

Culture's Contribution Towards a Liveable and Distinctive City

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Rosa Daniel, Dean of the Culture Academy at Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, reflects on how culture shapes distinctive cityscapes which are unique and endearing to residents and visitors. What are the opportunities to expand career pathways for our cultural workers through inter-disciplinary work in related domains of design, architecture, and infrastructure planning?

Last May, I had the privilege of launching, at the Venice Architecture Biennale, the Singapore Pavilion intriguingly titled “When is Enough, Enough? The Performance of Measurement”. This May, the Pavilion was part of Singapore Archifest 2024, and it was a pleasure to revisit the exhibition back home.

The Singapore pavilion was commissioned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and DesignSingapore Council (DSg), and curated by three architects—Melvin Tan, Adrian Lai and Wong Ker How—from the Singapore Institute of Architects. It drew inspiration from the “Loveable Singapore” project launched by DSg in 2021 where six essential qualities for a city—agency, attachment, attraction, connection, freedom and inclusion—were identified. Close to 100,000 international and local respondents had reflected on what people want from their cities and how “measuring the unmeasurable” could contribute to its loveability. The responses revealed that culture, history, identity and memory are the intangible factors that contribute to what makes a city special.

More recently, I was also invited to speak on a panel at the World Cities Summit (WCS) 2024 in Singapore which was co-organised by the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) and the Urban Redevelopment

Authority (URA). The sessions at this year's edition drew participation from around 3,500 delegates, including mayors and city leaders from close to 100 cities, as well as policy makers, industry leaders and academics. There was lively discussion on the notion of liveability and how it has evolved to include social capital, as well as acknowledgement of the challenges of measuring impact within and across cities. This followed the WCS Mayors Forum 2023 in Seoul which had also affirmed the need to view culture and heritage as being integral to the soul of a liveable—and loveable—city.

These insights on the international stage point to an increasing convergence of thinking that a city is liveable and loveable when it evokes the intangibles—memory, identity, history and culture. Beyond the traditional physical measures of infrastructural and city planning, these intangible dimensions relate to the lived experiences of how people connect emotionally to places and spaces as home—to live and work in, to raise families, or to age well in.

This is what many citizens feel at a personal level. Many a time, while walking through the neighbourhoods of Singapore, we feel and know we are home because of the familiar scenes that evoke memories that go as far back as childhood. They make this place unique for us even as other glittering cities of the world beckon with their attractions.

As we reflect upon what the future holds, I am optimistic that new pathways will open up in the creative sector. We already owe much to the specialised professionals who build our city through excellence in architecture, engineering and design. But our artists and heritage experts will also be valued for building a more liveable and loveable city that reflects our rich multicultural heritage with vibrancy and character through diverse, engaging artforms.

Those of us who have worked in the sector know that access to arts and culture—across all age groups, income and education levels—plays a part in enlivening the city. Engaging in activities that make our civic spaces culturally vibrant and distinctive is one way every citizen and resident can contribute in building a unique and loveable home for themselves, their families and their friends.

In the National Arts Council's (NAC) Population Survey on the Arts 2023, 77% of Singaporeans indicated that the arts and culture gave them a greater sense of belonging to Singapore, while 75% felt that the arts and culture improved the quality of life. In the National Heritage Board's (NHB) Heritage Awareness Survey 2022, 90% of Singaporeans surveyed recognised how engaging with heritage experiences increased their own awareness of Singapore's history and heritage. These datapoints reinforce how the arts and heritage are embraced by the broad populace.

Over the last 12 years, significant investments have been made in arts education under the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (2012 to 2025) with successively larger annual budgets for the cultural sector. Singaporeans now enjoy rich and diverse arts and culture on a year-round basis, attesting to artistic energies and talents that grow and engage audiences. In the years ahead, our cultural workers should be supported as they attain professional skillsets and take innovative approaches to deepen citizen engagement. This will create a virtuous reinforcing loop for citizen contribution anchored on a strong sense of identity and belonging through the arts and culture.

Today, Singapore is a UNESCO Creative City of Design, the Singapore Botanic Gardens is a world heritage site, and we have 75 gazetted monuments and more than 7,000 conserved buildings. There

are vibrant and distinctive cultural precincts like Kampong Gelam and Little India which reflect the multicultural soul of Singapore, and capture both the memories and the aspirations of our different ethnic communities. Most of our MRT stations and public parks feature artworks and aesthetics in their architectural designs that evoke our heritage and identity. These help make Singapore distinct from other international cities. We would do well to involve more extensively our artistic talents in designing and activating our city and precincts.

The five-year masterplans from NAC and NHB also articulate the government's continued commitment to enhancing our living environment through arts and culture initiatives. Evoking the intangible qualities of identity and memory, such initiatives will inject vibrancy and creativity in communities and precincts. For example, NAC's Our SG Arts Plan (2023-2027) identifies A Distinctive City as one of three strategic thrusts, emphasising how spaces can be invigorated by the arts, contributing to making Singapore an endearing home and attractive destination. Similarly, NHB's Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 highlights how heritage can weave a strong social fabric by uniting communities and creating a sense of belonging. Through these two strategic plans, arts and culture play an increasing role in enlivening Singapore for both residents as well as visitors.

A recent, seminal exhibition by the National Library Board (NLB) and URA, "Dare to Design: Singapore Architecture 1960s–2000s", captured well the distinctiveness and identity of our built heritage over the decades. Likewise, NHB's Preservation of Sites and Monuments division's "PSM50: Celebrating the Golden Jubilee of Singapore's Preservation Journey (PSM50)" exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore in 2021 tapped innovative ways, such as 3D printing and virtual reality, to provide different perspectives of Singapore's national monuments.

These have helped Singaporeans deepen their appreciation of what has gone into the island's built environment.

Our public housing has become integral to the Singaporean identity and won international admiration. We could draw from excellent examples of living museums such as the Netherlands Open Air Museum and the Beamish Museum in County Durham in the United Kingdom which leverage technology and thoughtful curation for immersive experiences to highlight the uniqueness and remarkable progress of Singapore's public housing infrastructure. Executed sensitively, such projects can balance adaptive reuse and city rejuvenation, objectives necessary for the evolving needs and social memories of our future generations.

These developments point to the greater need for interdisciplinary and integrative mindsets for our cultural workers. More than ever before, the domains of architecture, design, arts, heritage, education and outreach need to come together to make meaning and foster identity in a collaborative building of city and home. This calls for new ways of training in our schools and tertiary institutions that build in our younger generations the attitudes and capabilities that will enable them to work across domains, think collaboratively, and innovate with the new frontiers offered by technology.

Another critical skillset is the ability to be data-driven and evidence-based. Our cultural workers must be equipped with the knowledge and interest to be informed by qualitative and quantitative measures of success, to be confident in benchmarking with international good practice, and honest in evaluating outcomes in a resource-scarce world. Data provides quantifiable measurements of progress towards liveability, and, ultimately, the quality of life in Singapore. Tracking and measurement via digital

capture will be necessary at the community and precinct level to complement big data at the national level. There would be a need for commitment by public agencies to invest in data capacity-building through technology or human resources to better track and evaluate both quantitative and qualitative data. There can also be creative channels to gather citizen data and feedback that help government agencies shape their strategies.

Ultimately, a city that is liveable for its residents must foster a sense of belonging and affiliation to its places and communities. It could track this by tapping on a variety of data collection methods such as pulse trackers and sentiment gauges. Buildings and precincts that preserve cultural heritage or community identity are also measurable and relatable indicators. These quantitative measures of built and intangible heritage are based on standards of excellence by international bodies such as UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

The increasing role that the arts and culture play in enlivening a city underscores the need for global urban indices to measure liveability more comprehensively and holistically. Cultural metrics currently feature in some indices such as Mercer's Quality of Living and EIU's Global Liveability Index. There is still room to include a wider range of indicators or to review the weightings. Possible metrics could include: the level of civic participation and engagement in cultural events; the utilisation and activation of public spaces for cultural activities such as performances; and the number of efforts to conserve and promote the city's cultural heritage, traditions and practices. These metrics reflect the degree to which people have agency and ownership in enhancing the liveability and distinctiveness of their city.

Cultural administrators and researchers will need the skillsets to work with their counterparts, first across domains within Singapore, and then with like-minded cities to identify and harmonise data requirements, set up the local data architecture and access comparative data for benchmarking in the international context. The biennial World Cities Summit convened by CLC is a valuable platform to curate and advance such conversations across cities on liveability and sustainability.

As we navigate the increasing complexity of our operating environment, three big drivers of change will impact Singapore's liveability and distinctiveness. The first is resource sustainability with which this land-scarce city-state may host our growing population's "live, work and play" needs; these resources have to be provided affordably and optimally for current and future generations. The second is technology which, with its disruptive risks and opportunities, will require forward thinking to harness the opportunities while mitigating the risks. The third driver, demographic change, particularly with regard to an ageing society, requires us to design solutions with a view to active ageing and mental wellbeing.

These drivers, in fact, highlight the central challenge: the need to draw on the stable anchor of emotive familiarity and connectedness with heritage, memories and identity, while preparing for the future through enabling facilities and creative design. Confronting this challenge opens up exciting and compelling possibilities for the arts and culture to create and sustain Singapore as a liveable and distinctive city. □

About the Author



Rosa Daniel is Dean of MCCY's Culture Academy where she drives leadership development, cross-cutting research projects and international partnerships for the culture sector. Daniel also serves on the boards of the Institute of South Asian Studies and Lien Council of Trustees. She chairs the Advisory Board for the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University. In September 2022, she was appointed Singapore's Ambassador to UNESCO, representing Singapore's interests in preserving its culture and heritage, as well as profiling achievements in education and science. Daniel has held various leadership roles in public administration. Most recently, she served as Deputy Secretary (Culture) from 2012 to 2021 in the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and was concurrently Chief Executive of the National Heritage Board from 2013 to 2017. From 2017 to Feb 2023, she was the Chief Executive of the National Arts Council.

Note:

1. An earlier version of this essay was first published in *The Business Times* in Singapore on August, 23, 2024.