma)," Asian Art Archive, accessed December 6, 2019. https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-myanmar-burma/.

[52] "Myanmar Contemporary Art 1," Asian Art Archive, accessed December 6, 2019. https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/myanmar-contemporary-art-1

[53] Kester, *The One and the Many*, 152.

Writing about the cultural landscape of the early 2000s, scholar Kester notes that the Myanmar government feared foreign "infiltration" of the country via cultural initiatives.[54] In addition, he writes, "the widespread presence of informants means that members of most cultural organizations (writers unions, artist guides, etc.) are habituated to a form of self-censorship. It has also resulted in a climate of suspicion, and even enmity, among different groups."[55]

This repressive atmosphere led to what Kester identifies as the "the essentially performative nature of public and private identity in Myanmar,"[56] a practice embraced by all citizens, not just artists. Kester notes this performative identify operates on two levels: the first is meant for the state, involving "the public performance of docility and submission."[57] The second is a "subtle subversion of this public or official persona via the uncoupling of speech from intention" resulting in nuance and interpretation.[58]

"The Burmese people are natural performers because they have to perform every day of their lives; they have learned to speak and act differently with different people, depending on their perceived threat or trustworthiness,"[59] says Jay Koh, who worked with artists in Myanmar for almost a decade starting in the late 1990s. "It's nearly impossible to get someone to tell you directly what they think, and we soon learned that the Burmese believe that direct or open speech is an act of great foolishness."[60]

Under this climate, "the 'contemporary artist' was charged with the task of transmitting artistic and intellectual know-how to younger protégés as well as to local

[54] Ibid, 146.
[55] Ibid,147.
[56] Ibid, 148.
[57] Ibid, 148.
[58] Ibid, 149.
[59] Ibid, 149.
[60] Ibid, 148-49.

audiences under perceived conditions of 'lack.' "[61] Due in part to a sense of political urgency,[62] performance art since the mid-1990s was one way artists engaged with audiences while dealing with the pervasive censorship and state suspicion. Writes scholar Isabel Ching:

> The ephemerality of performance allowed for temporary inscriptions of what are frequently political messages within the safety of closed-door performances, or the walls of foreign consulates and cultural organisations. Performance art's rapid adoption by younger artists in the 2000s attests not only to the importance of finding outlets for expression within conditions of political suppression and societal conservatism, but also to the attraction of making art on the move with more open choices of location and material. Fostered (trans)locally and in dialogue with foreign artists and international performance festivals, its coming of age after the turn of the millennium remains one of the most well-documented art "movements" in Myanmar—one which has also negotiated for a more visible public presence.[63]

Despite increased openness in the period since the country's 2015 elections in which Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi party won an overwhelming majority, censorship remains. The Telecommunications Act, enacted in 2013 and still in effect, forbids a number of online actions that can result in jail time, leading to the continued self-censorship of artists, "particularly when dealing with issues related to ethnic minorities, politics, and religion."[64] Some artists expressed doubts about censorship and restrictions on artistic freedom. When asked how the current political climate affects her writing, Poet Pandora quotes blogger and Myanmar PEN recipient

[61] Ibid, 148-49.
[62] Ching, "Ideas: Shortlist/Myanmar (Burma)," Asian Art Archive.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Pearlman, "A Brief History of Contemporary Art in Burma."

Nay Phone Latt, who was imprisoned for four years: "We are free now, but we are not sure whether we are safe."[65]

Singapore Artists and Their Public: The Impact of Censorship and Other Challenges

Singaporean performance artist and activist Seelan Palay has been arrested three times, most recently in 2017 for his site-specific performance, "32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror." The work honored Chia Thye Poh, who spent 32 years jailed or under house arrest in Singapore without a trial. Palay's performance and subsequent arrest coincided with his own 32nd birthday. Palay notes that most Southeast Asian art communities "have been under one-party or authoritarian rule for a long time, which shapes our societies and also our art scenes."[66]

In Singapore, 80 percent of the arts funding comes from the state,[67] and attached to those dollars are rules, sometimes explicit but often vague. Says Palay about such funding, "It comes with a lot of conditions, including censorship, changing of works and also self-censorship. For instance, if a theater group puts on work that the government doesn't like, it would probably get less funding the following year."[68]

The term related to this ambiguity of rules is "OB markers," or out-of-bounds markers, a golfing phrase first used in its Singaporean context in 1991 by George Yeo, then minister for information and the arts. It is meant to describe unacceptable topics of discourse, often related to politics, race, religion and sexuality but also hard to determine,

[65] Peter Lom and Khin Aung Aye, "Realizing a Dream is Never Too Late," *The Irrawaddy*, November 19, 2017. https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/realizing-dream-never-late.html
[66] Kritika Varagur, "Art and Dissent in Singapore: An Interview with Seelan Palay," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 4, 2019. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/art-and-dissent-in-singapore-an-interview-with-seelan-palay/
[67] Olivia Ho, "Why is state funding needed for our arts scene to thrive?", *The Straits Times*, July 24, 2015. https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-is-state-funding-needed-for-our-arts-scene-to-thrive/.
[68] Varagur, "Art and Dissent in Singapore."

ever-changing and sometimes bewildering, like criticism of locally produced TV shows and even monosodium glutamate (MSG).[69] The use of OB markers "lays out, informally, the limits of what can be said, and if you've lived long enough in Singapore, you are supposed to know what those markers are, and where they are,"[70] says journalist Salil Tripathi.

"Singaporeans are very aware of where they should align themselves without being told," says artistic director Ong Keng Sen.[71] "You're not told what's not possible, but you are given an indication that that's *not* the way you should go, and you just internalise it, and co-ordinate yourself and your desires."[72]

Artists may feel stymied by Singapore's paternalism, but the herd mentality it creates among the general population can also be effective in promoting arts appreciation and encouraging a more culturally appreciative society. Audience attendance for ticketed and non-ticketed events has grown steadily over the years, reaching record highs in 2018.[73] Arts events of all kinds are generally well-attended. For example, Singapore's Night Festival, an annual weekend art event, routinely draws upwards of 600,000 people,[74] and the National Gallery Singapore attracted nearly 1.8 million visitors in 2017.[75]

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[69] Cheong Yip Seng, *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2012).
[70] Salil Tripathi, "As Singapore turns 50, is it on the cusp of becoming different?", Index on Censorship, July 30, 2015. https://ifex.org/as-singapore-turns-50-is-it-on-the-cusp-of-becoming-different/
[71] Steph Harmon, "Art v government in Singapore: 'I fear once I leave, they will punish me'," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/09/art-v-government-at-singapore-festival-i-fear-once-i-leave-they-will-punish-me
[72] Ibid.
[73] Arts and heritage statistics and publications, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, accessed January 23, 2020. https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/statistics/2019/jan/arts-heritage-statistics-and-publications
[74] Nabilah Said, "Night Fest draws record crowds," *The Straits Times*, September 1, 2015. https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/night-fest-draws-record-crowds
[75] Let Art Surprise You, National Gallery Singapore Annual Report FY18, June 2019, 11.

Yet some in the art world point to Singaporeans' social conservatism as a roadblock to a maturing cultural landscape. "While Singapore's issues with censorship are mellowing, traditional beliefs still hang heavy, and it becomes more apparent that building an art scene in a conservative state is no easy feat," write TJ Sidhu and Ashleigh Kane in an article about Singapore's burgeoning arts scene.[76] "There are not just creative barriers but systemic ones to break first. Without more artistic freedoms guaranteed from the government, alongside the financial ones already in place, as well as the backing of Singapore society at large, Singapore could just be building on a scene which will be forever fractured by its growing pains."[77]

But some artists engaged in community work disagree with this judgement. Artistic director Noorlinah Mohamed credits Singaporeans with being more open and progressive than the government believes them to be, while acknowledging many do internalize the state's restrictions.[78] "We're taught to say, 'Oh we should not challenge authority,' or, 'We should not question race or religion, because that might lead to the race riots of 1964' ... It becomes mythologised in our psyche that these are areas we should leave alone; that our government knows best for us. And because of that we tend to censor ourselves a lot more."[79] As a result, an artist is always torn between presenting the work as he or she intended and bearing the consequence, or making requested changes, diluting the message but, with government support, reaching a bigger audience.

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[76] Ashleigh Kane and TJ Sidhu, "Singapore and the realities of growing a new contemporary art scene," Dazeddigital.com, March 21, 2019. https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/43563/1/singapore-reality-growing-contemporary-art-scene-sarah-choo-su-en-wong-art-week

[77] Ibid.

[78] Harmon, "Art v government in Singapore: 'I fear once I leave, they will punish me'."

[79] Ibid.

"You start to become preoccupied with these questions. You add them into the equation of every single creation,"[80] says Mohamed.

People in Places

In a globalizing world that is bringing fast change to Asian cities, artists are increasingly examining what that means to the human condition. In the context of Asian art, says curator Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, "different artistic practices are addressing today a complex system of knowledge that places at its centre the human presence in the social context, therefore provoking questions, ideas, insights, experiences and perceptions."[81]

Throughout Asia one can experience site-specific art, both permanent and temporary, that speaks to issues of community and identity. Scholar Wan-Jung Wang has investigated the preponderance of applied theater in East and Southeast Asia, the result, she believes, of a sense of placelessness in the region's rapidly changing cities. "In these performances, applied theatre practitioners have attempted to reconstruct communal memories of places, recovering a sense of connection between the specific sites of the city and those who inhabit them."[82] Wang says such performances offer a kind of cultural resistance by facilitating "the reconstruction of cultural memories and counter[ing] the manipulation of space by the forces of globalization."[83]

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Susanne Bosch and Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, "Exchanging Thoughts," *Art in Context: Learning from the Field* (Berlin: Goethe Institut, 2017), 234.
[82] Wan-Jun Wang, "Applied Theatre and Cultural Memory in East and Southeast Asia," in *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre,* Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson, editors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 61.
[83] Ibid.

Scholar Sandra Cate believes socially engaged art in some countries is rooted in Buddhist practices that invite interaction between objects and audiences,[84] while art scholar Nora Taylor contends that the works of Southeast Asian artists "speaks of place,"[85] and that such works are "the necessary consequence of artists' environments, in the specific context of Southeast Asia."[86]

More specifically, this thesis argues that the cultural memories that have been reconstructed by artists, community groups and cultural organizations in Yangon and Singapore addressed issues specific to each: access to long-closed public places in Yangon and the notion of home in Singapore. These art events occurred in each city within a relatively short time span, creating a critical mass of history and of memories linked directly to architecture and space. Together, they have created a message more powerful and lasting than what would have resulted from any single event.

[84] Nora A Taylor, "Art Without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography," *Art Journal*, 2011, 21.
[85] Ibid, 22.
[86] Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

ART IS THE KEY: UNLOCKING YANGON'S HISTORIC PUBLIC SPACES

On November 6, 2005, at 6:37 a.m., Yangon's 120 years as the capital of Myanmar came to an end. At that time, the country's senior military leaders departed for the newly constructed capital of Naypyidaw, about 200 miles due north. The date and time were reported to have been chosen by an astrologer to Tan Shwe, the famously superstitious general who headed the military government from 1992 to 2011.[87] It is said that five days later, on November 11, at 11a.m., a fleet of 1,100 military trucks carrying 11 military battalions and 11 government ministries followed,[88] 11 being the lucky number astrologers had assigned to Naypyidaw.[89] Over the next few months, the rest of the city's civil servants decamped from the old capital to the new. By February 2006, the shift from Yangon was complete.

Officials claimed at the time that the move had been in the works for four years,[90] but it was kept so secret that its suddenness left civil servants, Yangon residents and foreign diplomats bewildered.[91] It also left dozens of central Yangon's historic government buildings deserted, their gates padlocked, officially inaccessible to residents. The newly emptied buildings included City Hall, site of many a wedding in the 1950s and

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[87] Aung Zaw, "Moving Target," *The Irrawaddy*, Nov 9, 2005. http://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=5147

[88] Jordi Sanchez-Cuenca, "An Instant Capital Expands in Myanmar," Polis, March 22, 2014. https://www.thepolisblog.org/2015/10/an-instant-capital-expands-in-myanmar.html

[89] Galen Pardee, "Auspicious Urbanisms: Security and Propaganda in Myanmar's New Capital," *The Avery Review* 24, accessed August 15, 2018. https://averyreview.com/issues/24/auspicious-urbanisms

[90] Veronica Pedrosa, "Burma's 'seat of the kings'," Al Jazeera, November 20, 2006. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2006/11/200852518415076671 3.html

[91] Morten Pedersen, "Myanmar: The Future Takes Form – but Little Change in Sight," *Southeast Asian Affairs (*2007), 219.

60s[92] and of major anti-government demonstrations in the 1980s and 2007; the Tourist Burma Building, a publishing house in the 1920s that had given birth to some of the country's best-known writers;[93] and the Secretariat, where revered national hero Aung San, known as the father of modern Burma, had been gunned down in 1947, just prior to independence from British rule. Other sites had been mothballed even longer. Some, like the well-regarded Yangon University (along with other higher learning institutions), had been closed since the 1980s in an attempt by the ruling junta to prevent student-led protests. Privatization efforts of the 1990s closed others, like the 1877 Burma Railways Company building, vacant since 1994 when a private company constructed new headquarters in exchange for a 30-year lease on the site.[94] Regardless of the cause, by 2006, the result was that great swaths of the city were within sight but literally beyond reach of its residents.

[92] Association of Myanmar Architects, *30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon: Inside the City that Captured Time* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2012), 42.
[93] Ibid, 49.
[94] Ibid, 140.

Figure 7. The Burma Railways Company Building, foreground, had been vacant since 1994 when it was purchased by a private company in exchange for the construction of new railway headquarters. (*Credit: Author, 2012*.)

Yangon's cityscape and residents have endured—and been shaped by—the harsh vicissitudes of politics, from the 18th-century overthrow of the Mon Dynasty by the Burmese to British colonization and segregation starting in 1924, Japanese occupation during World War II, a short-lived Parliamentary democracy in the middle of the century, five decades of harsh military dictatorship and now a fragile new government. In the dense downtown core, the site of significant personal and political moments for millions of people—from whispered teashop discussions to violent mass protests—the complex, layered stories of Yangon's residents are intertwined with those of the city's buildings.

Myanmar's recent isolation, both self-imposed and internationally enforced, has gradually eased. The country's general election in 2010, the first in 20 years, encouraged dramatic growth in foreign investment, including in the real estate sector. This influx of money is rapidly changing Yangon's urban fabric.

At the same time, this opening has given rise to a series of site-specific art installations, performances, 3D sound-and-light mapping and other arts events, often in historic spaces that had been off limits to Yangon's inhabitants. Although these projects and events were temporary, their impact on public access to Yangon's important sites has been lasting. They have helped residents to reclaim their memories of a lost urban existence, at once intimate and sweeping, and to participate in civic life—something that previous governments had discouraged and sometimes actively prevented.

The Building(s) of the City

Home to more than 5 million people, Yangon is Myanmar's largest city and commercial center. It sits on the eastern side of the Irrawaddy Delta where three rivers converge, helping to make it, at one time, one of Southeast Asia's leading ports. The urban core is a dense grid laid out more than 150 years ago by British planners. With its amalgam of low-rise buildings housing ground-floor teashops, small offices and apartments abutting sizeable civic buildings constructed during colonial rule (1824-1948), the bustling downtown was a fine example of "mixed use development" before the term was coined. The downtown grid fans out from the riverfront and gives way to winding roads with bungalows, villas and mid-century apartment blocks and office buildings to the north.

Yangon is considered "one of the world's best-preserved colonial cities."[95] "Best-preserved" is a misnomer, however, as it suggests active restoration efforts rather than the reality of economic stagnation and neglect. In fact, until recently, Yangon's buildings were crumbling. Lack of investment and underuse (or, conversely, over-crowding) had

[95] Ian Morley, "Owning the city: Civic art's historical practice and contemporary meaning in Yangon," *Art and the Public Sphere* 2, no 1+2+3 (2012 [2014]), 40, accessed July 5, 2018. doi: 10.1386/aps.2.1-3.37_1

taken their toll on the city's built environment. The ravages of weather, including a destructive earthquake in 1930 and the devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008, had worsened its already dismal condition. And of course the term "colonial" is also inaccurate, failing to take into account Yangon's history and development before and after British rule, as well as the role of city residents themselves in creating the built environment.[96]

The Shwedagon Pagoda, the country's holiest Buddhist site, is located just north of the urban core. It was most likely built sometime between the 6th and 10th centuries during the Mon Dynasty. Soon after, a fishing village called Dagon sprung up around the shrine. Dagon remained a small settlement until King Alaungpaya, an ethnic Burman of royal heritage, captured it in 1755. With an eye on waterway access, he transformed Dagon into a sizeable port, which, under his rule, also became an important shipbuilding center that he renamed Rangoon.[97]

Through a series of Anglo-Burmese wars beginning in 1824 and lasting until 1885, Britain eventually took over the whole country. By the time of the annexation of Lower Burma in 1852, the wars had wreaked havoc on Rangoon, so British planners got to work, with William Montgomerie, secretary to the Town Committee of Singapore,[98] directing the effort. The planners designed a city grid in such a way that accounted for stifling heat (providing shade during the day), fire safety and clear views from and of important buildings and monuments,[99] including the Shwedagon to the north as well as the ancient 144-foot Sule Pagoda, a central landmark that remained a touchpoint for the

[96] Ian Morley, "City profile: Rangoon," Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning 31 (2013), 604, accessed July 5, 2018. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2012.08.005
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid, 605-06.
[99] Ibid, 606.

downtown core. They then divided and zoned the grid, assessing and taxing land parcels based on proximity to the river, while requiring construction within a year of purchase and specifying building materials to be used.[100]

Figure 8: The Sule Pagoda, a landmark in Yangon's downtown core, has been the site of many protests over the decades. (*Credit: Author, 2012*.)

In 1885, Rangoon became the official capital, and the colonizers began a 40-year civic building campaign whose visual hallmark was a group of structures in the central

[100] Jayde Roberts, "Heritage-making and Post-coloniality in Yangon, Myanmar," *Citizens, Civil Society and Heritage Making in Asia*, Hsin-Huang, editor, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute (2017), 42-44, accessed July 1, 2018. https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1355/9789814786294.

core united in their neoclassical design. The Burma Railways Office, undertaken prior to Rangoon becoming the capital, was completed in 1877. It was followed by what became the seat of national government for more than a century: the behemoth Secretariat, begun in 1889, finished in 1905, and arguably the most notable of all Yangon's existing civic buildings. By the turn of the century, the Currency Department, which collected government revenue, the Customs House and the High Court were all completed. All stand today.

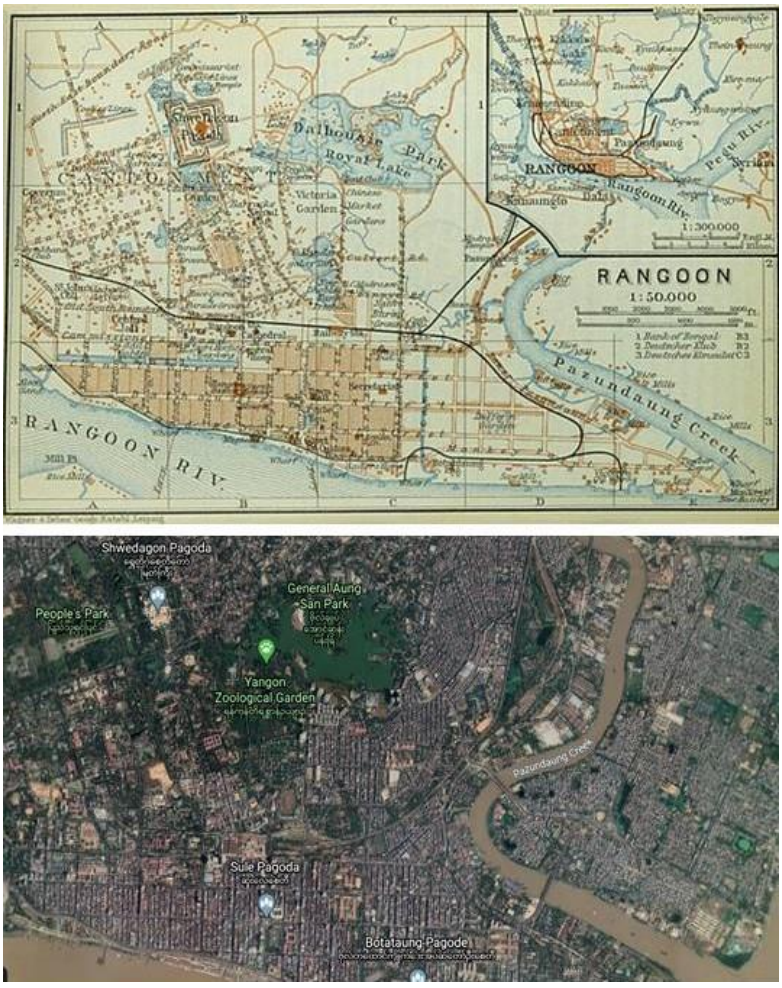

Figure 9: Yangon's city grid, then and now. Above, a Baedeker Map from 1914; below, the same area as shown on Google Earth in 2020.
(*Credit: Top: Wikimedia commons, bottom: author from Google Earth.)*

Urban historian Ian Morley contends these buildings represent excellent examples of civic art, which he defines as "the art of architecture applied to city buildings."[101] In addition to their common style, the major colonial-era structures are generally the same height, creating a visual harmony; they feature consistent use of vertical elements, including columns, towers and domes; and they employ monumental planning lines to create a unified composition.[102] Their materials, often red brick and plaster, with ornamental details in concrete, helped to further unite the appearance of Yangon's urban center.

By the turn of the 20th century, Yangon's long-time status as a prosperous port city coupled with the British colony's immigration policies had attracted a diverse population whose presence is reflected in its architecture: Burmese Buddhist stupas, Muslim temples from the Indian arrivals, pagodas built by Chinese migrants, an Armenian church pre-dating colonialism, a synagogue, a Catholic cathedral and missionary schools. Less spiritual concerns were also evident in the form of banks, trading houses, hotels and department stores, all within a stone's throw of the newly erected civic buildings. Because of the government's land use requirements, these buildings shared many of the characteristics of their civic counterparts, including height, orientation and materials. In some cases, they even shared architects, engineers and suppliers. The result was a visually cohesive central core of public and private structures.

Although the buildings' uses changed during the Japanese occupation of World War II and the post-war years, Yangon's colonial-era downtown remained remarkably intact. After independence in 1948, authorities focused reconstruction efforts on

[101] Morley, "Owning the City," 40.
[102] Ibid.

hospitals and universities at the city fringes,[103] while individuals constructed small apartment houses downtown on vacant plots—what today would be termed infill. After a military coup in 1962, the generals who came to power wreaked financial ruin; with little economic growth, there was no need for new buildings in the city center.[104] The economic liberalization of 1990 resulted in the development of suburban townships, possibly to clear the city's informal settlements (for the benefit of tourists) and to remove the threat of protesters (for the benefit of the junta).[105] Although the West imposed stringent economic sanctions in the 1990s, Myanmar, desperately in need of foreign funding,[106] found willing financial partners from China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Thailand,[107] as well as from the wealthy Burmese population.

After decades of visual "stagnation," the influx of investment in the run-up to the 21st century began to change the cityscape and skyline of Yangon. A luxurious private housing estate was built on the northern end of the central core, and eight-story office buildings with blue mirror cladding replaced rows of downtown shophouses. A handful of taller buildings rose to punctuate the skyline near the Sule Pagoda: the 20-story Sakura Tower office building, completed in 1999, sits directly across from the Sule Shangri-La, built in 1993 on the site of a number of cinemas and tea houses as well as a cemetery, all of which had been razed by the government.

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[103] Ben Bansal, Elliot Fox and Manuel Oka, *Architectural Guide: Yangon* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2015) 208.
[104] Ibid, 332.
[105] Than Than Nwe and Janette Philp, "Yangon: Myanmar: The Re-invention of Heritage," in *The Disappearing "Asian" City*: *Protecting Asia's Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World*, William Logan, editor (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002), 150.
[106] Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux: 2007), 328-30.
[107] OECD Investment Policy Reviews: Myanmar 2014, OECD Publishing 2014, accessed July 8, 2018. http://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/investment-policy/Myanmar-IPR-2014.pdf

The City's Contested Space

For nearly a century, Yangon's downtown core has served as a symbol of both government authority as well as the site of protests against it. Morley contends that public unrest has shaped the city,[108] and, indeed, Yangon has been acknowledged as a "landscape of resistance."[109]

Many of the protests of the early 20th century, beginning around 1920,[110] were sparked by concerns over taxation and a university education system seen as elitist. These were precursors to the modern-day mass demonstrations and violent military crackdowns that gained international attention.

The fear of riots—or public gatherings of any kind—always spooked the generals, who ran the country without interruption from 1962 until 2010. For them, urban planning became more about containing the threat of protest and less about making the city a more livable place. For example, new townships on the urban outskirts were ostensibly built to resettle slum dwellers. They also had other uses: "by confining people and their activities to a manageable and clearly delineated area, surveillance is easier and greater authoritarian control possible."[111] After years of temporary closures, in 1988 the generals shut the central Yangon University, the country's premier institution of higher learning. Located downtown, it had been the genesis of many protests through the decades. During the 1930s, Aung San, as a student leader at Rangoon University, led rallies against the imposed British education system. Eventually, these grew into pro-independence

[108] Morley, "City profile: Rangoon," 613
[109] Donald M. Seekins, "The State and the City: 1988 and the Transformation of Rangoon," *Pacific Affairs* 78, no 2 (Summer 2005), 258.
[110] Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 180.
[111] Tan Tan Nwe and Janette Philp, "Yangon, Myanmar: The Re-invention of Heritage," in *The Disappearing "Asian" City: Protecting Asia's Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World,* William S. Logan, editor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 150.

demonstrations, including one in 1938 in which protesters surrounded the Secretariat.[112] At the start of the junta's rule in 1962, students there demonstrated for greater academic freedom, resulting in the military's dynamiting the student union, killing dozens. In 1974, student-led protests erupted in Yangon suburbs and spilled into the central core when students, angered over the government staging of former UN head U Thant's funeral, stole his coffin and carried it through the Yangon streets to the former student union building.

After the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1988, the generals shut the school and eventually built new satellite campuses far from the city to disperse the students. It is hardly far-fetched to see the 2005-06 move to Naypyidaw as a way for the generals to put distance between themselves and the restive citizens of Yangon.

Like many demonstrations of earlier years, those against the repressive military government in 1988 and 2007 incorporated Shwedagon Pagoda and the area surrounding Sule Pagoda, including City Hall. Tens of thousands of people came out onto the streets of downtown Yangon (as well as in other cities around the country), and the subsequent military crackdowns left thousands dead, more injured and many fleeing the country. In video footage and photographs, anyone familiar with the city can recognize the avenues down which the protesters marched, the buildings where they gathered and the pedestrian bridges from which onlookers stood in support, some furtively filming the unfolding violence. Media that circulated in the aftermath of the violent military crackdowns show the same avenues and buildings, but the normally bustling streetscapes were eerily empty.

[112] Association of Myanmar Architects, *30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon*, 24.

Figure 10: Public protests of 2007, in which Myanmar's monks led the marches, became known as the Saffron Revolution. After military crackdowns, the streets are empty, save for soldiers and the sandals of fleeing protesters. (*Credit: Top: Associated Press, bottom: unknown*.)

Conservation Efforts

Myanmar began to recognize the importance of heritage a quarter century ago. In 1990, the junta lost a general election but held onto power anyway. Recognizing that its failed quasi-socialist, state-controlled economy was a source of unrest, and that it needed

foreign investment,[113] the government began to move toward a more market-oriented direction.[114] Expanding the nascent tourism sector was one way to attract foreign currency; the country's historic sites were a way to attract tourists. So in 1993 the junta established the Central Committee to Protect National Heritage, the first organization in the country's history concerned with listing and preserving sites and monuments.[115] That same year, 1993, the hotel industry was privatized. Particularly in Yangon, state-approved conservation focused on creating luxury visitor accommodation in government buildings (Kandawgyi Palace) and historic villas (The Savoy, Belmond Governor's Residence) and upgrading former grand hotels (The Strand).

The properties were up and running as hotels in time for "Visit Myanmar Year" in 1996. That year the city's municipal government in the form of the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), which has overall responsibility for city planning and development, designated 189 sites worthy of preservation. The list included only publicly owned buildings,[116] and mostly religious structures.

Over the next decade, the country drifted toward dystopia.[117] Then the poorest country in Asia,[118] Myanmar's crushing poverty exacerbated issues such as childhood malnutrition, human trafficking and HIV/AIDS; its banking and education systems were in a shambles. In spring of 2007, small protests began in reaction to increased prices of basic consumer goods. The protests grew in number and size through the summer, culminating in the fall in what is known as the Saffron Revolution, in which tens of

[113] Thant, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 328-30.
[114] Nwe and Philp, "Yangon, Myanmar," 147.
[115] Ibid, 150.
[116] Bansal, Fox and Oka, *Architectural Guide: Yangon*, 160.
[117] Thant, *The Hidden History of Burma*, 56-81.
[118] Ibid, 60.

thousands of monks led marches throughout the country. In late September, a violent crackdown by the junta quelled the protests and sent the country into lockdown, cutting telecommunications services. Less than a year later, in May 2008, Cyclone Nargis struck, killing an estimated 134,000; the cyclone left millions homeless, particularly in the hard-hit Irrawaddy delta. In the aftermath, Yangon was said to resemble "a post-war city,"[119] confusing to navigate as the cyclone had destroyed so many familiar landmarks.[120] All the while, political machinations within the junta continued; in 2010, the country held its first election in two decades and declared the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) as the winner.

A week after the election, the government released dissident Aung San Su Kyi (the daughter of Aung San) from house arrest and began a number of social and economic reforms (she had been held under house arrest for a total of 15 years during a 21-year period from 1989 to 2010). As a result, by 2011 many international sanctions had been relaxed, and more foreign investment was flowing into the country. From 2009 to 2011, foreign direct investment more than doubled from USD1 billion to USD2.5 billion.[121]

As the money flowed in, the downtown historic buildings, many of them still padlocked after the migration of the government to Naypyidaw, all seemed to have a figurative "For Sale" sign hanging on their gates. But there were not as many of these buildings as there once had been. Between 1990 and 2011, a third of the city center—

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[119] Stephanie Valera, "Yangon is like a Post-war City: Cyclone Nargis Aftermath," Asia Society Online, May 23, 2008, https://asiasociety.org/policy/yangon-post-war-city-cyclone-nargis-aftermath
[120] Emma Larkin, *Everything is Broken: The Untold Story of Disaster Under Burma's Military Regime* (London: Granta Books, 2010), 20.
[121] The World Bank, data.worldbank.org/indicator. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?end=2011&locations=MM&start=2009

approximately 1,800 buildings—had been demolished.[122] Many feared the buildings that remained would go to the highest bidder and either be torn down for redevelopment or transformed into luxury hotels for well-heeled tourists and business people whose numbers were increasing daily. The number of tourists to the country rose from 790,000 in 2010 to 3.4 million in 2017.[123] This posed a threat to the city's urban fabric. Residents feared their memories and homes and livelihoods were being obliterated in the rush for economic growth. Development is happening so fast that residents have little "chance to reflect on what they value,"[124] says Jayde Lin Roberts, an expert on urban Myanmar.

Figure 11: Some in Yangon feared the city's historic buildings would all become luxury hotels. The 205-room Rosewood Hotel along Yangon's riverfront dates from 1927, and served originally as the New Law Courts. *(Credit: Rosewood Hotels.)*

It was about this time, in 2012, that historian Thant Myint-U (grandson of diplomat and UN head U Thant), along with a number of local architects and

[122] Philip Heijmans, "The struggle to save Yangon's architectural heritage," BBC News, February 9, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-31146066
[123] Myanmar Tourism Statistics, Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, accessed July 18, 2018. https://tourism.gov.mm/statistics/
[124] Roberts, "Heritage-Making and Post-Coloniality in Yangon, Myanmar."

businesspeople, founded the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT). They got to work quickly, holding conferences with international and local heritage professionals and conferring with government officials, local architects and international preservationists. YHT published a widely circulated book, *30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon*, and began a "blue plaque" program commemorating significant buildings. Its work raised the alarm about threats to Yangon's built environment while raising its profile.

Although YHT's earliest efforts focused on preserving specific buildings, the organization swiftly moved beyond that to stress the importance of tangible and intangible heritage—to the city's cultural fabric and its importance to citizens, for the monetary value of a historic city center, and as a critical consideration in the larger urban planning process. In 2016, the group produced a comprehensive report, "Yangon Heritage Strategy," which makes detailed recommendations for "combining conservation and development to create Asia's most livable city."[125]

Geographer Than Than Nwe has echoed the sentiment of a comprehensive approach, arguing for systematic conservation that is incorporated into larger planning matters. The focus of preservation should not just be on "'great traditions' and major monuments," she writes, but also on the "ordinary and everyday cultural heritage of the people."[126]

Art Takes Back the City

Leading up to the country's general election in November 2015, various artists, community groups, non-governmental organizations and cultural associations began

[125] Sarah Rooney, editor, *Yangon Heritage Strategy: Combining Conservation and Development to Create Asia's Most Livable City*, Yangon Heritage Trust, 2016.
[126] Nwe and Philp, "Yangon, Myanmar," 154.

grassroots efforts to "take back" the city, many centered on art. While some of these "actions" occurred on streets and in parks, increasingly performances and exhibitions were being held in heritage spaces that had been off limits, sometimes for decades. In doing so, these closed spaces re-opened, becoming newly accessible to Yangon's residents.

A handful of contemporary performance artists had paved the way, beginning in the 1990s. In an impoverished country ruled by a harsh military government that employed draconian censorship rules, art galleries—or spaces of any kind where art could be performed or displayed—were few and far between. Moe Satt, one of Myanmar's leading contemporary artists, is best known as a performance artist, and a political one at that. He has said that performance art allowed him and others to perform with little monetary cost.[127] In an atmosphere of heavy censorship, performance art also had the advantage of being temporary yet it was filled with possible political interpretations.[128] "Its coming of age after the turn of the millennium remains one of the most well-documented art 'movements' in Myanmar—one which has also negotiated for a more visible public presence,"[129] writes Ching of the Asian Art Archive.

In the first decade of the 21st century, at least two performance pieces circumspectly acknowledged Yangon's rich built environment. In *Offering of Mind* in 2005, collaborators (including an artist, a student, a noodle vendor and others) wrote their "strongest wishes, hopes or thoughts,"[130] on a piece of paper, put them in a woven stupa-

[127] Sam Gaskin, "Why Moe Satt is Leading Myanmar's Contemporary Art Scene: He's Not Afraid to Get Political," Artnet News, November 25, 2015. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/moe-satt-hugo-boss-asia-art-prize-370211
[128] Pearlman, "A Brief History of Contemporary Art in Myanmar."
[129] Ching, "Shortlist: Asian Art Archive."
[130] Kester, *The One and Many*, 150.

shaped headpiece, donned the headpiece and were photographed, their backs to the camera to hide their identities, at a location that each chose for its personal relevance. The sites included the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon University and a downtown market street.[131] Although it has not been confirmed if Moe Satt was among the collaborators, he was part of the collective, Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts (NICA), that conceived and organized the performance.[132]

In 2008, Satt organized a performance art festival, "Beyond Pressure," which was held annually over the next four years. Its mission was to "create from within, spaces and forums in which people in Myanmar can take part in the representation of themselves, thus reaffirming our place in the global community. Furthermore, through the global power of assembly that art provides, we aim to present critical alternatives to how Myanmar is perceived by the outside world."[133] But Satt and his festival found it challenging to identify space where government officials would permit the event to be held, one year resorting to a location outside the city.[134]

Overcoming the lack of a specific space, in 2013, with Yangon's "culturally and politically important heritage sites"[135] as his setting, Satt performed and photographed "Bicycle Tyre Rolling Event in Yangon." Dressed in traditional Burmese attire, he rolls a thin bike tire—a children's amusement—around historic places throughout the city. These included along the banks of Inya Lake, through Mahabandoola Park situated in

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Jay Koh, "Answerability and Artistic Dialogue: Development of Myanmar's Performance Art Scene since 1997," *Voices in Transition* (London: Lunn+Sgarbossa, 2018), 34. http://www.academia.edu/37379672/Voices_of_Transition_Contemporary_Art_from_Myanmar
[133] The YGN Public Art Festival, Geographies of Change, accessed May 1, 2020. http://www.geographiesofchange.net/565-the_ygn_public_art_festival.html?ordby=&q=&&from=500
[134] *Moe Satt: Short Introduction of Myanmar Performance Art*, Vimeo, 25:01, SCCA-Ljubljana, 2015. https://vimeo.com/128882948
[135] "Shapeshifting: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia," 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, March 1, 2016, 32. https://issuu.com/10clg/docs/20160314_shapeshifting_catalogue_we

front of Sule Pagoda and City Hall, around the Bogyoke Aung San statue, and in Kandawgyi Park. "By placing empty signifiers and cultural images side by side, he is trying to talk about the loss of identity for citizenship in our society,"[136] wrote Min Khet Ye in *Silent for A While: Contemporary Art from Myanmar*, a 2016 exhibition catalog from a Hong Kong gallery where photos of Satt's performance were on display.

Figure 12. Moe Satt and "Bicycle Tyre Rolling Event in Yangon," photos of which are part of the collection of the Singapore Art Museum. (*Credit: Roots.sg*)

Although Satt's performance included important sites of cultural memory (for example, the bank of Inya Lake, where protesters had been shot by the army in 1988[137]),

[136] "Silent for a While: Contemporary Art from Myanmar," 10 Chancery Land Gallery, January 29, 2016, 16. https://issuu.com/10clg/docs/silent_for_a_while_e-catalogue
[137] "Timeline: Myanmar's 8/8/88 Uprising," National Public Radio, August 8, 2013. https://www.npr.org/2013/08/08/210233784/timeline-myanmars-8-8-88-uprising

and he referenced surrounding buildings in his various artist statements, he seldom used the buildings themselves in his work. Nor for that matter did other performance artists, who chose instead to perform on the street, or in small, little-known underground galleries.

Celebrating Building Histories

As the country continued to open, and foreign cultural organizations returned after decades, residents of Yangon saw a marked increase in site-specific works, usually sponsored by these cultural organizations.

One of the first examples occurred in 2015 at a 1920s villa slated to become the new home of the Goethe Institut, Germany's cultural institute. Two years earlier, the organization had returned to Myanmar, having left the country in 1962 shortly after the military coup.[138] Its new base, located in a leafy residential neighborhood in central Yangon north of Kandawgyi Lake, would be this two-story villa marrying European design, like its porte cochere topped by a sizeable balcony, with Chinese touches, including the teak room dividers and Chinese characters on the entry transom.

The villa, like many buildings in Yangon, has a rich, layered history that illustrates one of the multitude of stories of the city. Home to an affluent Burmese-Chinese family since shortly after it was built,[139] the house was abandoned during World War II as those with means fled Yangon in the face of the Japanese invasion. It eventually became the base of the Burmese independence movement, the Anti-Fascist

[138] "For a Civil Society in Which Everyone has a Place," Goethe Institute, June 2018. https://www.goethe.de/en/uun/pub/akt/g18/21305558.html?forceDesktop=1

[139] Bharti Lalwani, "Postcard from Yangon: Building Histories," Eyeline Contemporary Visual Arts 84, 2016, accessed May 1, 2020. http://www.eyelinepublishing.com/eyeline-84/review/postcard-yangon

People's Freedom League (AFPFL)[140] led by Aung San and U Nu, who became the country's first prime minister. (In the months prior to independence, it is said that one or the other lived in a portion of the house.) For many years after, the villa housed the Yangon State School of the Arts, where generations of Burmese artists trained.[141] In 1993, when the school moved to a new facility, the building fell vacant.

Figure 13: The home of the Goethe Institut Myanmar, prior to renovation. In this condition, it served as the setting for "Building Histories" in March 2015. (*Credit: Goethe Institut Myanmar*.)

Before turning over the villa to contractors for renovation, the Goethe Institut used the space to host "Building Histories," an exhibition whose artists were asked to

[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

"decode and interpret the historic meaning of [the] iconic edifice."[142] Iola Lenzi, a Singapore-based curator specializing in Southeast Asian contemporary art,[143] organized the show to include site-specific installations, performance art and multimedia exhibitions. The exhibition ran March 1-15, 2015, was open daily 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., and was free to the public. About 2,000 people visited.[144]

Five Burmese artists and four Southeast Asian artists participated. When questioned about the choice of non-Burmese artists, the head of the Goethe Institut Myanmar, Franz Xavier Augustin, said, "The personal background of these artists might have been different, but what they have in common is the very similar political, economic and cultural situation in their prospective neighboring countries. This helps and stimulates the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Experience shows that an interaction between artists who grew up and developed their art under similar conditions works better than bringing in artists from further away."[145]

Some of the Burmese artists chose to exhibit video installations shown previously that nodded to the country's thorny past. Others developed new works for the show. Burmese artist Chaw Ei Thein's work, *Building Histories (2015),* was an installation of hundreds of pairs of worn rubber sandals, some inscribed with names of those who died in the 1988 uprising. Strewn along the paths leading to the villa, they were a palpable reminder to many of the aftermath of the country's protests, riots and subsequent military crackdowns, when the streets empty save for the footwear of the protesters as they fled.

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[142] "One Building, Nine Artists: Building Histories in Myanmar," Asia-Europe Foundation, accessed July 18, 2018. culture360.asef.org, n.d., https://culture360.asef.org/news-events/one-building-nine-artists-building-histories-myanmar

[143] "Opening: Building Histories," Goethe Institut Myanmar, accessed July 18, 2018. https://www.goethe.de/ins/mm/en/ver.cfm?fuseaction=events.detail&event_id=20478388

[144] Borbala Kalman, "The New Era of the Goethe Institut, Myanmore: The Ultimate Guide to What's On, June 13, 2015. https://www.myanmore.com/yangon/2015/06/the-new-era-of-the-goethe-institut-yangon

[145] Ibid.

Figure 14: Chaw Ei Thein's work, *Building Histories (2015),* was an installation at the Goethe Institut Myanmar of hundreds of pairs of worn rubber sandals, some inscribed with names of those who died in the 1988 uprising. (*Credit: Goethe Institut Myanmar*.)

Yadanar Win, another Burmese artist, created *A Long Range of Perspectives,* a participatory installation of English- and Burmese-language schoolbooks with blank covers set atop burned rice husks. A single spot-lit chair inside the dark, claustrophobic room invited viewers inside to read. Win's work was a reflection of both censorship and the poor state of the Burmese education system, whose share of the government's budget was miniscule.

One of the most politically evocative performances, *Aung San's Dinner*, was conceived by Dinh Q Le, an internationally recognized Vietnamese artist whose family fled Vietnam for the US in 1978 when he was 10. He returned to Vietnam in 1993, and has, since then, created art that addresses identity, memory and history.[146] Le believes it is necessary, when creating art that addresses the fraught history of a place, to build collective memory "freed from restraint."[147]

Performed in Burmese, *Aung San's Dinner* featured 11 participants, a "Who's Who" of well-known activists. Many had participated in the 1988 movement, and nearly all had been imprisoned at some point for their political activities. They included actors, artists and journalists. The discussion was moderated by Zarganar, a comedian-turned-politician and former political prisoner. Le chose the participants because they were all actively working to bring democracy to Burma: among them, the activists had been imprisoned for 60 to 70 years.[148]

[146] Ruben Luong, "Dinh Q Le: Where I Work," *Art Asia Pacific* 85, September/October 2013. http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/85/DinhQLe
[147] Zoe Butt, "Dinh Q Le in Conversation with Zoe Butt," Guggenheim Foundation (blog), January 22, 2013. https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/dinh-q-le-in-conversation-with-zoe-butt
[148] Bharti Lalwani, "Ghosts at a Dinner Party: Bharti Lalwani in Conversation with Dinh Q Le," *Eyeline: Contemporary Visual Arts* 83, 34, accessed July 20, 2018. https://www.eyelinepublishing.com/eyeline-83/article/ghosts-dinner-party

Figure 15: *Aung San's Dinner*, conceived by Dinh Q Le, included dinner guests known for their pro-democracy stance. Over a traditional Burmese dinner, they discussed Aung San and his legacy. (*Credit: Goethe Institut Myanmar*.)

Over dinner, said to include Aung San's favorite dishes,[149] guests talked for nearly two hours about his life and legacy.[150] At the close of the meal and conversation, one by one the dinner guests left the table. Le filmed the performance, adding English subtitles for screening on subsequent nights. For the remainder of the exhibition, the table, the chairs, the food all remained as they had been when the guests abandoned the dinner. Le likened the disruption of the dinner party to the vision of modern Burma, disrupted by Aung San's assassination in 1947.[151] In speaking about his installation, Le said,

> Yes, definitely the history of this house was my inspiration. It is the house itself, you don't need any artwork here. It is such a fascinating history as it is and of course the building is beautiful. Therefore I decided to bring back some aspects

[149] Lalwani, "Postcard from Yangon: Building Histories."
[150] Ibid.
[151] Lalwani, "Ghosts at a Dinner Party."

> of the house as my part of the exhibition instead of making something new. We can imagine that when the people of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) were here, there must have been amazing political discussions taking place in this house. There would have been discussions about the future of Burma, what these people wanted for Burma, to free it, and of course all of that was disrupted when General Aung San was assassinated and when the party was banned later on. When I think about this I am wishing in a way to hear these conversations myself. I think this was the impulse to create this "Dinner," which is a political dinner with political discussions and acts as a kind of witness of that time and those conversations. It is a chance for people to be here and to listen in.[152]

Reclaiming the City at City Hall

A 15-minute taxi ride from the Goethe Institut sits City Hall, located at the center of downtown Yangon across from Sule Pagoda. The four-story masonry building was commissioned by the colonial government in 1913 with plans drawn up by a British architect. The start of World War I put construction on hold, leading to the choice of Burmese architect U Tin in 1925 to re-start the project. It is one of the few buildings of this era attributed to a Burmese architect. Completed in 1940, City Hall was built when nationalism was on the rise, and its Burmese-style flourishes, including tiered towers and motifs of peacocks and nagas along the façade, demonstrate the hybridization of architecture that was taking place in the later years of British rule. At the time of completion, it contained the city's largest auditorium; in the 1970s, it housed the National Library.[153]

[152] "Building Histories," Goethe Institut, March 2015, accessed July 20, 2018. https://www.goethe.de/ins/mm/en/kul/mag/20688739.html
[153] The Association of Myanmar Architects, *30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon*, 42.

Figure 16: City Hall, built during the colonial era, is one of the few buildings attributed to a Burmese architect, who incorporated traditional elements such as the tiered towers visible here. (*Credit: Author, 2012.)*

Over the years, the building took on importance as a symbol of Burma's nationalism. After the Japanese were defeated in World War II, the Rangoon War Criminal Trial was held here. It was also the site of Aung San's last public speech, given from the balcony, six days before his assassination. It has been one of the sites most frequently chosen for anti-government protests over the years, including bomb blasts in 2008.[154] Happier, less political pursuits, including marriages and concerts, have occurred here as well.

[154] "One Dead in Burma Blasts," Radio Free Asia, October 20, 2008. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/bombs-10202008121201.html

Throughout the period, the building has functioned continuously as the seat of the municipal government, and it houses the YCDC offices. However, access to the building was strictly limited. In order to enter, a visitor must have a confirmed appointment with YCDC and an ID card. [155]

On December 3, 2016, City Hall's front façade became the centerpiece of a 15-minute sound-and- light show as part of the Mingalabar Festival, organized by the Institut Francais and the Yangon Region government to mark the 55th anniversary of French-Myanmar relations. The organizers said the festival aimed "to give back the city to its inhabitants."[156]

Viewers gathered in front of the building for one of the evening's two free shows. In a video of the event,[157] crowd members are lit by their cellphones as they film the show. Like other 3D mapping projects, the building's architectural details serve as the basis for the video shown on its facade. During the first five minutes, lines and shapes, dancing to syncopated rhythms, highlight the façade's entryway, columns, grills and windows. The music changes at the five-minute mark as serpent-like shapes crawl up the front of the building and a red flame shoots across the façade. Amoebas appear, transforming into human torsos that alternately dance and kick a soccer ball, which draws some cheers from the crowd. The amoebas then morph into elephant heads, and the crowd whistles as their trunks spout images of water, which also starts to pour from the roofline like a waterfall. At about 14 minutes in, the music changes as a Burmese phrase

[155] Za Yar Lin, "Proposal to Open Yangon City Hall to the public in limbo," *Myanmar Times*, October 21, 2015. https://www.mmtimes.com/business/property-news/17106-proposal-to-open-yangon-city-hall-to-the-public-in-limbo.html
[156] Nyo Me, "Say mingalabar to Yangon's biggest-ever arts festival, *Myanmar Times*, November 25, 2016. https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/23894-say-mingalabar-to-yangon-s-biggest-ever-arts-festival.html
[157] Mingalabar! project mapping dec 2016, YouTube video, 17:20, posted by Project Mapping, January 31, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNaI3T9s28s/.

with English subtitles flashes across the top of the building: “Forget it, our terrible past.” Images of paper lanterns float up through the façade. The crowd whistles and cheers. “Leave it, the freedom which we’ll never regain.” The crowd quiets. “Who will get karma?” The crowd erupts with louder whistles and cheers and begins to clap. (The country’s generals, held in low regard by most Burmese, are famously concerned with their karma, trying to improve it by grand merit-making activities such as temple building,[158] which the public views cynically.) The phrases continue, urging the crowd to try hard, to make a change. The final message, “Today is for everyone,” brings another cheer.

Figure 17: “Who will get karma?” A still from a video of the Mingalabar! projection mapping on Yangon’s City Hall in 2016. (*Credit: Project Mapping on YouTube.*)

[158] Simon Roughneen, “Than Shwe: Karma Chameleon,” *The Irrawaddy,* January 27, 2012. http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=22937&page=2. See also Seth Mydans, “What Makes a Monk Mad,” *The New York Times,* September 30, 2007. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/weekinreview/30mydans.html

The light show was conceived by Les Rencontres Audiovisuelles, based in Lille, France. The lyrics, as they are referred to in the credits, were written by Ye Ngwe Soe of Burmese punk band No U Turn. The four-member No U Turn was formed in 2002, and remains one of Myanmar's best-known bands. Ye says he tries to write lyrics that are not so much political as encouragement to young people to take control of their lives.[159]

Travel Through the Tourism Burma Building

Across the Sule Pagoda roundabout from City Hall sits the former Ministry of Hotels and Tourism building, commonly known as the Tourist Burma Building. The three-story neo-classical building dates from the early 1900s and was the city's first Burmese-owned department store. By the 1920s, it had become the offices for a company publishing one of the country's first magazines, *Dagon*, the ancient name for Yangon. Some of the country's most famous authors worked here, many adding "Dagon" to their names. They included the first female novelist (Dagon Khin Khin Lay) and a beloved mystery writer (Dagon Shwe Hmyar). After World War II, the government used the space for ration distribution and a staff shop for civil servants. It was also home to one of the country's first film studios, A1 Film Company. By the 1970s, the building housed the Tourism Burma office, where foreign tourists arranged their in-country travel. Twenty years later, the Ministry of Tourism and Hotels had taken over the space, but eventually joined the other ministries in the move to Naypyidaw in 2005-06, leaving the space empty.

Its recent restoration was headed by Turquoise Mountain Foundation (TMF), started by Britain's Prince Charles to meld heritage restoration, training in traditional

[159] Charlie Michio Turner and Gwan Ho Tong, "NO U-TURN Stays Punk," *Myanmore: The Ultimate Guide to What's On*, June 15, 2016. https://www.myanmore.com/yangon/2016/06/no-u-turn-stays-punk

building skills, and the revival of artisan craftsmanship. TMF's earlier work on a two-story century-old residential building on Merchant Street received near universal praise. The project trained 250 people in traditional building skills, while its 80 occupants remained in it during its year-long restoration.[160]

One of TMF's goals for the Tourist Burma Building is to ensure public access. Even before the restoration started, in November 2017, the people of Yangon were invited into the Tourist Burma Building for a number of events. The first was a photo exhibition on display as part of My Yangon My Home festival, started by the British Council in 2015. The exhibition, under the umbrella title "World of Change," was held November 3-19, and was open daily 11a.m. to 6 p.m. "Memories, Objects and Spaces" depicted Yangon street life and heritage issues, while "A Memorable Trip Installation" featured conceptualized "memories of travel."[161] Organizers also called for the public to donate an object associated with their travel memories to an installation at the site, along with a story behind the object.

Soon after, the building hosted Burma Storybook Exhibition. This interactive exhibition featured walls of large headshots of more than a dozen of the country's best-known poets. Standing in front of the photos, viewers used their phones to listen to the poems, and then were encouraged to write their own on the "poem wall."[162] In mid-December, TMF held a film screening of "We Were Kings," a 2017 documentary about

[160] Yangon Heritage Trust, " 'Living Restoration' on Merchant Street," Facebook, April 29, 2016. https://www.facebook.com/theyangonheritagetrust/posts/1019302534825535:0
[161] Facebook Events, "World of Change Exhibition," Facebook, n.d., accessed July 20, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/events/151098992165302/.
[162] Turquoise Mountain Myanmar, Facebook, November 30, 2015. https://www.facebook.com/turquoisemountainmyanmar/.

the exiled Burmese royal family—an appropriate choice for a building that had been home to a film studio.

Figure 18: Among the events that welcomed the public into the Burma Tourist Building was a film screening about Burma's exiled royal family. (*Credit: We Were Kings Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/events/736997683162349/.)

Restoration has been completed, and the building has become a central cultural hub, with public space for exhibitions and workshops. In March 2018, the Dutch Embassy hosted an exhibition, Reuse Redevelop and Design. Since then, the building has been used as the launch site of TMF's Myanmar Artisan Toolkit, and as the site of a community workshop on the history of the Tourist Burma Building and how to integrate it with its surroundings in a community-friendly way.

The Weight of History

The Secretariat is Yangon's most important civic building. It served as the seat of government from its completion in 1905 until the junta's move to Naypyidaw in 2005. But it is perhaps most deeply entrenched in people's minds as the site of Aung San's

assassination. Less than six months after his murder, the Union Jack was lowered here for the last time, and a ceremony was held to mark the handover of government.[163]

Set on 16 acres, the Secretariat was designed by Henry Hoyne-Fox, an engineer in the Public Works Department. Now officially called The Ministers' Building, the two-story U-shaped Victorian building of red brick with cast stone[164] takes up an entire city block, bordered by Maha Bandula Road on the south, Anawrahta Street on the north, Thein Phyu Road on the east and Bo Aung Khaw Street on the west. The south wing contains the main entrance, a three-story center entrance with a port cochere and Corinthian columns. Most elevations of the three wings are divided horizontally by yellow cast stone cornices and feature arcaded verandas with round arched windows. The corners of the three wings each contain three-story towers. The Secretariat has lost its original central dome and 18 of its turrets,[165] many to the 1930 earthquake. One enters by walking through a vast courtyard into the main entry hall, which is a cylindrical central space with a striking double spiral staircase with teak stairs and cast iron balustrades.

[163] Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 1994), xv.
[164] "Yangon Secretariat Myanmar: Conservation Management Plan," Simpson and Brown with Alleya and Associates, September 2015.
[165] Bansal, Fox and Oka, *Architectural Guide: Yangon,* 18.

Figure 19. Secretariat (Minister's Building), Yangon. South elevation, looking west. (*Credit: Author, 2012*.)

Even before it was vacated, the Secretariat sat behind a large padlocked gate and razor wire atop its fence posts. During the years of military rule, it was so heavily guarded that residents were wary of walking along nearby sidewalks.[166] In recent years, on Martyr's Day, the public was allowed partial entry to the site. Otherwise, it was off limits.

In the colonial era, the British had opened the courtyard for use as a public park accessible to city residents outside working hours.[167] Nearby residents remembered those days of playing in the courtyard; as the country opened and word spread of the privatization of government property, they called for the Secretariat to be returned to the public, and were joined in that view by architects and politicians.[168]

[166] Daniel Brook, "History of the Present: Yangon," *Places Journal*, September 2014. https://doi.org/10.22269/140929

[167] The Secretariat, "Yangon Time Machine." https://yangontimemachine.com/2018/09/11/secretariat-ministers-office-building

[168] San Yamin Aung, "Will Yangon's Secretariat be Returned to the Public?", *The Irrawaddy*, July 18, 2017. https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/will-yangons-secretariat-returned-public.html

In early 2017, the Goethe Institut used the Secretariat for its exhibition, "Where the Land and Water Ends," featuring the work of German sculptor Wolfgang Laib. Renowned for his contemplative, minimalist installations featuring natural elements, Laib's pieces, installed in three rooms in the Secretariat's southeast wing, as well as in hallways and covered arcades, included milk, bees wax, pollen, brass and marble.

In one room, a flotilla of beeswax and brass "ships" of various sizes is placed on the floor bow to stern, some on piles of rice, and appear as if they are heading out to sea. Another room is empty save for a standalone stairway coated in Burmese lacquer from the ancient capital of Pagan, part of 100 kilograms of lacquer the artist bought on a visit there more than 20 years ago.[169] Along an arcade sat simple brass dishes filled with offerings of rice.

Figure 20: "Where the Land and Water Ends," a 2016 site-specific installation by Wolfgang Laib at Yangon's Secretariat. It was the first time in decades that the public was allowed entry for an extended period. (*Credit: Lillian Kailish*.)

[169] Rik Glauert, " 'Where the Land and Water End' Exhibition," *The Irrawaddy,* January 13, 2017. https://www.irrawaddy.com/culture/land-water-end-exhibition.html

"You can do a big exhibition at MOMA [Museum of Modern Art], but this has context,"[170] says Laib.

> I think it's a very heavy history, and I think when you see especially this installation with all these ships—it's like seven ships out of beeswax and about 70 ships out of brass sitting on rice—and when you think about what ships were in the history of this country, mostly war ships and mostly ships which were taking things away, this installation is the opposite: it's about ships which bring something to you.[171]

The events that have occurred at the site "makes this building a mirror of the history of Myanmar in the past 150 years,"[172] says Goethe Institut director Augustin. "We hope this building will be used for the people, for the public, for presenting the history of this country in the form of a museum, in the form of maybe an art gallery, in the form of a cultural center. The statement of Wolfgang is a kind of first attempt to use it in this sense."[173]

The exhibition, held Jan 14-Feb 4, 2017, was open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., and free to the public. It is said to have attracted 50,000 viewers[174] who entered through the main gate of the complex, and then through the main entry of the building and up the double helix staircase. They were able to wander freely through the exhibition space as well as the grounds of the building.

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[170] Lillian Kalish, "Yangon's Secretariat reopens for art exhibit," *Myanmar Times*, January 13, 2017. https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/24528-yangon-s-secretariat-re-opens-for-art-exhibit.html
[171] *Can art bring the Secretariat building back to the people of Yangon?* YouTube video, 5:13. Posted by Coconuts TV, January 31, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlB5CptjWpE
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Stephen Starr, "Myanmar past and present meet at the Secretariat," *The National*, March 14, 2018. https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/myanmar-past-and-present-meet-at-the-secretariat-1.712984

In December 2017, Anawmar Group, the long-term lessee of the building, announced it would offer four paid tours a day, including to the site of Aung San's assassination,[175] finally granting the public the ability to enter the structure.

Then, in early 2018, an arts collective, Pyinsa Rasa, was given a six-month residency in the building's south wing,[176] and the group began hosting performances, exhibitions, events and educational programs. The residency kicked off with "Burmese Photographers," an exhibition in partnership with the Goethe Institut; it featured historic photos taken by often anonymous Burmese photographers, part of the Myanmar Photo Archive.[177]

The City as Unifying Force

Architecture and memory are unifying elements. Buildings serve as placeholders for our memories, both the intimate and ordinary, like playing in the courtyard of the Secretariat, to the resounding, outsized events that become part of a collective memory. Morley points to the city's "inescapable presence in building social solidarity between the ethnic diversity population of Rangoon."[178]

Site-specific art events have allowed Yangon residents to pass through the gates into sites off limits to them for decades. That in itself is of value. It satisfies the curious; enables people to look at what are often times beautiful examples of architecture, art and craftsmanship; and celebrates Myanmar's—and Yangon's—public reawakening and

[175] Marissa Caruthers, "Yangon heritage building reopens to public, *TTG Asia*, December 12, 2017. https://www.ttgasia.com/2017/12/12/yangon-heritage-building-reopens-to-public
[176] "Art Arrives at the Secretariat," Go-Myanmar.com, May 21, 2018. https://www.go-myanmar.com/art-arrives-at-the-secretariat
[177] Lwin Mar Htun, "Archivist Salvages Myanmar's Neglected Photographic History," *The Irrawaddy,* February 20,2019. https://www.irrawaddy.com/culture/archivist-salvages-myanmars-neglected-photographic-history.html/.
[178] Morley, "Owning the City," 43.

relative loosening of expression. But the meaning of such events can be far greater. In the words of Moe Satt, they offer the "power of assembly that art provides,"[179] and present the city as a unifying force binding together its disparate residents. Perhaps more important, these performances and installations have provided the time and literal space for people to determine what memories are important to them and how they can best be held. Their interpretations, and the meaning they derive from them, can help to play an important part of shaping the city for the future as they envision it.

[179] The YGN Public Art Festival, Geographies of Change.

CHAPTER 3

SINGAPORE: HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

On an overcast evening in early 1996, I stood outside the heavy double door of 38 Amoy Street, a vacant, dilapidated two-story shophouse in Singapore's Chinatown. My ticket provided entry to "The Yang Family," a performance about a matriarchal family who arrived in Southeast Asia from China in the 1930s. The shophouse, where the fictional Yang family operated a *kueh* (cake) business from the ground floor and lived upstairs (Appendix I), served as the set. The production followed successive Yang generations as their financial stature rose—along with their interest in property values and flashy cars.

Outside, the surrounding streets were filled with similar shophouses, built over a century, starting in about 1840.[180] At one time home to immigrant families and their businesses, now they were devoid of inhabitants, soon to be demolished for parking lots or gutted to accommodate boutique ad agencies and hip cafes. In the 1990s, I worked in a renovated shophouse on the next block, and often wondered about its previous occupants as I climbed the stairs to my office. "The Yang Family" asked these same questions.

An evocative reflection about a hard-working immigrant family's transformation over more than 50 years, the performance and its setting also offered a commentary on the changes occurring throughout Chinatown. Much of the area's distinct urban fabric had been torn down in the prior decades,[181] and a new state-led redevelopment plan

[180] Victor Savage, "Singapore Shophouses: Conserving a Landscape Tradition," *SPAFA Journal* 11 no 1, n.d.
[181] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Publishing Group, 2000).

threatened to turn what was left into what critics termed an "ethnic theme park."[182] The setting also referenced broader changes occurring throughout Singapore, where the "heavy-handed demolition of old buildings"[183] was rife.

"The Yang Family" was written by Leow Puay Tin, herself the granddaughter of Chinese immigrants to Malaysia who spent her early years in a shophouse in Malacca.[184] The staging in an actual shophouse was the brainchild of Ong Keng Sen, artistic director of Theatreworks, a Singapore arts group. "My ambivalence towards the need for change and progress which has taken away many heritage buildings in Singapore rises to the fore once again in this production,"[185] Ong wrote in the program notes.

"It is seldom that a venue becomes the 'star' of a performance,"[186] playwright Leow wrote. "…but it will likely happen with this production of 'The Yang Family.' The old shophouse that Keng Sen has chosen has both presence and character." She continued, "Rather run-down now, it evokes memory and mystery, shadow and light…perfect as the house of old Mrs. Yang."[187]

Inside 38 Amoy Street, audiences wandered through the rooms, each of which served as a set-specific "chapter" telling a discrete story. A video on one wall captured the final day of the nearby Fuk Tat Chi temple before it was deconsecrated and redeveloped into a museum that now serves as a hotel entrance. In the kitchen, a team of actor/bakers prepared and served *kueh*, the foodstuff that had contributed to the fortunes

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[182] Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, "Singapore's Chinatown: Nation building and heritage tourism in a multiracial city," *Localities* 2, 2012, 139. https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/2250

[183] Theatreworks (Re)search, from: Marcus Yee, *38 Amoy Street*, April 27, 2015, https://theatreworksre-search.tumblr.com/page/6

[184] Leow Puay Tin, "Translating and Performing Languages of Memory," *Between Tongues: Translation and/of/in Performance in Asia*, Jennifer Lindsay, editor (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2007), 264-71.

[185] *The Yang Family*, theater program, Theatreworks, February 29-March 16, 1996.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Ibid.

of the fictional Yang family. Toward the end of the evening, an actor/building inspector rushed in, enthusiastically finding faults and fire hazards in every corner of the century-old building. Her ultimate and unexpected conclusion also marked the close of the performance: "While many parts of this old building has [sic] failed my test, there is much heritage and culture that we must preserve. Today, I'm going to close one eye and pass the building."[188]

Figure 21: 38 Amoy Street, site of the performance of "The Yang Family," November 2019. (*Credit: Author from Google Maps.*)

In the years since "The Yang Family" explored the meaning of home, heritage, family and memory, Singapore has undergone tremendous changes in its built environment, which continue today. The remaining shophouses, located in designated

[188] Theatreworks (Re)search, from: Marcus Yee, *38 Amoy Street*.

conservation areas, are no longer under threat. Demolition of the homes of more recent generations of Singaporeans continues, however, in order to accommodate infrastructure projects and higher-density housing on a land-scarce island with a growing population.

The Singapore government's traditional top-down approach, which has resulted in state ownership of 90 percent of the country's land,[189] has until recently left residents with little opportunity to contribute to, or counter, the government's plans generally and its housing plans specifically. Those who are angered, frustrated or heartbroken about the loss of their homes and heritage, and the dissolution of their community, typically do not protest, which requires a license and is restricted to a specific state-sanctioned location.[190] Instead, Singapore citizens publish blogs, post to social media, document the sites in photographs and write letters to the editor to voice their concerns, mourn their lost homes and communities, and honor their memories.

Increasingly, professional and grassroots arts organizations are working with residents to pay homage to Singapore's homes. These arts events take place in public housing blocks, private bungalows and shophouses. In recent years, such efforts have risen in number and frequency. The result is a critical mass of site-specific art performances that give voice to residents' stories and memories of home, and serve as a visible part of a wider effort that is influencing changes in government policy on heritage, housing—and public participation in related decisions.

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[189] Anne Haila, *Urban Land Rent: Singapore as a Property State* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2016), 216.

196 Cheryl Sim, "Speakers' Corner," SingaporeInfopedia, September 22, 2014. https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_515_2005-01-25.html/.

"Our Future, Our Home"[191]

Originally an equatorial fishing village, the island city-state of Singapore spent nearly 140 years under mostly British rule, starting in 1824. By the early 20th century, its economy was expanding beyond its role as a successful international trading port, driven initially by the processing and sale of tin[192] and rubber (for the burgeoning automobile industry).[193]

Between 1900 and 1930, the population more than doubled to a half million people,[194] largely due to immigration from China, India, Indonesia and Malaysia. Most people lived in racially segregated areas near the city center. This pattern had been specified in the Jackson Plan, published in 1828, in which the British colonial power established the city's grid system of streets and created a commercial district in what was possibly the island's first land reclamation project.[195]

[191] *Island-wide, URA Master Plan 2014*, YouTube video, 2:27, posted by Urban Redevelopment Authority, June 6, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dll81VogvCo
[192] Barbara Leitch LePoer, editor, *Singapore: A Case Study* (Library of Congress, 1999), 29.
[193] Gretchen Liu, *Singapore: A Pictorial History 1819-2000* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1999), 92, 98.
[194] Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing, 2012), 9.
[195] Kay Gillis and Kevin Tan, *The Book of Singapore's Firsts* (Singapore: Select Books, 2006), 96.

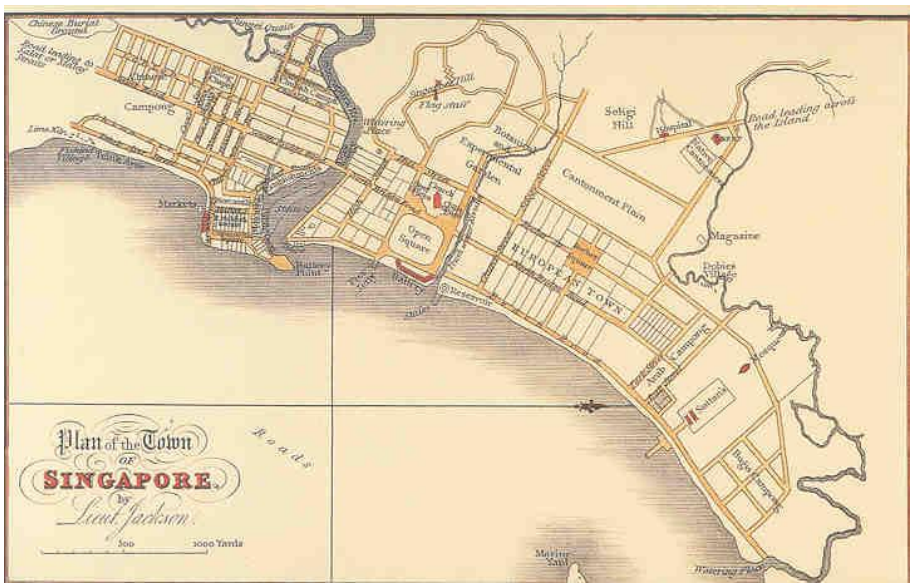

Figure 22: The Plan of the Town of Singapore, from 1822, known as the Jackson Plan, established the city's initial street grid and segregated residents by ethnicity. (*Credit: National Archives of Singapore.*)

Today, Singapore is a well-planned country. The island is clean with vast green landscapes, yet one of the densest cities in the world with a multitude of office buildings, shopping malls, condos and public housing blocks. It is a bustling, uber-modern city of futuristic architecture and skyscrapers filled with global financial services firms abutting vibrant historic districts. Its 400-acre nature reserve in the middle of the island is a peaceful oasis with more than 1,300 species of flora and fauna.[196] Just off shore, however, sit dozens of oil tankers and container ships, taking advantage of Singapore's role as one of the world's busiest ports. It packs all this, along with a population of 5.7 million, into 275 square miles, an area about half the size of Los Angeles. It is also in the top 10 countries of the world in terms of GDP per capita, almost US$65,000.[197]

[196] "A Trip to Bukit Timah Nature Reserve," National Parks Board, guided walks PDF, n.d., accessed October 2016. https://www.nparks.gov.sg/~/media/nparks-real-content/learning/learning-journeys/guided-walks/diy-guided-walks/ancient-forest/worksheets-for-students.pdf?la=en.
[197] GDP per capita, current USD, World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD

Singapore has been dubbed "City of the Future,"[198] a gleaming, high-tech city-state with unrelenting forward momentum. Among the government ministries responsible for this is the powerful planning agency, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). The URA's Master Plan 2014 liberally uses the term "vision" and insists that "the future remains our focus."[199] An accompanying video underlines the premise: "We can see our whole lives ahead of us," says a couple at the start, leaning from the top floor of a high-rise apartment building.[200] The video ends with Singapore's current slogan, "Our Future, Our Home!"[201]

Figure 23: "Our Future, Our Home!" from Singapore's Master Plan 2014 lays out the future vision for the city-state. (*Credit: Urban Redevelopment Authority*.)

[198] "Singapore crowned best city of the future," *Asian Correspondent*, September 25, 2017, accessed October 27, 2018. https://asiancorrespondent.com/2017/09/singapore-crowned-best-city-future
[199] Singapore Master Plan 2014, accessed October 20, 2018. https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Planning/Master-Plan/Introduction
[200] *Island wide – URA Masterplan 2014*. YouTube video, 2:27. Posted by Urban Redevelopment Authority, June 6, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=Dll81VogvCo
[201] Ibid.

Singaporeans' futures have been tightly intertwined with their homes since the country's independence in 1965. Under the laser focus of the first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who ruled until 1990, housing was a top priority: "My primary preoccupation was to give every citizen a stake in the country and its future. I wanted a home-owning society. I had seen the contrast between the blocks of low-cost rental flats, badly misused and poorly maintained, and those of house-proud owners, and was convinced that if every family owned its home, the country would be more stable."[202]

In 1965, the housing situation was dire. The rapidly increasing immigrant population of the early 20th century had outpaced the growth of housing,[203] with the majority living in overcrowded shophouses and informal settlements. The Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), established in 1927 by the British colonial government to address the population's housing needs, moved slowly. It took the SIT nine years to open the island's first public housing estate, Tiong Bahru, which accommodated 6,000 people.[204] At the time of SIT's dissolution in 1960, there were numerous housing plans on its books, but few had been built; about nine percent of the population lived in public housing.[205]

Under Lee and his People's Action Party (PAP), housing became the foundation upon which the country was transformed into one of the world's great economic success stories. Post-independence, the government got to work building large swaths of public housing estates, moving residents out of subpar accommodation, which was then demolished. To do this, it turned to the SIT's replacement, the Housing Development

[202] Lee, *From Third World to First*, 116-17.
[203] Lee, *From Third World to First,* 79, 119.
[204] Eunice Seng, "Habitation and the Invention of a Nation, Singapore 1936-79," (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2014).
[205] Ibid.

Board (HDB), which constructed and financed the island's housing estates, commonly known as HDBs. By 1979, 60 percent of the population lived in public housing.[206] Today, that figure is about 80 percent.[207] Singaporeans' home-ownership of public housing is achieved through the purchase of 99-year leases on units within government-constructed housing estates that have been built on government-owned land. Within the lease period, the units are freely bought and sold at market rates.

Figure 24: Tampines, an HDB housing estate located in the eastern part of Singapore, is home to more than 230,000 residents living in nearly 70,000 apartments. (*Credit: Housing Development Board*.)

Through this meticulously managed public housing program, the state provided an avenue for residents to achieve widespread home ownership, providing the new nation

[206] Ibid.
[207] Ng Jun Sen, "Parliament: HDB flats made up 73% of Singapore's total housing stock in 2016," *The Straits Times*, May 8, 2017. http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-hdb-flats-made-up-73-of-singapores-total-housing-stock-in-2016

with stability.[208] It created wealth for homeowners by establishing resale markets for public housing and incorporating housing loan programs into the country's provident fund.[209] It also used housing to enforce its social policies,[210] implementing home ownership rules that encouraged ethnic integration, couples to have more children and live closer to aging parents while discouraging single lifestyles and same-sex relationships.[211]

Since independence, the government has built, financed and sold nearly 11,000 public housing blocks[212] containing 1 million apartments. As a result, Singapore is one of the only countries in the world to have re-housed its entire population in a single, sustained effort.[213] It has delivered on Lee Kuan Yew's desire: the country boasts a home ownership rate of 90 percent, among the world's highest.[214]

The pressures of prolonged development on a land-scarce island are felt by virtually every resident. One way is economic, in the form of rising housing costs. Another is more subtle. The rapidly changing landscape leaves citizens with a sense of disorientation and the removal of people from their homes with a sense of displacement.

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[208] Sock-Yong Phang and Kyunghwan Kim, "Singapore's Housing Policies: 1960-2013," *Frontiers in Development Policy: Innovative Development Case Studies,* 2013, 123-153. http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soe_research/1544

[209] Ibid.

[210] Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, "Decoding Sexual Policy in Singapore," Social Policy in Post-industrial Singapore, Kwen Fee Lien and Chee-Kiong Tong, editors (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 293-4.

[211] Ibid.

[212] "HDB statistics, facts and figures," Teoalida's website, https://www.teoalida.com/singapore/hdbstatistics/

[213] George Clancy, "Toward a Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore," *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity,* John Phillips, Ryan Bishop, Wei-Wei Yeo, editors (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 36.

[214] Sock-Yong Phang and Matthias Helble, "Housing Policies in Singapore," ADBI Working Paper 559, Asia Development Bank Institute, 2016.

Demolition Derby

The Singapore government's approach to housing, and land use generally, has been both pragmatic and transactional. The Land Acquisition Act of 1966 allowed the government to acquire private lands to develop the homes, highways and hotels necessary for a developing country. In the first decades after independence, the purchase of land and subsequent construction of "new towns," as the communities of housing blocks were then known, often meant the destruction of traditional villages, or *kampungs*, along with markets, cemeteries and other places of personal significance. In Singapore, which can be characterized as an authoritarian and developmental state, residents had no say in such decisions. There were occasional rumblings of discontent,[215] but on the whole, the government simply did what it deemed necessary in the name of national progress and better housing for all.

To this day, traveling around the island, one notices the dominance of these "new towns," or HDBs; they comprise 72 percent of the housing stock.[216] Privately owned condominiums and other apartments are the second-largest category (22 percent), followed by landed properties—bungalows, detached and semi-detached housing, and terrace housing—at 5 percent. Singapore's iconic shophouses—the kind owned by the Yang family—are considered "other housing units." These account for less than 1

[215] "Land Acquisition and Resettlement: Securing Resources for Development," Centre for Livable Cities Singapore, 2014, 21-22.
[216] "Singapore Resident Households by Type of Dwelling, 2019," Singapore Department of Statistics, accessed May 1, 2020.
https://www.tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/publicfacing/createDataTable.action?refId=14626
https://data.gov.sg/dataset/resident-households-by-type-of-dwelling-annual?view_id=a5c5898a-367b-4c00-9e8a-9cb8194d5ca0&resource_id=54ad26a7-1ff4-453a-a2cd-39ce64c6aaa8

percent,[217] an indication of their fewer numbers and that those that remain have been adapted for non-residential use.

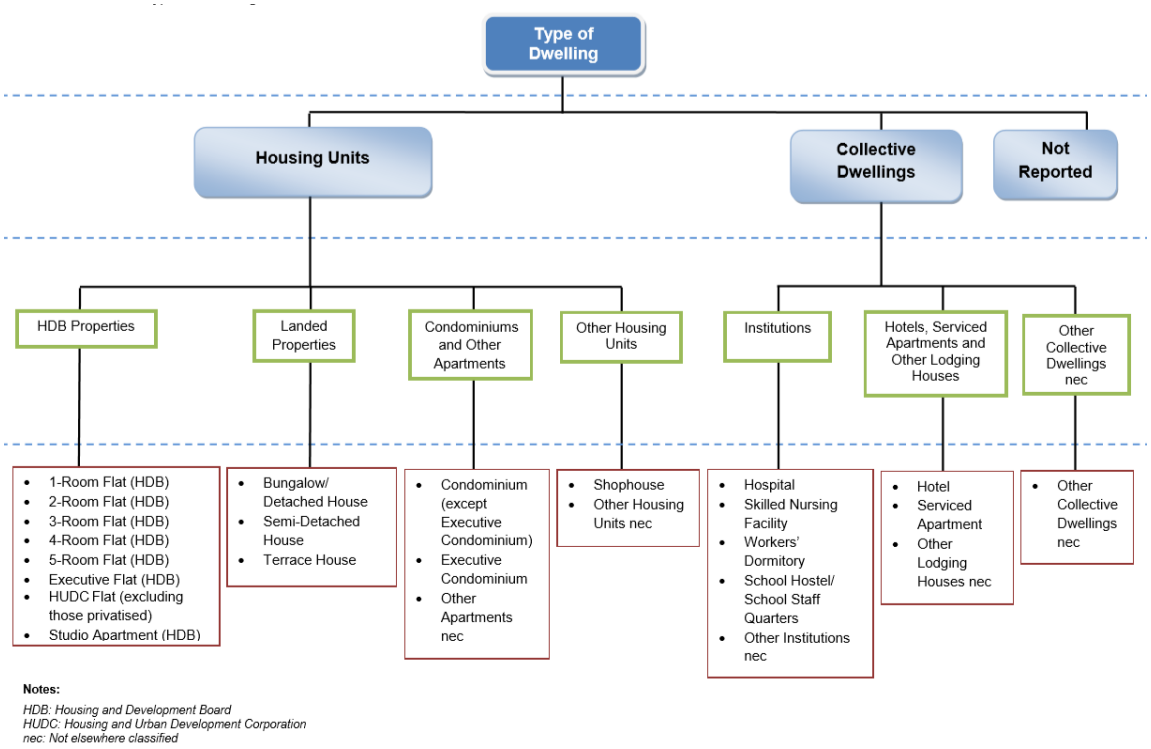

Figure 25: Classification of Singapore housing types, the vast majority of which are HDB properties. (*Credit: Housing Development Board*.)

Why did the shophouses all but disappear? It was intentional. From the mid-1960s through the late 1980s, informal settlements and shophouses were demolished to make way for the new HDBs. Ever since, the continuing cycle of development and redevelopment has meant the routine demolition of lower-density housing stock to construct more modern, higher-density dwellings. A couple of decades ago, that meant shophouses disappeared; more recently, it has meant the demolition of HDBs.

[217] Ibid.

Figure 26: The seven 50-story towers of Pinnacle@Duxton, an HDB that opened in 2009, replaced ten-story HDBs built in the 1960s. (*Credit: ARC Studio Architecture + Urbanism*.)

In 1995, the HDBs that had been built in the early days of independence began to come under the wrecking ball with the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS). Still in effect today, the program demolishes designated housing blocks, then compensates and resettles residents in newer housing; this frees up the land for redevelopment of higher-density public housing. It can also accommodate new

infrastructure projects such as highways. Since the start of SERS, 84 HDB sites comprising 33,000 units have been demolished.[218]

Many Singaporeans seemingly accept this cycle as part of life on a land-scarce island, in which their standard of living has steadily improved. Others, however, find this resettling unsettling. One long-time HDB resident who was resettled under SERS says, "There were gains, of course, because I didn't pay much for a new flat with a fresh lease. But at the end of the day, I lost the sense of rootedness, identity and context which I can't pass on to my daughters now."[219]

Initially, such regrets regarding the loss of their HDB communities were assuaged somewhat by the government's stated policy on demolition: razed HDBs would be replaced by upgraded HDBs. There would be homes for others like themselves, if not themselves. But over the years, Singaporeans have noted this has not always been the case, pointing to several examples in which HDBs and surrounding public lands were sold to private developers to construct private condominiums and shopping malls.[220] Indeed, the percentage of public housing stock has shrunk, from about 78 percent in 2006 to 72 percent today; meanwhile, the percentage of private condominiums has grown proportionally.[221]

Hillview Estate, built in the late 1970s, was the largest SERS project when it was announced in 1999[222] and among the most controversial. Comprising 13 blocks of flats, along with shops, a market and a community center, Hillview was located in a lush, green

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[218] "List of SERS sites," Teoalida's website, https://www.teoalida.com/singapore/serslist/.
[219] Ng Jun Sen, "Goodbye to Sers with love…and a little windfall," *The Straits Times*, November 12, 2017. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/goodbye-to-sers-with-love-and-a-little-windfall
[220] "Government recycles public land vacated by HDB dwellers to developers for building private condos," The Online Citizen, September 19, 2018. https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2018/09/19/govt-recycles-public-land-vacated-by-hdb-dwellers-to-developers-for-building-private-condos
[221] Ng Jun Sen, "Parliament: HDB flats…".
[222] "List of SERS sites," Teoalida's website.

area in the western part of the island with several nature parks nearby. In 1999, SERS was announced; residents relocated between 2003 and 2005, and the estate was demolished shortly after. Rather than replace it with higher-density public housing, the government sold hundreds of parcels to private developers. "PAP profited billions from this," wrote blogger Philip Ang in a 2018 blog post, "while HDB flat buyers suffered when property prices shot up and are now forced to move to as far as Jurong or Punggol instead of having a home in, say, Alexandra or Tiong Bahru,"[223] referring to areas located closer to the central business district (CBD). Today, the Hillview area is dominated by private condominiums and bungalows and upmarket shopping malls. There is no public housing in the neighborhoods of Alexandra and Tiong Bahru that Ang mentioned due to a SERS offering that saw residents move out in 2002.[224] Today, there are five private condominium developments in these neighborhoods, where formerly there were five HDB blocks. The private units' sale prices range from SGD1.2 million up to SG$7 million (US$5.2 million).[225]

Private owners of both landed property and condominiums also contribute to the rapid change of the city's urban fabric. As property prices have risen, many have sold their properties to private developers. A bungalow with a verdant garden may be replaced by a multi-unit condominium. Those living in private condominiums may participate in collective en bloc sales to private developers, which require resident approval levels of 80 to 90 percent, depending on the age of the building.[226]

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[223] Philip Ang, "PAP ministers lie about recycling land to provide affordable public housing," likedatosocanmeh blog, September 16, 2018. https://likedatosocanmeh.wordpress.com/2018/09/16/pap-ministers-lie-about-recycling-land-to-provide-affordable-public-housing

[224] "Government recycles public land," The Online Citizen.

[225] Property Guru, https://www.propertyguru.com.sg/search/hillview+condo

[226] Strata Title Bank, Government of Singapore, https://www.stratatb.gov.sg/applicant-steps-relating-to-ltsa.html/.

The privately-owned Pearl Bank Apartments on the edge of the CBD is a recent example. Upon completion in 1976, the 37-story horseshoe-shaped building was the tallest in Singapore, and seen as a model for high-rise living.[227] Over the years, access to the building became more difficult for its aging residents, and the pipes and elevators were aging, too. To address these issues, the residents were eager to monetize their asset. As recently as 2015, the idea was to sell the five-story adjacent car park for development and build a second residential unit on top while using the proceeds to make improvements to the original building.[228]

Figure 27: Three views of Pearl Bank Apartments prior to their demolition in March 2020. (*Credit: Darren Soh, used with permission.*)

When word of the redevelopment plan got out, local architects appealed for the conservation of the Pearl Bank Apartments, arguing that the public had a right "to participate in the decision-making process to protect the built heritage and urban

[227] "Soul-searching as symbol of '70s Singapore faces demolition," Agence France Presse, February 22, 2018. http://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2018/02/22/soul-searching-as-symbol-of-70s-singapore-faces-demolition.html
[228] Ibid.

identity."[229] It was to no avail. Pearl Bank Apartments was sold in February 2018 to a private developer, who demolished it in early 2020. The artist's renderings for the new development, scheduled for completion in 2023, show two 39-story buildings. The architect's design bears a striking resemblance to the original cylindrical Pearl Bank Apartments,[230] seemingly honoring its history but with nearly three times as many apartments.[231]

Writing in May 2019 of three more housing estates slated for demolition (to be replaced by a highway, a new residential development and sold to private investors respectively), journalist Morgan Awyong remarked, "Even with assurances from national developers promising to 'improve' the three estates with high-value projects, perhaps the word 'value' needs to be assigned to something that is less tangible and one that's a growing challenge in Singapore's horizon — that of her identity as home to her people."[232]

The Contested Meaning of Home

As in any other country, Singaporeans view their homes as important financial assets. From 1990 to 2015, both public and private housing values increased at an average of

[229] Zaccheus, Melody. "Architects keen on conservation status for Pearl Bank." *The Straits Times*, May 8, 2014. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/architects-keen-on-conservation-status-for-pearl-bank

[230] Jessica Lin, "This is the 774-unit tower duo taking over Singapore's iconic Pearl Bank apartments," *Business Insider Singapore*, May 14, 2019. https://www.businessinsider.sg/these-are-the-774-unit-towers-taking-over-singapores-iconic-pearl-bank-apartments

[231] Ibid.

[232] Morgan Awyong, "Singapore is Heading to Space," *The Epoch Times*, May 4, 2019. https://epochtimes.today/singapore-is-heading-to-space/.

about 7 percent annually.[233] But they also know that these spaces are imbued with more than their market value.

Geographer Yi-fu Tuan uses the term "fields of care"[234] for homes and the landscapes they are situated in—the housing estate with its local market, the street corner where neighbors wait for the bus. These, he says, are "habitats for people who endow them with meaning in the course of time."[235] That distinguishes homes from places that serve as public symbols, such as monuments, public squares, and, in the case of Singapore, the modernist luxury malls and stylish office buildings that embody its ambition to be a "Global City."

Singaporeans who have a personal, emotional idea of "home" are at odds with the government's notion of home primarily as a developmental financial tool to further economic growth. "The rhetoric of 'home' is a familiar one in Singapore, with a close affinity to the ideals of national/cultural identity and nation-building," says cultural media scholar Terence Lee, referencing sociologist Joseph Tamney.[236] To get a sense of what is meant by this, consider the state's regular use of the term "home" in its annual slogans and themes for National Day celebrations: "My Country, My Home" (1993), "My Singapore, My Home" (1994),[237] "Our Global City, Our Home" (2006), "Loving Singapore, Our Home" (2012), "Our People, Our Home" (2014).[238]

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[233] Wai-Mun Chia, Mengling Li and Yang Tang, "Public and Private Housing Market Dynamics in Singapore: The role of fundamentals," *Journal of Housing Economics* 36, 2017, 44-61.
[234] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place," in *Philosophy in Geography*, Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson, editors (Dordrecht, Holland: D Reidel Publishing Co.1979), 412.
[235] Tuan, "Space and Place," in *Philosophy in Geography*, 415.
[236] Terence Lee, "The Politics of Civil Society in Singapore," *Asian Studies Review* 26, no 1, March 2002.
[237] Linda K Fuller, editor, *National Days/National Ways: Historic, Political, and Religious Celebrations Around the World* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 213-14.
[238] "Singapore National Day Parade (NDP) Logos and Slogans," Pirr Creative, July 9, 2019. https://pirrcreatives.com/singapore-national-day-parade-ndp-logos-and-slogans

The report "Singapore 21" was a vision for the country's future launched in 1999 under Lee Kuan Yew's protégé, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. It "was the first of a series of attempts to strengthen community bonds in order that people stay committed to Singapore,"[239] writes William Lin, a local architect and urbanist. The report, Lim added, "states in earnest that: 'We need to feel passionately that Singapore is where we identify with, where our roots are, where we feel is home.' However, tying together the identity of the nation with personal concepts of home and family is a formidable task. In effect, the state is seeking to harness these ideas as part of its long-term economic priorities."[240]

Much has been written about the increasing alienation and rootlessness that one can experience in a rapidly globalizing world, an idea often evoked through an image of an anonymous city of glass skyscrapers, international retailers and crowds of tourists. Such a city could be anywhere, utterly lacking a sense of place or particularity. The concern is that land-scarce, wealthy Singapore, in forging ahead to that globalized future, has not just left behind its past, but demolished it forever. "Indeed very few Singaporeans have the luxury of growing old in or even revisiting their childhood home or neighborhood. Such has been the pace of change,"[241] writes Geh Min, former president of Singapore's Nature Society.[242]

Geh continues, "It was acceptable in exchange for a dynamic economy and upward mobility. As the latter is sacrificed, the old social compact cannot hold. As upward mobility declines, and economic growth slows, it is even more essential that we

[239] William S.W. Lim, *Asian Ethical Urbanism: A Radical Postmodern Perspective* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd, 2005), 168.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Geh Min, "Singapore: A Contested Space," *Global-is-asian*, August 2, 2018. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/singapore-a-contested-space
[242] Ibid.

conserve as much of our natural and man-made heritage, shared memories and familiar landmarks as possible."[243]

At a conference sponsored by Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies in 2011, Parliament member Sylvia Lim spoke of the "palpable sense of loss of identity among Singaporeans due to the pace of change over the last few years."[244] There were tensions, she noted, between the government's aspirational public themes of Singapore as both a "Global City" and an "Endearing Home."[245]

Yeo Wei-Wei explores this distinction in "Of Trees and the Heartland: Singapore's Narratives." She writes about the preponderance of references to HDBs by filmmakers and writers:

> The attention that is paid to the rhythm of life and the blocks of flats themselves in the HDB heartland is curious when the lack of representation of other public spaces that are associated with the masses in Singapore is borne in mind: the area with the highest density of white-collar workers in Singapore, the central commercial district with its towering corporate buildings; the many shopping malls along Orchard Road as well as in HDB town centres. The grasp of the local is less possible in such places where the global orientation of the city-state is reflected in the international range of brands that are available in the shops and the number of multinational corporations who occupy the offices along Shenton Way. In comparison with the old HDB estates, the buildings in the city centre reflect a different side of Singapore – one that is not close to the hearts of local writers and filmmakers, it would seem. Perhaps there is a conscious censoring of the central city area because it manifests the global citizenship of Singapore much more powerfully than any sense of the local and the historic.[246]

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[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] "Singapore: A nation of paradoxes?" Singapore Perspectives 2011, January 17, 2011. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/singapore-a-nation-of-paradoxes.pdf
[246] Yeo Wei-Wei, "Of Trees and the Heartland," *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity, 26.*

The part of Singapore that visitors see—the shiny shopping centers, bustling business district, the civic buildings that form the core of the Colonial District—are not without history. It is a history, however, of large-scale globalization rather than the more personal histories that each Singaporean associates with a neighborhood, an apartment block, a home.

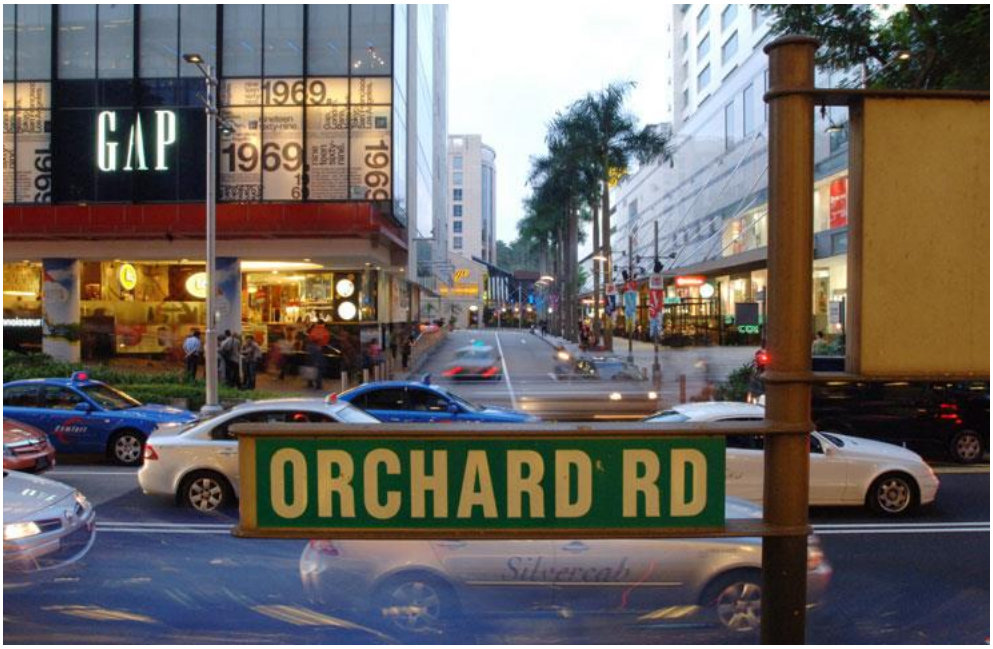

Figure 28: With its international branded shops and towering malls, Orchard Road's transformation starting in the 1990s captures the city's rapid globalization. (*Credit: Roots.sg*.)

Heritage Planning: The Government Steps In

Like its approach to housing, Singapore's conservation efforts have been largely driven by economics.[247] The first Conservation Master Plan (CMP), introduced in 1986, came in response to a decline in tourism three years earlier, the first since

[247] Brenda S.A.Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, "Strengthening the Nation's Roots? Heritage Policies in Singapore," *Social Policy in Post-industrial Singapore,* Lian Kwen Fee and Tong Chee Keong, editors (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

independence in 1965.[248] The timing was unfortunate, as the government had named tourism a high priority in its 1981 development plan.[249] A Tourism Task Force, appointed to examine the reasons for the decline, cited the loss of lively street scenes as one factor; when these went, they concluded, so did some of Singapore's unique Asian character that drew tourists.[250] In response, the CMP recommended the conservation of six heritage areas,[251] including Chinatown and five others that illustrated Singapore's colonial history, including ethnic enclaves from that time.

The following year, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) was formally assigned the role of conservation authority, allowing it to set guidelines.[252] By 1989, the Planning Act had established conservation as a planning function, and four additional conservation areas were named.[253]

Today, Singapore's approach to heritage conservation is grounded in three principles: the importance of nation-building in a relatively new country with a multi-ethnic citizenry; the overarching economic goals that factor into seemingly every government initiative; and the philosophies and pragmatic policies of adaptive use necessitated by its limited land. The 125-page Conservation Guidelines (similar to the

[248] Lim Soon Neo, "Team set to revitalize ailing tourist industry," *The Business Times*, September 15, 1984, 2.
[249] Parliament session, Highlights of Singapore's Economic Development Plan for the Eighties, March 6, 1981. http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/resource/NonPDF/1981/19810306/19810306-HA-0400357.htm.
[250] Ministry of Trade and Industry, *Report of the Tourism Task Force*, 1984. http://eservice.nlb.gov.sg/viewer/BookSG/44d861a9-47f8-4872-9938-0acb5bf81a34.
[251] Ilene Aleshire, "Six areas to be preserved," *The Straits Times*, December 27, 1986, 1.
[252] Belinda Yuen, editor, *Planning Singapore: From Plan to Implementation* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Planners, 1998), 138.
[253] Belinda Yuen, editor, *Planning Singapore: From Plan to Implementation*, 135.

US' Secretary of the Interior Standards), updated regularly, stress its three Rs of conservation: maximum retention, sensitive restoration, careful repair.[254]

Through its Preservation of Sites and Monuments division, part of the National Heritage Board, Singapore recognizes national monuments and conservation areas and affords them a degree of protection. Its precursor, the Preservation Monuments Board, was established in 1971 as a result of the destruction that resulted from post-independence development plans. "In the 1960s, the pace of urban renewal had quickened," wrote Lee Kuan Yew in his memoirs, *From Third World to First*. "We went through a phase when we recklessly demolished the old run-down city centre to build anew. But in late 1970 we felt disquiet over the speed at which we were erasing our past, so we set up the Preservation of Monuments Board… ."[255]

Today, there are 72 "gazetted" sites and monuments that are required to be preserved in their settings.[256] The less rigorous "conservation" status has been awarded to more than 7,000 buildings in 100 conservation areas.[257] These areas include four main types: historic districts (Chinatown, Little India, etc), residential historic districts (specifically named areas close to the city center on which sit residential shophouses), secondary settlements (areas at the fringe of the city center, developed between the 1910s and 1960s) and bungalows (clusters of colonial-era houses known as black-and-whites for their distinctive exterior paint colors). No post-independence housing estates are on either list.

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[254] Urban Redevelopment Authority, Conservation Guidelines, 2017. https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/-/media/User%20Defined/URA%20Online/Guidelines/Conservation/Cons-Guidelines.pdf?la=en
[255] Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, 209.
[256] *Our SG Heritage Plan*, National Heritage Board, 2018, 11. https://www.oursgheritage.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Our-SG-Heritage-Plan-Publication_2.pdf
[257] "Brief History of Conservation," Urban Redevelopment Authority. https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Get-Involved/Conserve-Built-Heritage/Explore-Our-Built-Heritage/brief-history

Heritage Planning: The Citizens Step In

While Singaporeans are not calling for designation of their homes, they do desire recognition from the state of the value of the housing it has built. For some, it is about connection to their literal home, while others believe the heritage value of such landscapes is being overlooked. Architectural photographer Darren Soh has taken up the task of recording the local and historic by methodically capturing numerous HDB complexes before they disappear. He notes that such buildings were built "at a time when the country was a newly independent nation finding its footing on the world stage."[258] Their subsequent demolition, he says, "create[s] a state of national amnesia, where we will be missing a huge gap in our built history because we have many conserved pre-war and colonial buildings but only a handful of post-independent buildings have been gazetted."

Soh notes that his photo exhibitions draw not only those interested specifically in architecture and heritage. "Judging from the people who have come for the exhibition and emails and messages I've been receiving, it appears that many people do care that their memories and childhood spaces are being destroyed in the name of progress."[259]

A 2014 conference paper written by colleagues at Singapore's University of Technology and Design called for a change in approach to conservation, by melding expert input with community participation.[260] The paper based this call on findings from extensive surveys of residents of Tiong Bahru, the country's first

[258] Tay Suan Chiang, "3 Singaporeans protecting Golden Mile Complex, People's Park Complex and Pearl Bank Apartments," *The Peak*, September 17, 2018. https://thepeakmagazine.com.sg/lifestyle/3-singaporeans-trying-to-protect-heritage-buildings-like-golden-mile-complex-peoples-park-complex-and-pearl-bank-apartments

[259] Ibid.

[260] Kien To, Zhuo Wen Chong, Keng Hua Chong, "Identity of a Conserved Housing Estate in Transition: The Case of Tiong Bahru," conference paper, International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments 2014.

housing estate, built in the 1930s,[261] and the only one to have conservation status, awarded in 2003.

The report found that personal memory plays a significant role in the public perception of whether an estate is worth conserving and argued that people's views were inadequately reflected in the government's conservation guidelines: "While personal memories are subjective, the cumulative bank of shared community memories can actually play an important role in recording and retelling the nation's history."[262] The paper continued:

> It is recommended that the development and/or redevelopment of historically important housing estates should be planned and implemented cautiously to ensure the continued harmonious duality of old and new elements in the estate. In overall, a more comprehensive conservation approach and agenda which incorporates both institutional expert approach and ground-up people-centric one should be considered. The perception gaps between these levels as observed in this paper thus call for a comprehensive conservation agenda towards a more socially and culturally sustainable Singapore.[263]

In 2018, as a trio of well-known 1970s residential and retail complexes faced demolition, the Singapore Heritage Society, a preservation advocacy organization formed in 1986, published a position paper entitled "Too Young to Die: Giving New Lease of Life to Singapore's Modernist Icons."[264] Pearl Bank Apartments, completed in 1976, was wholly residential, while the People's Park and Gold Mile complexes, built a few years earlier, are mixed-use developments

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[261] Alvin Chua, "Tiong Bahru," SingaporeInfopedia, 2010. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1700_2010-08-11.html
[262] To, Chong, Chong, "Identity of a Conserved Housing Estate in Transition."
[263] Ibid.
[264] "Too Young to Die: Giving New Lease of Life to Singapore's Modernist Icons," Singapore Heritage Society position paper, August 2018. https://www.singaporeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SHS-Position-Paper-Too-Young-To-Die-Aug-2018.pdf/.

that include a significant portion of residential units.[265] All three were designed by Singaporean architects who took inspiration from international styles to "devise buildings that responded inventively to local conditions."[266]

The paper nodded to the intangible heritage of these buildings, including their connection to Singapore's early post-independence ideals, while noting that demolition would mean the loss of a unique urban fabric that would likely be replaced by generic consumer malls.[267] It recommended government inter-agency cooperation on conservation, including a focus on maintenance and adaptive reuse.[268]

Today, as noted above, Pearl Bank Apartments has been demolished and the site is being redeveloped.[269] People's Park and Golden Mile are in limbo, with owners agreeing to en bloc sales that no parties have taken up. To those Singaporeans who pay attention to such matters, it must seem rather hopeless: if these historic, distinctive icons cannot be saved, what hope is there for the rest?

[265] Ibid.
[266] Ho Weng Hin, Dinesh Naidu & Tan Kar Lin," Our Modern Past: A Visual Survey of Singapore Architecture, 1920s-70s" (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society and Singapore Institute of Architects, 2015), Vol. 1 Part 1, 11.
[267] "Too Young to Die."
[268] Ibid.
[269] Jessica Lin, "This is the 774-unit tower duo taking over Singapore's iconic Pearl Bank apartments."

Figure 29: People's Park, built in 1972, is one of the city's first mixed-use developments, and is now under threat of demolition. (*Credit: Darren Soh, used with permission*.)

Sites of Engagement: 1997-2007

After "The Yang Family," site-specific performances did not return to Singapore homes for a decade. Instead, local arts groups entered a larger geography of public and contested spaces. As in the case of "The Yang Family," these performances wove together themes of memory, change and community, but in a more public arena.

In 1998, theater organization Spell#7 held a performance at CHIJMES, a former Catholic convent that had been redeveloped in the 1990s, somewhat controversially,[270] as a dining-retail-entertainment hub. Spell#7 created unique performances that integrated site-specificity and environmental soundworks to focus on "the ways history, culture and

[270] Sandra Hudd, *From Orphanage to Entertainment Venue: Colonial and post-colonial Singapore reflected in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, PhD dissertation, University of Tasmania, 2015, 149-52, 166.

politics intersect in everyday life."[271] In 2004, it created "Desire Paths," an inspired walking tour of Little India,[272] an area undergoing rapid transformation as the result of new roads and train lines. Around the same time, dance company ArtsFission set its performances in public spaces and accessible arts and cultural centers; its works addressed urban culture's impact on the environment, and the conflicts between old and new Asia.[273]

The dearth of such performances set in HDBs and private homes during this era may be partly explained by what was – or was not – occurring in the housing market. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 coincided with an already slowing market and a backlog of unsold housing units.[274] The government stopped land sales and announced just two SERS projects in the 12 months following the meltdown, compared to six in the 12 months prior.[275] As a result, during 2000-2010 housing supply increased just 6 percent,[276] in contrast to double and triple digit percentages from independence through the 1990s.

With the housing shortage of earlier decades largely resolved, the government was no longer engaged in comprehensive demolition, development and resettlement.[277] Instead, under Prime Minister Goh, deregulation drew more private developers into the

[271] "Desire Paths," Spell#7 Performance, http://www.spell7performance.org/.
[272] Corrie Tan, "Couple spell#7 out plans for new move," *The Straits Times*, April 16, 2014. https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/couple-spell7-out-plans-for-new-move
[273] Xin Ying Lee, "The Arts Fission Company," Singapore Infopedia, April 17, 2013. https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-04-25_092051.html/.
[274] Phang and Helble, "Housing Policies in Singapore."
[275] "Residential: Latest SERS Projects, In-progress SERS projects, Completed SERS projects," Housing and Development Board. https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1383799148650&pagename=InfoWEB%2FPage%2FInternalLandingPage&rendermode=preview/.
[276] Phang and Helble, "Housing Policies in Singapore."
[277] Ibid.

market, and the government was fine-tuning its policies regarding HDB resales[278] while working to curb the speculation that was forcing up housing prices.[279]

While the construction of housing developments slowed considerably, the same could not be said of commercial developments and infrastructure. Changi Airport was adding new terminals,[280] the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) rail system was adding more lines and stations,[281] additional expressways were cutting across the island,[282] Orchard Road shopping malls were increasing in number and size,[283] waterfront development included the durian-like Esplanade performing arts center, and in 2005 the government announced plans to build two enormous casinos.[284] Eventually, engineers would even divert the route of the Singapore River,[285] which for decades had shaped the development of so much of the central business district.

[278] Phang and Kim, "Singapore's Housing Policies: 1960-2013."
[279] Ibid.
[280] Hank Lim, "Infrastructure Development in Singapore," *International Infrastructure Development in East Asia – Towards Balanced Regional Development and Integration*, Kumar, N, editor (Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2008).
[281] Tao Soon Cham, "Land Transportation," *50 Years of Engineering in Singapore*, December 2017, 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814632300_0001
[282] Ibid.
[283] Ken Lee, Mina Zhan, Elyssa Kaur Ludher, Thinesh Kumar Paramasilvam, and Viknesh Ganasagaran, "Singapore: Enhancing Urban Health and Vibrancy by Leveraging Streets, Park Connectors and Marketplaces," *The Hidden Wealth of Cities: Creating, Managing and Financing Public Spaces,* Jon Kher Kaw, Hyunji Lee, and Sameh Wahba , editors (Washington DC: World Bank, 2020), 354-69. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1449-5
[284] "Proposal to Develop Integrated Resorts," Statement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on integrated resort on Monday, 18 April 2005 at Parliament House. https://web.archive.org/web/20071127000719/http://app.mti.gov.sg/data/pages/606/doc/Ministerial%20Statement%20-%20PM%2018apr05.pdf/.
[285] Christopher Tan, "Downtown Line 3 taking shape as Singapore diversion comes to completion," *The Straits Times,* October 29, 2014. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/transport/downtown-line-3-taking-shape-as-singapore-river-diversion-comes-to-completion

Figure 30: Singapore transformed the waterfront of its Central Business District within a decade. Many Singaporeans are disoriented by the rapid pace of change in the built environment. (*Credit: unknown*.)

Although citizens' homes were still standing, the landscape around them was rapidly changing, taking with it familiar touchpoints, and Singaporeans felt voiceless.[286] The state's failure to engage its constituents in urban planning and heritage was under fire. A 1991 survey found the majority of respondents felt the URA acted too much on its

[286] Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "Urban Conservation in Singapore: A Survey of State Policies and Popular Attitudes," *Urban Studies* 31, no 2, 1994, 247-265.

own, failing to take into account public views and to sufficiently involve the private sector. The authors of the resulting paper wrote:

> …respondents felt that the Authority had not sufficiently involved the general public, interest groups or the private sector. That there is as yet no strong collective voice or sustained public outcry to challenge the URA's role may in part explain why the URA had been able to ride roughshod over public sentiment. For others, a state-driven conservation programme which fails to involve the people is a reflection of the wider political culture in Singapore, where the state is seen to have absolute power and is not interested in consulting the public.[287]

Beginning in 1995, the URA established annual architectural heritage awards in order to recognize the private sector's work in conservation.[288] Although this effort may have been rather feeble, the government did seem to be paying more attention to engaging public support in favor of heritage preservation. The Concept Plan 2001, the country's long-term land-use plan laid out seven priorities—including a focus on identity through attention to the built heritage. [289] It encouraged public participation through focus groups and surveys.[290]

In 2002, another survey found that 9 out of 10 Singaporeans believed the government should consult the public in heritage matters.[291] Respondents agreed that "heritage preservation in Singapore was too much of a top-down process and there was

[287] Ibid, 262.
[288] "Architectural Heritage Awards," Urban Redevelopment Authority. https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Get-Involved/Conserve-Built-Heritage/Architectural-Heritage-Season/Architectural-Heritage-Awards
[289] *Concept Plan 2001*, Urban Redevelopment Authority. https://www.ura.gov.sg/-/media/User%20Defined/URA%20Online/publications/research-resources/plans-reports/concept_plan_2001.pdf/.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Yeoh and Huang, "Strengthening the Nation's Roots?"

widespread agreement, that the government should consult the public more, regarding what aspects of Singapore to preserve."[292]

Although the government adopted placemaking as a strategy in 2008,[293] it called it "place management," which suggested yet another technocratic, top-down approach to a community-based practice generally considered elsewhere to be a bottom-up process. Rather than address the desires of local communities, noted scholars at the National University of Singapore, the state was using placemaking, or place management, to advance its national agenda, including nation-building.[294] Yet, as noted in "The Notion of Place, Place Meaning and Identity in Urban Regeneration," it is "apparent that without addressing the significance of the people's psychological connection with places, any form of assessment in determining place quality will be inadequate."[295]

At a time when many believed the government was failing to heed the public's voices, arts groups stepped into the breach. In the case of Singapore, the state's relaxation of stringent arts censorship rules over the years has had an empowering impact on the national psyche. According to sociologist Chua Beng Huat:

> This has resulted in very much expanded spaces for artistic expression, which, as in the very character of aesthetic practices, regularly challenge the official construction of social reality. This has very directly contributed to the opening up of the cultural sphere, not only in professional artistic circles, but also in popular culture production and consumption. It has thus contributed to destabilise the official version of

[292] Ibid, 216.
[293] Yulia Pak, "Creative Placemaking as a Policy and a Practice of Urban Regeneration in Singapore: Negotiating Power Relationships and Forging Partnerships in Civic Society," Working Paper No 268, Asia Research Institute, September 2018. https://ari.nus.edu.sg/Assets/repository/files/publications/wps18_268.pdf
[294] Pak, "Creative Placemaking as a Policy and a Practice of Urban Regeneration in Singapore."
[295] Norsidah Ujong and Khalilah Zakariya, "The Notion of Place, Place Meaning and Identity in Urban Regeneration," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Science* 170, 2015, 710. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.073

> the Singaporean 'reality' and introduced new public intervention and discussion on social issues… .[296]

In this context, site-specific performances in people's homes presented a more grounded, prosaic social reality than that offered by the government. By effectively addressing issues of heritage, place and engagement, they gave residents a voice—and got the government's attention.

Performances Return (to) Home, 2011

In 2011, large-scale demolition of HDBs began once again as the government worked to increase housing supply,[297] address the ongoing issue of aging housing estates and accommodate infrastructure projects, including new expressways.[298] At the same time, the number of private residential units being built increased noticeably.[299]

[296] Chua Beng Huat, "Culture and the Arts: Intrusion in Political Space," *Social Policy in Post-industrial Singapore*, Lian Kwen Fee and Tong Chee Kiong, editors (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 244. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/lib/cornell/reader.action?docID=682237&ppg=231/.
[297] Phang and Helble, "Housing Policies in Singapore."
[298] Ibid.
[299] Singapore Building Commenced: Private Residential, No of Units, CEIC DATA. https://www.ceicdata.com/en/singapore/buildings-commencement/bldg-commenced-private-residential-no-of-units/.

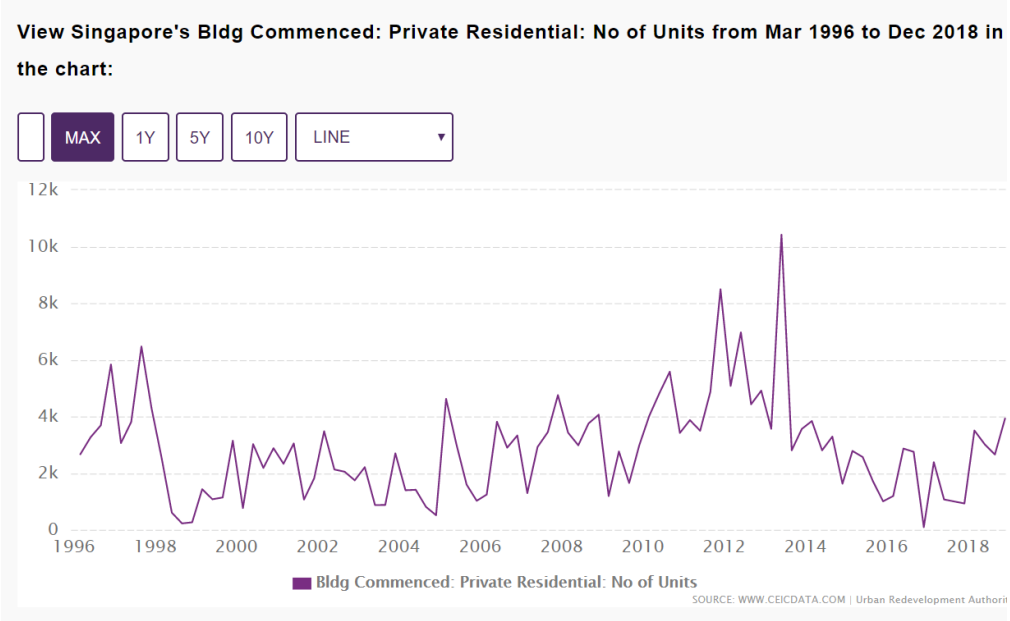

Figure 31: New private residential units by year, 1996-2018. The number of units coming on the market peaked in 2012-13, as HDBs were demolished and the land was sometimes sold to private developers. (*Credit: CEICDATA and Urban Redevelopment Authority*.)

This widespread redevelopment meant that, once again, residents found themselves vulnerable to the demolition of their homes, whether public or private. But 2011 was also when Singaporeans found their collective voice.

The raising of this collective voice was noted that year by geographer Lily Kong, who wrote:

> [P]rocesses of heritagization also involve stakeholders, including the general public, who have been invited either to design their own heritage trails, or to suggest certain sites as historically relevant and hence deserving heritage consignment. Knowledge production of the past, therefore, stems not only from bureaucratic and urban renewal procedures, but also comprises the memories and experiences of individuals and communities deemed integral that thereby reflect a broader shift toward a more "engaged citizenry.[300]

[300] Lily Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2011), 66.

That year, 2011, a very personal and poignant performance paid tribute to the confluence of memories contained within a family home. “Villa Alicia” was a photographic and soundscape exhibition staged in a 1950s bungalow located at 43 Binjai Park, a leafy residential area in the central part of the island.[301] It was among the oldest houses in the neighborhood, and one of the largest—4,800 square feet, with a massive garden.[302] (See Appendix I.)

Figure 32: The Binjai Park bungalow was the setting for Villa Alicia, a 2011 site-specific art and sound installation honoring the home before it was demolished. (*Credit: Villa Alicia/Alecia Neo, used with permssion.*)

The house was home to the Tan family, who had lived there since the 1970s. At the time of the exhibition, it was occupied by Dr. Nalla Tan, a prominent physician, artist and writer who, at 88, had Alzheimer’s; and her son, a lawyer and wine entrepreneur. The family had sold the house, and it was scheduled to be demolished a few days after the exhibition ended.

[301] “Villa Alicia: A new project by Singaporean artist Alecia Neo about homes and memories,” press release, June 16, 2011. http://alecianeo.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Villa-Alicia-Press-Release-Low-Res2.pdf.
[302] Adeline Chia, “Art raze against time,” *Life! The Straits Times*, August 6, 2011, 2.

The son, Tan Ying Hsien, had contacted photographer Alecia Neo and sound artist Clarence Chung to arrange a tribute to his mother, the house and the decades of family moments it contained. “I've lived there for the better part of a lifetime and most of my memories are inextricably tied to the house,” he said. “Whilst I carry away these memories, their physical link will be severed when the house disappears.”[303]

The title of the performance is taken from the title of a novella written by Dr. Tan about her childhood in Ipoh, Malaysia. The interior was much as it was in the 1970s, with distinctive and rather moving touches. Dr. Tan, aware she was developing Alzheimer’s, had scribbled notes on the walls about the photos and furnishings in each room in order to help her remember what/who they were. Within this setting, the artists re-created photos from family albums, re-shooting them in the house with members of the public who had responded to an open call. A family of four sisters posed for a shot of Dr Tan with her three sisters; two brothers re-enacted a photo of Ying Hsien and Ying Jien, Dr Tan's two sons. “Our intention was to invite these families to experience the home, engage in dialogue about our own roots via Dr. Nalla Tan's legacy and family home,”[304] says Neo.

Soundscapes were available in seven rooms; the dining room, for instance, featured dinner-table conversations. A garden tea party opened the performance, which was free and opened to the public for a week from morning through the evening. Visitors were allowed to wander freely through the house and garden. Says Neo, “The house was the heart of the work, and it was truly breathing and performing with light and sounds, interacting with the presence of visitors. Both strangers from the public, and close friends

[303] “Villa Alicia” press release, June 16, 2011.
[304] Alecia Neo, email exchange with author, May 6, 2020.

and family who knew Dr Nalla Tan personally, entered this space, activating it once more."[305]

Figure 33: Villa Alicia included soundscapes throughout the house, including the dining room, where sounds of Sunday lunches could be heard. (*Credit: Villa Alicia/Alecia Neo, used with permission*.)

As planned, the new owners of the property demolished the house. In its place sits a contemporary two-story 12,600-square-foot house that was advertised in 2018 for rent at S$28,000 a month (or US$20,790).

[305] Ibid.

Figure 34: At the close of Villa Alicia, the house, which had been sold to a private developer, was demolished. (*Credit: Villa Alicia/Alecia Neo, used with permission*.)

HDBs were also under threat in 2011. Five SERS sites were slated for demolition—as many as in the previous four years. One of them was the Rochor Centre HDB. Located in central Singapore, the complex was famous for its four gaily-colored housing blocks and "was one of the few remaining landmarks from 1970s Bugis, where sailors and transvestites could be found before the area was developed further in the 1980s."[306]

Increasingly, citizens drew attention to these under-valued HDBs and the communities they represented. In 2010, residents formed My Community, an organization launched in Queenstown, one of the country's oldest neighborhoods, and the site of some of the largest SERS projects.[307] The organization's Queenstown Heritage Trail offers regular walking tours through seemingly ordinary neighborhoods. Explained

[306] Charmaine Ng, "Demolition of Rochor Centre to begin on June 26 in preparation for North-South Corridor: LTA," *The Straits Times*, June 20, 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/demolition-of-rochor-centre-to-begin-on-june-26-in-preparation-for-north-south-corridor

[307] "Residential: Latest SERS Projects, In-progress SERS projects, Completed SERS projects," Housing and Development Board.

My Community president Kwek Li Yong, "Every community has a story to tell. Through heritage walks, we wish to narrate the endearing story of the common man, celebrate the little things that make the neighbourhood special and reconnect individuals to the social networks in the community."

Figure 35: Old for new. In June 2014, HDB announced 31 blocks of Tanglin Halt, left, would be demolished with residents due to move out by 2020. Many will resettle nearby at HDBs @Dawson. (*Credit: Left: The Straits Times, right: Housing Development Board.*)

Its goals went far deeper. In a 2013 statement, the organization explained its values:[308]

> The streetscape of Queenstown serves aptly as a walking gallery of public housing, provides inspiration for the planning of satellite towns and incorporates the memories of generations of Queenstown residents, which must not be underestimated, altered or dismantled without sound knowledge or public consultation…Queenstown residents must be empowered to protect their past and plan for their future.[309]

My Community is also engaged in advocacy work, producing assessments and reports of threatened buildings and presenting them to the government for consideration.

[308] "The Queenstown Story," My Community press release, n.d., accessed May 1, 2020. http://www.mycommunity.org.sg/press-release.html
[309] Ibid.

Its most recent submission, from November 2019, is a 34-page report to the URA in favor of saving the remaining housing blocks on Stirling Road. Built in 1961, these are Singapore's oldest surviving HDBs.[310]

Another grassroots arts organization, OH! Open House, launched in 2009, offers creative walking tours combining art and residences. The first took place within six shophouses along Niven Road,[311] a then-quiet stretch of two-story shophouses. Two years later, OH! launched a program that put art into the HDBs at Marine Parade housing estate that comprise 58 blocks of flats, many with sea views. Completed in the 1970s, Marine Parade was the first HDB built entirely on reclaimed land.[312] Photos of the event show a long line of attendees snaking through the entrance. "I remember the queues were ridiculous and that gave us the confidence that we've hit something we can go forward with,"[313] says OH! executive director Alan Oei.

OH! has become a force in experiential site-specific art performances, celebrating such places as the 1930s-era Tiong Bahru estate, now known for its hipster vibe and rapid gentrification; and Holland Village, long associated with old Western expatriates but now populated by young Singaporeans. OH!'s annual performances "redefine everyday spaces through art by challenging artists to create new work responding directly to an existing space—a specific neighbourhood, or history, or even a home."[314] These "open houses" feature 12 to 18 local artists who collaborate with homeowners, seeking to highlight

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[310] Melody Zaccheus, "Civic group seeks to conserve flats in Queenstown," *The Straits Times*, November 10, 2019. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/civic-group-seeks-to-conserve-flats-in-queenstown
[311] "OH! Niven Road (2009)," OH! Open House, accessed May 2, 2020. https://ohopenhouse.org/OH-Niven-Road
[312] "OH! Marine Parade (2011)," OH! Open House, accessed May 2, 2020. https://ohopenhouse.org/OH-Marine-Parade
[313] Mayo Martin, "Kampong spirit and kaypoh intentions: 10 years of letting strangers into our homes," Channel News Asia, March 10, 2019. https://cnalifestyle.channelnewsasia.com/trending/kampong-spirit-oh-open-house-art-tours-11329366
[314] OH! Open House, accessed May 2, 2020. https://ohopenhouse.org/about

complicated issues faced by Singaporeans today: gentrification, identity, the foibles of urban planning, a colonial history.

Figure 36: OH! Open Homes events from left: Emerald Hill, Marine Parade and Potong Pasir. (*Credit: OH! Open House Facebook.*)

OH's tagline states its mission: "We tell alternative stories of Singapore through art."[315] It believes that "site-specific art offers us new perspectives about things we often overlook, and challenges us to truly grapple with our environment and our histories."[316]

Even as OH! extended its work, others had also begun to strike out, forming organizations to call attention to the destruction of specific cultural landscapes. In 2011, for example, there was a grassroots campaign to preserve the Tanjong Pagar Railways Station, an Art Deco building completed in 1931 that marked the end of the rail line from Malaysia. Designated as a monument in 2011 when the railway station moved to a different location,[317] site-specific events at the Tanjong Pagar station honored its place in the psyches of generations of Singaporeans who had traveled to and from the station. Since its closure, it has been the centerpiece of many arts events, including a two-day

[315] Ibid.
[316] Ibid.
[317] "Historic Railway Stations to be Kept for Future Generations," Preservation of Monuments Board and Urban Redevelopment Authority media release, April 8, 2011. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20110415003/joint_pmb-ura_release_on_tprs_and_btrs__final_.pdf

festival of performance and art in 2015[318] and an augmented-reality exhibition featuring stories and history of the site.[319] Adib Jalal, of a local placemaking firm, said, "There was a lot of ground-up interest, with groups like the Nature Society and the Heritage Society involved. Just by the fact that the railway line passes through so many neighbourhoods, each one feels it has a little piece of ownership."[320] Currently closed to the public, Tanjong Pagar is being redeveloped as a multi-functional community space that will also serve as a stop on the public train system.

The effort to save the Bukit Brown Cemetery, one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside China,[321] did not fare as well. In 2011, the government announced it would exhume and re-bury more than 4,000 graves to accommodate a road to ease traffic congestion, and eventually to develop the area for new housing.[322] The plan provoked immediate and forceful opposition, making it "almost a national issue"[323] that caught government agencies off guard, said architectural historian Lai Chee Kian. Citizens had "a head start in defining what heritage information could be derived from tombs, discovering important personages connected to all sorts of political and socio-economic histories of Singapore. …The interred slowly formed a web of history quite unlike what

[318] */semble/* Program, The Artists Village, n.d., http://www.tav.org.sg/semble/semble_FINAL.pdf
[319] Justin Choo, "Memory Lane in Augmented Reality," The Active Age, June 16, 2015. http://activeage.co/memory-lane-augmented-reality/.
[320] Ling Low, "Abandoned train station signals community revival in Singapore, *The Guardian*, July 22, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jul/22/abandoned-train-station-signals-community-revival-in-singapore
[321] Jianli Huang, "Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 87, n*o. 2, December 2014, 21-45.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/26527673.
[322] Ibid.
[323] Bharati Jagdish, "Too much heritage affected by roads and MRT lines: Architect, historian Lai Chee Kien," Channel News Asia, April 29, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/lai-chee-kien-architect-historian-on-the-record-10181678

had been recorded in textbooks."[324] Though people continue to draw attention to the cemetery through walking tours and continued research and documentation, the road has been built. Government plans call for the cemetery to be cleared entirely by 2030 in order to make way for additional housing units.

At the close of 2011, in an article in the *East Asia Forum*,[325] Mukul Asher, a professor of public policy at the National University of Singapore, acknowledged that the government had done a commendable job on issues like infrastructure and wealth creation. But he pointed to the common perception that, as citizens of a wealthy country, Singaporeans expected more when it came to public participation in "policy, media and electoral contestability."[326]

If 2011 marked the year that Singaporeans gained a louder collective voice through engaged art performances, the subsequent years have helped them hone that voice to greater effect when it came to the future of housing and heritage.

Everyone's Home: 2015-18

In 2015, Singapore turned 50. SG50, as the commemorations were known, celebrated how far the country had come. SG50 was also an opportunity to think more deeply about the future. "[W]ith Singapore's 50th anniversary, more people are starting to take a closer look at the places we live in and more attention is placed on spaces that may not be around in another 50 years,"[327] said architectural photographer Soh.

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[324] Ibid.
[325] Mukul Asher, "Singapore 2011: the emergence of quality of life concerns," East Asia Forum, January 17, 2012. http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/01/17/singapore-in-2011-the-emergence-of-quality-of-life-concerns
[326] Ibid.
[327] Mrigaa Sethi, "What will Singapore look like in 50 years?" *SG Magazine*, December 30, 2014. https://sgmagazine.com/city-living/news/photographer-darren-soh

Some of those were used as performance spaces through "O.P.E.N. Homes," a program offered in 2015 and again in 2017 as part of the Singapore International Arts Festival. Led by Ong Keng Sen of Theatreworks, O.P.E.N. Homes invited the public into the living rooms (and beyond) of 25 to 30 Singapore residents who had volunteered to open their homes—HDBs, condominiums and houses alike. Working with theater professionals, the residents told their stories through their possessions and their place, giving a tour to their "guests." Ironically, some were scheduled to soon move out of their HDBs, which were being redeveloped.[328]

In "Alice in Wonderland," 66-year-old Alice Cheah, living in an HDB in the neighborhood of Bukit Panjang, shared stories, in Cantonese and English, about her work as a waitress at a hawker stall and as a receptionist who took a course on how to answer phone calls. A Cantonese opera buff, she also performed for the audience.

For "Mommy Not Home," artist Danny Tan (and his dog) included the audience in his experiences over the years caring for his Peranakan (descendants of the earliest Chinese migrants to the Malayan peninsula) mother, who has dementia.

OH!'s 2016 program in Potong Pasir, known as Singapore's longest-held opposition district in Parliament,[329] explored meaningful engagement in everyday spaces, and posed questions about contested sites, like the Bukit Brown cemetery. Says OH! co-founder Alan Oei, "There's so much potential to our model where people can tell their

[328] Eugene Tan, "Open Homes, O.P.E.N. Kitchens," Singapore International Festival of Arts, August 21, 2017. https://www.sifa.sg/archive-blog/open-homes-o-p-e-n-kitchens
[329] "OH! Potong Pasir (2016)," OH! Open House. https://ohopenhouse.org/OH-Potong-Pasir/.

own stories of neighbourhoods—that it's not the urban planners, but us the inhabitants who make a place come alive."[330]

Dakota Crescent was a well-loved complex with 15 low-rise housing blocks, built in 1958, that was home to 400 households. Located close to the central business district, its unique local shops attracted Singaporeans from all over the island. The complex is known, among other things, for its iconic Dove Garden (a playground with a giant dove incorporated into the structure). Most of the residents were low-income renters, many of them elderly, who had lived at Dakota Crescent nearly all their lives. In 2014, however, the Singapore government announced plans to redevelop the site; all residents received eviction notices.

Almost immediately, the organizing began. Perhaps surprisingly, the focus was not on tenants' rights. The government had found homes for the residents and made equitable financial arrangements; there was never a question that they could stay. Instead, there was an emphasis on remembering. Residents began offering walking tours, giving a very personal slant as they shared their stories of their decades on the estate. Organizers started social media campaigns, asking those with photos and stories to share them. There were short documentaries, photo exhibitions and concerts.

[330] "Asia in Focus: Inside Singapore's Most Innovative Art Programme," *Harper's Bazaar*, August 26, 2016. https://www.harpersbazaar.com.sg/life/bazaar-art/asia-in-focus-we-heart-art/

Figure 37: Proponents of conserving part of Dakota Crescent generated a conservation report, as well as organizing and participating in community events and site-specific art and performances. On the right is one of the site's iconic butterfly blocks. (*Credit: Left: Save Dakota Crescent, right: Wikicommons*.)

And then advocates began to campaign to save the buildings and incorporate them into redevelopment plans—not only because of what they represented to the residents but to Singapore as a whole. As part of the campaign, a group of local architects met with residents and worked to develop a conservation plan that was eventually submitted to the government, outlining how part of or the entire site could be saved. Campaigners held seminars and talked to the press. Enter Drama Box, a local theater group known for site-specific performances that involve working with communities on issues of social awareness and civic responsibility.

In July 2016, after Drama Box worked with residents for more than a year, the multimedia presentation of "IGNORLAND and its Loss" opened to capacity crowds, using nearly the entirety of Dakota Crescent as the "stage." Admission was free with registration for the duration of the six nights of performances. The multi-platform show, performed entirely by Dakota Crescent residents, included a self-guided tour, audience

interactions, dramatic performance, and a slide show of resident portraits projected against the buildings.

This was the fourth of Drama Box's IGNORLAND series, which explored "shared memories and forgotten stories amidst the tearing down and rebuilding of specific places as they bring audiences to the actual sites, enabling them to perceive the surrounding physical environment."[331]

Figure 38: Scenes from Dramabox's 2016 community-based performance, "Ignorland and Its Loss," at Dakota Crescent. (*Credit: Dramabox.*)

Eventually, a number of politicians from the district took up the cause to save Dakota Crescent. "It's not just about retaining buildings, but retaining memories,"[332] said one member of Parliament, noting that it was important that any future plans include public access to the area. Another MP noted the unique power of the community-organizing work: "What we have is a potentially pioneering project that could become a milestone in our approach towards urban and community development... one where the

[331] "Overwhelming response to Drama Box's site-specific performance in Dakota Crescent," *Today*, July 5, 2016. https://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/arts/overwhelming-response-drama-boxs-site-specific-performance-dakota-crescent?cx_tag=similartd&cid=tg%3Arecos%3Asimilartd%3Astandard

[332] Toh Wen Li, "Dakota icons to be kept as estate is redeveloped." *The Straits Times*, Dec 12, 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/dakota-icons-to-be-kept-as-estate-is-redeveloped

people take ownership and proactively negotiate among themselves to put forward viable sustainable plans for the future."[333] In late 2017, the government announced it was retaining a cluster of at least six buildings of flats and would incorporate them into a revised redevelopment plan that will turn the estate into a mixed-use area with public housing. For a high-modernist and authoritarian city-state, this was a remarkable outcome. Noted one newspaper columnist:

> Heritage groups and property analysts have welcomed the Government's decision to retain a cluster of flats in Dakota Crescent, hoping the unprecedented move signals a shift in the authorities' approach to redeveloping old housing estates. Among other things, they suggested a formal mechanism for the community to provide feedback and suggestions before buildings in an area face the wrecking ball.[334]

Photographer Soh said, "Six of the blocks have been conserved and to me that's a really big win because it's unprecedented. There has never been a case before where the government says 'we're gonna demolish this', a bunch of people came to say 'can you please not?' and they changed their mind."[335]

The term "participatory planning" started to appear on social media, and began to be used by members of Parliament, the URA and other government ministries. In a post titled A Milestone of Singapore's Housing History, the National Heritage Board, noted:

> Taking part in the deliberation process were members of the grassroots and various heritage groups such as Save Dakota Crescent, which submitted a comprehensive and thoughtful conservation plan. With the support of stakeholders and the wider community, the refreshed Dakota Crescent will

[333] Melody Zaccheus, "Motion to conserve key areas of Dakota Crescent," *The Straits Times*, Oct 11, 2016. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/motion-to-conserve-key-areas-of-dakota-crescent
[334] Alfred Chua, "Partial conservation of Dakota Crescent gives heritage enthusiasts hope," *Today Online*, Dec 12, 2017. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/partial-conservation-dakota-crescent-gives-heritage-enthusiasts-hope
[335] Mayo Martin, " 'I'm afraid one day it's going to go:' Saving Singapore's old buildings one photograph as a time," Channel New Asia, August 23, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/lifestyle/darren-soh-photograph-singapore-heritage-buildings-hdb-10636928

> now function as a community hub where past, present and future residents can continue to enjoy the estate's heritage alongside its modern housing amenities.[336]

After the announcement, a letter posted to Save Dakota Crescent's Facebook page said, "It's the very first time the government is acting on the citizen's initiative, in this case, to save Dakota Crescent…Power 2 the people!"[337]

Power to the people indeed. These are people who recognized the importance of storytelling and the value of community-based arts. They used their collective voice to influence decisions on housing and heritage in a rapidly changing city.

In April 2018, the National Heritage Board (NHB) released its first Master Plan for the heritage and museum sector. One pleasant surprise was its deep rhetorical bow to the citizens of Singapore. The need to cooperate and collaborate with Singaporeans runs through the announcement. The master plan, the NHB repeatedly noted, was co-developed with the community, created with the wider public, and will involve co-creation going forward, a testament, said CEO Chang Hwee Nee, "to how heritage truly belongs to the community."[338]

In late 2019, the URA released its latest Masterplan. Like the NHB, it stressed the increased community outreach and engagement that informed the strategy.[339] While there is some skepticism about how sincere these ministries are, others noted the rise in a civil society deeply engaged in the making (and preservation) of its neighborhoods reflects the

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[336] "Dakota Crescent: A Milestone of Singapore's Housing History," Our SG Heritage, n.d., https://www.oursgheritage.sg/dakota-crescent-a-milestone-of-singapores-housing-history

[337] Save Dakota Crescent, "A note from a resident," Facebook, December 13, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/pg/savedakotacrescent

[338] "Launch of Our SG Heritage Plan – Singapore's First Master Plan for the Heritage and Museum Sector," National Heritage Board media release, April 7, 2018, 4. https://www.nhb.gov.sg/-/media/nhb/files/media/releases/new-releases/launch-of-our-sg-heritage-plan-at-singapore-heritage-festival-2018---7-april.pdf

[339] Masterplan 2019, Urban Redevelopment Authority, November 27, 2019. https://www.ura.gov.sg/Corporate/Planning/Master-Plan

kind of place they wanted to live.[340] This may be only "a gradual shift in the relationship between the state, market and civil society,"[341] notes scholar Cho Im Sik, but it nevertheless implies a "significant departure"[342] from the past.

Home Rules, and Rulers

Ironically, the home of the man responsible for building the homes of millions of Singaporeans—and, indeed, modern Singapore itself—has been at the center of a storm over the importance of memory and place. Since his death in 2015, Lee Kuan Yew's bungalow has been the focus of a very public dispute among his family. An unsentimental pragmatist, Lee had made it known that after his death, and after his children had moved from the house, he wanted it demolished.[343] If demolition was not possible, for example because of changes to the law, he wanted no one except family members to enter.[344]

The Lee house at 38 Oxley Rd., a short walk from the luxury shopping hub of Orchard Road, sits in a low-rise residential neighborhood that is now encroached on by shiny condos. Characterized as a single-story "early style" bungalow,[345] like others from the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was built with Singapore's hot tropical climate in mind. As such, it sits above the ground on piers (with two stories in the back, built into a slope) and features a wide veranda along the front, overhanging eaves and high ceilings, all

[340] Rosa Daniel, "Reimagining Singapore: Placemaking through Arts and Culture," Civil Service College, July 6, 2018. https://www.csc.gov.sg/articles/reimagining-singapore-placemaking-through-arts-and-culture
[341] Cho Im Sik and Blaz Kriznik, *Community-based Urban Development: Evolving Urban Paradigms in Singapore and Seoul* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd, 2017), 147.
[342] Ibid.
[343] Report of the Ministerial Committee on 38 Oxley Road, released April 2, 2018, 9. http://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ministerial-committee-report-38-oxley-road
[344] Ibid, 12.
[345] Ibid, 5.

employed for maximum cooling effect. The heritage report notes other elements that are rarely seen today: "full-length louvre windows (French windows), fretted timber balusters, classical columns, pilasters and plinths, and vented grills that fill the arch masonry."[346] Lee moved into the house in the 1940s, and his wife, Kwa Geok Choo, joined him there in 1950 after their marriage. They lived there until their deaths, she in 2010 and he in 2015.

Figure 39: The house of Lee Kuan Yew, considered the father of Singapore, has been at the center of a political and personal controversy over its future use. (*Credit: Ministerial Report, undated*.)

Soon after Lee's death, his oldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, who has been prime minister since 2004, said a future government should decide the fate of the house. His younger brother, Lee Hsien Yang, and sister, Lee Wei Ling, were outraged—and said so, publicly—that the prime minister was seemingly contradicting his father's wishes. The family feud played out in Parliament, in the local media, and on Facebook.

[346] Ibid, 6.

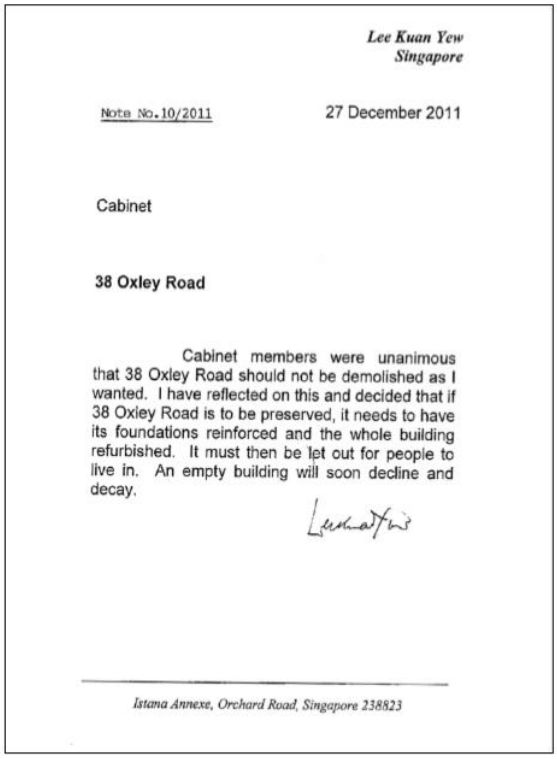
In April 2018, a four-member ministerial committee established to evaluate the future of the house issued its report. The committee acknowledged Lee Kuan Yew's wishes and concerns for his family's future privacy, while noting that the house had architectural, heritage and historical significance. Only 16 other "early style" bungalows still exist, and Lee's was largely unaltered. Moreover, Lee founded the PAP political party, which has ruled Singapore since independence, in the dining room in 1954, and the house served as PAP headquarters in its early years. Two prime ministers (Lee and his son) have lived there. Lee's wife, Kwa Geok Choo, also a founding PAP member, was one of Singapore's first female lawyers; she founded a law firm still in existence today.

The committee set out three options: demolition, conservation in its entirety, or conservation of the dining room, possibly enclosing it in glass and creating green space around it (noting that Lee was an advocate of greening Singapore).[347] It noted, however, that because Lee's daughter was still living in the house, these recommendations were merely advisory.

[347] Ibid, 17.

ANNEX C-2

MR LEE KUAN YEW'S LETTER TO CABINET DATED 27 DEC 2011



Lee Kuan Yew
Singapore

Note No.10/2011

27 December 2011

Cabinet

38 Oxley Road

Cabinet members were unanimous that 38 Oxley Road should not be demolished as I wanted. I have reflected on this and decided that if 38 Oxley Road is to be preserved, it needs to have its foundations reinforced and the whole building refurbished. It must then be let out for people to live in. An empty building will soon decline and decay.

Istana Annexe, Orchard Road, Singapore 238823

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Figure 40: Letter to his Cabinet members from Lee Kuan Yew. Acknowledging that Cabinet members were unanimous that the house not be demolished, he recommended refurbishment, noting that "an empty building will soon decline." (*Credit: Ministerial report, undated*.)

Lee Hsien Yang was not pleased. In a Facebook post, he argued that the committee had misrepresented his father's wishes: "His legacy is Singapore itself and not his old house."[348]

[348] Yasmine Yahya, "38, Oxley Road: Lee Hsien Yang says ministerial committee's report does not accurately represent Lee Kuan Yew's wishes," *The Straits Times*, April 3, 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/lee-hsien-yang-responds-to-ministerial-committees-report-says-it-does-not-accurately/.

The Value of Home

But as so many Singaporeans have come to realize, or knew always, a home is more than just an "old house." Ordinary residents living in Singapore's many housing types understand that their homes—the stories they contain and the memories that permeate through them—have a value beyond their price tags. The personal stories a home can celebrate, and the small memories it can conjure, are also part of a nation's heritage.

Efforts by grassroots arts organizations and cultural groups to help these citizens amplify the significance of their built environment to a larger audience have caught the attention of planners and Parliamentarians. Increasingly, the government has begun attempts to employ civic participation in decisions affecting the heritage of the shared cityscape.

In more fully appreciating communities' attachment to the places they live, and the value of the collective and individual memories of Singaporeans, the state may realize an even stronger future for the place(s) everyone calls home.

CONCLUSION

The landmarks, grand and pedestrian, of our built environment anchor us to our place in their history and the larger world. In an increasingly globalized world that threatens the urban fabric of so many of our cities and our memories, site-specific works can play an important role. The intersection of historic architecture and art that is inspired by and speaks about the unique spaces and places that are woven into the lives of residents is a worthy form of creative placemaking. This thesis, however, has attempted to demonstrate how such exhibitions and performances—powerful in their ability to unite people in a space to share an evocative and historically relevant experience—can move beyond placemaking to influence policy, planning and access to public spaces in a more lasting way.

The influence of such site-specific art and performances is seen in the case studies of dense, urbanizing Yangon, with its rapid privatization of public space, and the city-state of Singapore, with its contested meaning of "home." These two Southeast Asian cities have been the settings for multiple site-specific works that were united, in each place, by their focus on the weighty issues residents faced. In such places, art has played a role in addressing critical and sensitive issues that arise as the result of a rapidly urbanizing landscape in a neoliberal world. In these cities, site-specific works moved beyond creative placemaking to effect broader, deeper change in urban planning, historic preservation and public access.

Site-specific art and performance like the examples presented within this thesis can act as a means to bring about urban transformation, signaling to the state the sites and spaces that are important to citizens, and the many reasons why. As the case studies have

shown, critical mass is crucial. In both Yangon and Singapore, the many works were conceptually different but addressed the same theme, the issues of public space and home, respectively; they were shown and performed over a relatively short period of time; they reached a large number of attendees. As demonstrated in the case studies of Yangon and Singapore, site-specific works are far more effective in ushering in sweeping change when they anchor a larger effort, often in conjunction with other actions. Sometimes, such events may play an imperceptible role: The "nature of political transformation…is grounded in the gradual, often undetectable, accretion of events, relationships, and changes in individual consciousness."[349] Nonetheless, that role is important.

One will note the obvious difference between the two cities in the organizers behind the efforts. In Yangon, organizers were members of international cultural institutions who viewed art as a way to bring people together while addressing thorny issues. In Singapore, these site-specific efforts were organized by local arts and civic organizations—Singaporeans who wanted to help tell the stories of their fellow citizens. The difference may be due to the stage of development of civil society, which, in Singapore is well ensconced, while in Myanmar it is only now, after decades of isolation and repression, finding its footing.

It appears it is less important who creates and organizes the work. What is critical is that the installation or performance speaks to and about the society in which it is performed, transforming personal stories into political and policy changes to more broadly impact citizens.

[349] Kester, *The One and the Many*, 152.

As the events and outcomes in Yangon and Singapore demonstrate, when artists and civil society join to address a recognized issue, using site-specific art as a tool, and do so in a sustained manner, they don't just celebrate a community's sense of place. They are also able to bring larger influences to bear.

Future Investigations

As historic preservation moves in a more participatory direction, there will always be a need for creative methods that can encourage deeper community engagement and bring about change for greater benefit. The role of art and culture in making societies more just and sustainable has long been recognized.

Only recently, though, has academic research begun to focus on the value of site-specific work as a community- rather than an artist-focused endeavor. As this type of cultural community engagement becomes more prevalent, there will be opportunities for future scholarship that looks more critically and more deeply at what such efforts accomplish, and under what circumstances the accomplishments are most effective. Future researchers may find it valuable to identify specific arts organizations that have engaged with communities to produce site-specific works in heritage spaces, and more fully examine their inspirations, goals, processes and outcomes.

Space and Place, Post-pandemic

As I complete this thesis, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has overwhelmed the world. On a macro level, this has created the impetus for countries and their citizens to reevaluate issues including governance, public health care and the divide between rich

and poor. On a more personal scale, it has caused many to consider their relationship to space and place.

Estimates as of early April 2020 suggest one-third of the global population has been confined to their homes for weeks if not months, put on "enforced lockdown"[350] by governments. Concerns about social distancing—staying at least six feet from others — has forced the closure of libraries, schools and houses of worship. The places that so many people previously took for granted as they went through their days—a child's playground, a favorite neighborhood coffee shop, the local barber—have been shuttered. In some areas, parks and beaches have been closed to discourage large gatherings. When the pandemic ends and people begin to make their way out into the world again, these places will be the familiar touchpoints that help us regain the rhythms of our days that can usher in a more normal existence.

The emergence from this profoundly challenging time offers an opportunity for preservationists and planners, community organizers and artists, to engage more deeply with the public about their views of the importance of space and place. Through this effort, municipalities may be able to retain some of the positive developments that resulted from the massive shutdown, such as the cleaner air and bluer skies that resulted from lack of traffic, and the temporary measures that turned car-less thoroughfares into bike- and pedestrian-friendly routes.[351] There is a unique opportunity to celebrate the

[350] Elke Van Hoof, "Lockdown is the world's biggest psychological experiment – and we will pay the price," World Economic Forum, April 9, 2020. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/this-is-the-psychological-side-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-that-were-ignoring/

[351] Laura Laker, "World cities turn their streets over to walkers and cyclists," *The Guardian*, April 11, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/world-cities-turn-their-streets-over-to-walkers-and-cyclists

spaces we became intimately familiar with and reclaim those we missed sorely that were devoid of people for such a long time; perhaps we can even reimage some of them.

Site-specific art and performance that honors these places—our homes, where we have spent so much time, and the places we were not allowed to enter for so long—has a role to play as we re-emerge from our mandatory confinement. It offers an opportunity to honor the importance of public spaces, as Yangon residents did, and to celebrate the meaning of home, like what was done in Singapore. Such works also create an opportunity to address issues of social equity and justice that became magnified during this time when many people lacked shelter, and the most vulnerable workers turned out to be the most essential.

Like the examples of site-specific art and performance included in this thesis, newly created works might help us to better comprehend on a local—and larger—level the ruptures that occurred and how to repair them, and the good that resulted and how best to hold onto it. "It is up to us to remember, to understand and to comprehend the past: this is our shared moral, civic and human duty. Our shared history, and thus this city, are ours."[352] Site-specific art and performance in historic sites can help us all to interpret the past and the present, and consider how we can improve the future.

[352] Faurest, Stiefel and Melcher, "Valuing Community-Built," 214.

APPENDIX I: SINGAPORE HOUSING TYPES

Shophouses. Singapore's shophouses, built during 1840-1960, are a style specific to Southeast Asia, including Malacca and Penang in Malaysia and Phuket in Thailand. Two to five stories high, they are narrow and long, built side by side with common load-bearing walls, and are connected with a covered walkway in front, known in Singapore as a five-foot way, referring to the approximate width of the passageway.

Figure 41: Neil Road shophouses in 1985 (above) and after conservation in 1989 (*Credit: National Heritage Board.)*

Singapore's shophouses were built mainly in the then-segregated areas stipulated in the Jackson Plan of 1822, so can be found in the largest numbers today in Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam, originally the Muslim Malay area.

Generally, they were multi-purpose buildings that housed a shop, office or warehouse on the ground floor with living quarters on the upper floor(s). In some cases,

shophouses were used entirely for residential purposes, and featured internal courtyards, open to the sky to allow for light, ventilation and rainwater capture. Others were used as mahjong parlors, guilds or association headquarters. "Shophouses were the heart and soul of Singapore's residential population for a century as well as the economic arena in which businesses unfolded,"[353] according to geographer Victor Savage.

In the 1986 Master Plan for conservation, the city's historic areas totaled 55 hectares, including about 3,200 shophouses.[354] Shophouses also exist outside designated historic areas; it is estimated that nearly 7,000 shophouses have been conserved,[355] providing a visual reminder of how Singapore's early immigrants lived and worked. Yet few people live in the historic shophouses that the government has gone to great lengths to retain. Instead, the shophouses have been transformed into commercial spaces — offices, restaurants, bars and shops.

Today, the URA categorizes shophouses into six types, depending on their year of construction. The shophouse at 38 Amoy Street, the setting of "The Yang Family," is classified as Early Style. Located in the oldest sub-district of Chinatown, Telok Ayer, whose development dates to the 1820s,[356] the shophouse was likely built before 1900, due to its minimal exterior decoration, the timber window frames on the second-story façade, and the fact that it is two stories (in later years, shophouses generally were three stories).

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[353] Savage, *Singapore Shophouses: Conserving a Landscape Tradition.*
[354] Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 254.
[355] "Your Shophouse: Do It Right," Urban Redevelopment Authority, April 2018, https://www.ura.gov.sg/-/media/Corporate/Guidelines/Conservation/YourShophouseDoItRightMay2018.pdf?la=en
[356] "Chinatown Historic District," Urban Redevelopment Authority and Chinatown Business Association - URA Chinatown Heritage Walk, n.d. file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/urachinatowntrail17_brochure%20(2).pdf

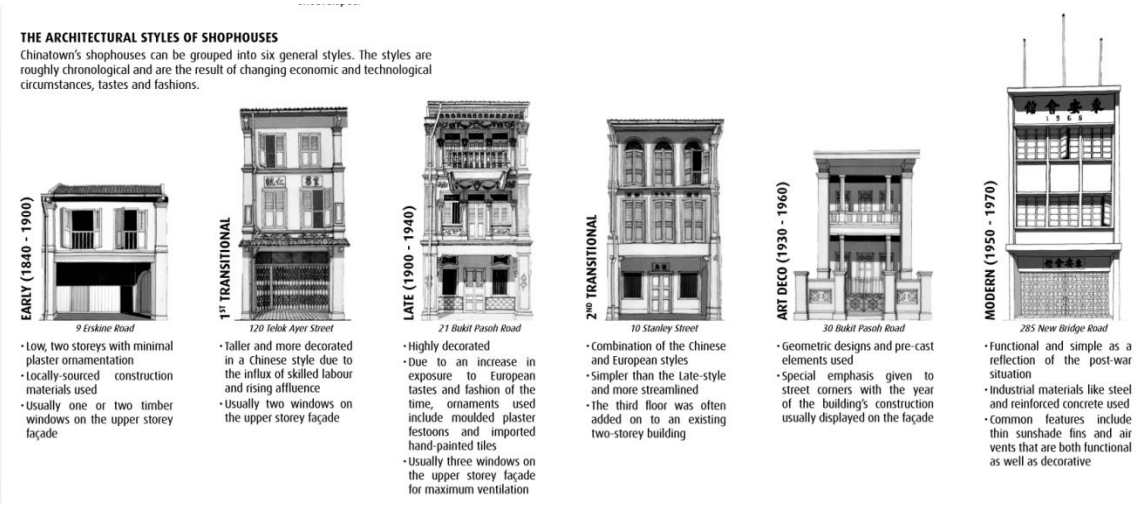

Figure 42: Singapore classifies shophouses into six types, depending on the period in which they were built. (*Credit: "Chinatown Historic District brochure.)*

In June 1996, three months after the performance of "The Yang Family," the shophouse underwent a 14-month, S$870,000 restoration. [357] Today, it houses an architecture firm and two other small businesses.

Bungalows. In Singapore, the term "bungalow" generally refers to a private house of any era. These are classified not by the structure, but by the size of the land it sits on. A bungalow must be sited on a plot that is a minimum of 400 square meters. Any dwelling on a plot of 1,400 or more square meters is classified as a "Good Class Bungalow" of which there are approximately 2,800.[358]

[357] Kinston Construction Pte Ltd, http://www.kenston.com.sg/services/past-projects/.
[358] Robert Powell and Albert Lim, *Singapore Good Class Bungalow, 1819-2015* (Singapore: Talisman Publishing, 2016).

Figure 43: A black-and-white bungalow from the British colonial era. (*Credit: Singapore Land Authority*.)

Bungalows can include Singapore's iconic "black-and-white" houses from the British colonial period, which have been described as "an adaptive eclectic cross between a Malay kampong house and English domestic architecture."[359] These were designed and built by British architects and engineers[360] for the equatorial weather, with high ceilings, wide verandahs and a layout that maximized air circulation. The black-and-whites that survive today were mainly built between 1920-1930,[361] and include homes that are grand

[359] Gretchen Liu, *Singapore Pictorial History, 1819-2000*, 370.
[360] Norman Edwards and Peter Keys, *Singapore: A Guide to Buildings, Streets and Places* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1988), 516.
[361] Ibid.

(for senior civil servants) as well as smaller, more modest buildings (for working-class army families).

The term also includes houses built in the 1950s and 60s, like the one in which "Villa Alicia" was set, as well as houses built today, such as the modern home built on the Binjai Park site where "Villa Alicia" was located.

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