

Cultural opportunities for liveable neighbourhoods

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In the wake of the pandemic, decentralised, accessible platforms for arts and culture located in suburban neighbourhoods continue to provide residents with opportunities to build shared memories, cultural experiences, a sense of place, as well as strengthen social resilience. The authors in this essay explore the various modes in which such localised spaces may be imagined and executed.

Cultural spaces in everyday life

Performing arts venues and museums have traditionally been concentrated in the downtowns of cities; take, for example, Museum Mile in London and Civic District in Singapore. Housed in iconic buildings or national monuments, these cultural spaces are usually open for public access. Visitors may enjoy a historical and cultural learning experience and locals may feel a sense of pride in their respective cultures. Such cultural spaces provide a safe platform for building shared memories and contribute towards a high quality of life.

The pandemic, however, has highlighted the shortcomings of cultural hotspots. During COVID-19 lockdowns in many cities around the world, access to downtowns was restricted and cultural venues were closed. In the meantime, engaging with culture via other means continued to uplift spirits and facilitate community connections. Even though people had to stay home, cultural activities such as museum tours, heritage site visits, and musicals were available online. Expressions of culture, such as community singing across apartment blocks, or

choirs on virtual platforms formed by a diversity of individuals singing inspirational songs, encouraged people to stay resilient. In Singapore, a solitary cellist's ad-hoc performance from the balcony of the Shangri-La Rasa Sentosa Resort & Spa enthralled other guests who were also serving Stay-Home Notices¹. Musician Dick Lee's live concert via virtual platforms allowed viewers to share in his life story and garnered some 22,000 views from around the world. Culture thus continued to manifest in our everyday lives.

More pertinently, localised cultural experiences continued despite lockdowns as residents worldwide were still able to access everyday spaces such as their immediate neighbourhoods for purposes such as obtaining everyday supplies. In some cities, these quick outings allowed for brushes with culture in public spaces; for example, the sculpture in the neighbourhood square, the painted mural on the side wall of the corner building or the plaque marking a heritage building. These small local touches remind communities of the cultural uniqueness of their neighbourhoods, making culture easily accessible, and instilling a sense of place and belonging.

Post COVID-19, there are new opportunities to re-imagine our neighbourhoods as vibrant places where we can engage even more with culture in our everyday lives. Developing easier access to cultural spaces improves liveability in neighbourhoods and helps communities to face any future crisis with greater solidarity and resilience. Drawing from examples both in other cities and within Singapore, as well as principles from the Singapore Liveability Framework, this article explores possibilities for expanding and enhancing cultural spaces in Singapore's post COVID-19 neighbourhoods.

Decentralising cultural facilities

Singapore's 1991 Culture Plan, a layer of the then Concept Plan², projected for the decentralisation of arts and cultural venues into the heartlands. This would allow for greater access to cultural facilities, alleviate crowding in the city centre and strengthen the cultural character of neighbourhoods.

On a regional level, public libraries in particular are well distributed to serve townships, and are found co-located in shopping centres and integrated with transit nodes. Community regional hubs such as Our Tampines Hub house performing facilities, practice studios, a public library and a community gallery. At a local level, there are smaller performing venues integrated with community centres, for example the Necessary Stage at Marine Parade Community Building located in a neighbourhood in eastern Singapore. National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme provides spaces outside the city area in places like Telok Kurau Artists Village and Wisma Geylang Serai for artists to practise or create.

Locating cultural facilities in neighbourhood centres

Building on existing efforts, more can be done to locate cultural facilities within integrated developments at the neighbourhood level. Facilities such as private museums, artist studios, music schools and performing spaces can be located in community centres or in the commercial neighbourhood centres of our heartland towns.



Figure 1. The Whitechapel Gallery (top) and the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London (bottom) are cultural spaces located in the city's neighbourhoods. Images courtesy of Herry Lawford (top) and BasPhoto/shutterstock.com (bottom).

In London, Whitechapel Gallery is a public art gallery that organises shows that are of interest to the local community in the borough of Tower Hamlets (Figure 1). The privately funded Saatchi Gallery in Sloane Square opens a private collection for public access. Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood is a deliberate insertion into the less well-off Bethnal Green neighbourhood, and serves as an icon of community pride (Figure 1).

Sharing of cultural amenities by educational institutions

Educational institutions, many of which are located in suburban neighbourhoods, are another resource to enable access to culture in everyday spaces. Institutes of higher learning and schools can open their cultural facilities to community groups. For instance, Republic Cultural Centre of Republic Polytechnic in Woodlands town, located in the northern region of Singapore, is accessible to the public. It is a focal point for the artistic development of students as well as a cultural space that facilitates the integration of the community through the common appreciation of the arts. It is located at the entrance of the polytechnic and serves as an excellent interface between the community and the students.

Going forward, one possibility is for schools to be designed to locate selected facilities such as arts and music studios, laboratories and home economics kitchens at the external edge of their compounds. The community can be granted access to these facilities after schooling hours at night or during the weekend. There is much to learn from The School in Sydhavnen (*Skolen I Sydhavnen*) in Copenhagen, a primary school that is also a community and cultural gathering point where facilities are made available for public use during non-schooling hours. The design incorporates a natural hierarchy of public, semi-public and more private spaces within, with a fully accessible viewing deck and a school playground that is shared with the community.

Artist-in-residence schemes within schools can also be introduced to promote interactions between artists, students and members of the community. Such residency facilities can provide a home for the artist to create and make, allowing for real-world active teaching to the students in their school. This can provide students opportunities to interact with the artist on school days and allow community interaction through classes during non-schooling hours.

Local community museums

Museums housed in city centres tend to be sites for national narratives. In contrast, local museums are better placed to tell the unique stories of neighbourhoods and communities. For example, in Singapore, community heritage museums in the neighbourhoods of Queenstown and Taman Jurong are highly popular among residents. Clan associations, often housed in heritage buildings, offer compelling historical records. These museums and associations document and tell the stories of ordinary Singaporeans and local neighbourhood life, providing a very different offering from museums in the city centre. Museum@My Queenstown showcases objects of socio-cultural significance from the area, such as items from two long-time businesses serving residents for more than five decades—the signboard of Thin Huat, a provision shop, and items from Meng's Clinic (Figure 2). The museum is run by civic group, My Community, which co-curates exhibitions with residents, and sustained through funds from residents, businesses and religious institutions as well as government grants.



Figure 2. Top: Museum@My Queenstown run by civic group My Community; Bottom: The “Museum of Us” was set up in a vacant shop in Old Kent Road, London, as a community space for exchanging ideas for longer-term plans for the area. Images courtesy of My Community (top) and Fieldwork Facility (bottom).

In encouraging the setting up of local community museums, we can look at the example of the rejuvenation of Old Kent Road in Southwark, London, where the local city council invited New London Architect and Fieldwork Facility to work with the local community (residents, industry and local action groups) in refurbishing a vacant shop into the Museum of Us (Figure 2). The museum features portraits of confident local residents in its campaign to raise community awareness and pride, making it a space for workshops and for the community to exchange ideas and share their views on the long-term plans of the area (Howie 2019).

Community museums can also showcase prominent local personalities or national heroes who lived in the area and contributed to nation building. For example, we can imagine re-creating the home of Zubir Said, composer of Singapore’s national anthem, complete with piano and original song sheets. Mackintosh House in Glasgow, Scotland, recreated the house of renowned artist and architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, complete with its original interiors. Memories of older residents may also serve as a resource for community museums in building shared stories. In Singapore, members of the community, particularly the pioneering generation who

witnessed Singapore's fledging years as a republic, can be invited to share their stories in nation building and inspire the younger generation.

A recent initiative by National Heritage Board (NHB), Street Corner Heritage Galleries, involves partnering local shop owners with at least 30 years of history to co-create mini-museums showcasing the heritage of their shops, for example the Ji Xiang Ang Ku Kueh in Everton Park and Loong Fatt Tau Sar Piah in Balestier. In going further to recognise and promote our intangible cultural heritage, we can learn from Japan where "living national treasure" status is conferred upon craftsmen and artisans in recognition of their expertise. Workshops run by such individuals become iconic of their neighbourhoods, drawing admirers from near and far.

Connecting points of cultural interest in neighbourhoods

A growing number of city leaders in Milan, London and Paris are bent on improving the post COVID-19 environment of their cities. They are adopting new city-wide efforts to temporarily close streets to vehicles, forming a network of inter-connected city blocks. This facilitates safe distancing, creating additional public space for residents to remain active by walking and cycling, and in some cities, allowing the spillover of outdoor dining to boost local economic activities, and creating more opportunities for cultural activities to occur.

In Singapore, during the COVID-19 circuit breaker³, parks and beaches were closed, thereby limiting access to nature. Exercise venues such as swimming pools, courts and gyms were also closed, restricting exercise options. Outdoor walking, jogging and running in one's immediate neighbourhood thus became a popular leisure activity.

During a walk or jog, one may encounter prosaic elements in the neighbourhood that might have gone unnoticed previously, providing a respite and improving physical and mental well-being (Brinson 2020). Delightful and identifiable points of interests along the way (such as works of art) can increase the attractiveness of taking walks around the neighbourhood. Curiosity in heritage can be generated through the marking of heritage buildings or heritage trees, with story boards featuring local points of interest. These can strengthen local neighbourhood identity and are opportunities for community-led efforts.

Cultural curation of walking trails

The experience of walking in the neighbourhood can be further enhanced by curating well-connected walking trails and park connectors⁴. In Singapore, community art projects in a neighbourhood can be linked up with existing heritage trails by NHB to create an intra-neighbourhood walking trail in a continuous loop. Such a trail can be marked out via coloured lines on pedestrian paths with directional signs. Landscaping with plants, markers and amenities such as benches and water dispensers can be included to enhance walkability. Points of interest and heritage buildings in the neighbourhood can have storyboards, similar to those created for national monuments and historic districts,

to encourage residents to pause and learn more about the neighbourhood. An inspiration for the design of the trails can be the Freedom Trail in Boston, where a four-kilometre brick path connects 16 historically significant sites with clear story boards along the way (Figure 3).

There are plenty of opportunities to involve the community in such a process. Extending NHB's Heritage Trails Adoption Scheme⁵ to include other local community groups is an opportunity

for students to work with residents, particularly local pioneers (Figure 3). Participatory mapping of neighbourhood trails can be done to produce creative walking maps, which can be incorporated in an easy-to-access smartphone app. Non-governmental organisations such as Singapore Heritage Society, and members of the public can be invited to contribute memories of specific sites in the neighbourhood, which in turn enrich the narratives of the trails.



Figure 3. Top: Freedom Trail in Boston uses a brick path to connect historically-significant sites, encouraging visitors to explore downtown Boston on foot; Bottom: A student from Catholic Junior College guiding his peers on the Balestier Heritage Trail. Images courtesy of Patrick Rasenberg (top left), Wilson Loo Kok Wee (top right) and National Heritage Board (bottom).

Linking neighbourhood trails to the park connector network

Going further, these local neighbourhood trails can be linked up to Singapore's park connector network to create inter-neighbourhood routes. Currently, there are 350km of park connectors island-wide, which will be expanded to 500km by 2030 as part of National Parks Board (NParks)'s "City in Nature" efforts. However, some of our park connectors are not continuous as they are bisected by wide roads. Inter-neighbourhood connectivity can be further enhanced by using overhead bridges or underpasses to close gaps

along the connectors to provide seamless walking and cycle trails. For instance, a cycling bridge across the Tampines Expressway to connect Tampines and Pasir Ris towns is currently being studied. At Bidadari and Punggol towns, Housing & Development Board has retained two heritage roads, Aljunied Road and Old Punggol Road, and re-planned them as green connectors within the town, linked to nearby open spaces and park connectors. Informal performance areas similar to those in Tokyo's Yoyogi Park can be set up, and community art installations can be placed along these roads to create a community and cultural walk.

The 606, or Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago, building on the defunct Bloomingdale rail line, is a 4.3km elevated park that connects four neighbourhoods (Figure 4). The 606 serves more than 80,000 residents who live within 10 minutes' walk to the trail, providing a space for leisure and safe commuting to downtown Chicago. Even though it was initially intended as a bicycle trail, the community found ways to use it creatively such as making the trail a "living work of art" with different plant species that change with the seasons, temporary art installations, performances, and regular community arts programmes (Centre for Liveable Cities 2017).

In contrast, the Major Taylor Trail in the same city has a lower usage, one of the main reasons being that pedestrians and cyclists have to cross busy streets along the trail, unlike The 606, which provides a seamless connection via overpasses for pedestrians and cyclists (Wisniewski 2016).



Figure 4. The 606 in Chicago provides a seamless connection through four neighbourhoods and offers spaces for artwork and cultural activities. Images courtesy of Thomas Barrat/shutterstock.com (top) and artistmac (bottom).

Creating broader car-lite cultural districts

In Singapore, we can also work towards creating more car-free zones and car-free days to provide more space for the public, while encouraging car-lite mobility. This can provide more space for safe distancing measures in a post COVID-19 world. For example, Haji Lane, which boasts of Singapore's most Instagrammable murals, can benefit from permanent street closure linking back to the overall pedestrian network at Oman Street and Bussorah Street (Figure 6). The combination of the various murals, Arabic motifs, heritage buildings, historic story boards, public and private museums and arts spaces can then be invariably linked to form a broader cultural district. The Ximending area in Taipei is a car-free zone daily from 10am to 10pm (Figure 5).

When the streets are closed, the district becomes a vibrant cultural area for buskers and street vendors selling food and artistic crafts, along with retail shops, cinemas, hotels and restaurants.

The back lanes and side lanes of historic districts can also be transformed into new pedestrian links and secondary frontages for the conserved shophouses. Melbourne led the way with the transformation of its dark and dank service lanes into laneways lined with cosy coffee places and food and beverage outlets. Melbourne's laneways have created new economic value for the building frontages along them and infused the city with a culture of coffee and reading (Figure 6).



Figure 5. The streets of Ximending in Taipei are pedestrianised from 10am–10pm daily, turning the district into a vibrant cultural area popular with locals and tourists. Images courtesy of Various images (left) and Yi-Lin Tsai (right) from shutterstock.com.



Figure 6. Haji Lane in Singapore (top) and Melbourne's laneways (bottom). Images courtesy of Lezlie (top left), Fabio Achilli (top right), _TC Photography_ (bottom left) and Leigh Marriner (bottom right).

Activating public spaces through cultural place-making

Public spaces such as town squares or pedestrianised streets are key touch points for culture. Such public realms can allow people to engage in social and cultural activities even as social distancing measures remain in gradual recovery from COVID-19. In Singapore, there are plenty of public spaces for people to enjoy,

be it in neighbourhoods such as the Toa Payoh town centre or the city centre like the promenade outside Marina Bay Sands. Public squares at Bedok Town Square, Paya Lebar Quarter and Kampung Admiralty offer spaces for pedestrians and community activities, alongside food and beverage outlets. Initiatives spearheaded by government agencies such as “Streets for People”, “Friendly Faces, Lively Places” and “Arts in Your Neighbourhood Programme”⁶ encourage community participation in enlivening public spaces. Going forward, place-making interventions can be made to enrich our public spaces with culture.

Co-creating public art through mural painting

Currently, the PAssionArts Community Art Gallery programme in Singapore by People's Association, a statutory board overseeing grassroots communities and social organisations, invites residents and community artists to display and share artworks in selected community spaces such as void-decks⁷ and coffee shops. This initiative can be expanded by identifying additional spaces for community murals which reflect residents' ideals and tell the unique stories of the neighbourhood.

Murals are visually striking and have strong symbolic values. In the creation of such murals, residents can be invited to participate in the ideation and painting process. For example, in 2019, the Ang Mo Kio Constituency Merchant Association commissioned 10 murals as part of rejuvenation efforts for the town centre. A 3D mural featuring a waterfall and koi pond is dedicated to the merchants of the town centre as the koi fish is associated with good fortune.

In Philadelphia, the Mural Arts Philadelphia programme engages communities in 50-100 public art mural projects a year using participatory methods. Artists partner community members to envision and express stories from the community through murals in public spaces.

There is plenty of local expertise in facilitating such community-led placemaking projects. For example, with the support of Our Singapore Fund⁸, community organisation, Participate in Design, has engaged residents in the planning and design of a community space, or Community Living Room, at a void deck in the Telok Blangah Crescent neighbourhood (Figure 7). This involves the painting of nature-inspired murals reflecting familiar landmarks in Telok Blangah. Along with other design interventions such as the installation of painted mobile seats, the void deck is transformed into an attractive place for residents, many of whom are seniors, to socialise.

Beyond the walls of void decks, other neighbourhood spaces such as utility boxes, street



Figure 7. Volunteers coming together in painting murals at the void deck of 7 Telok Blangah Crescent.
Image courtesy of Participate in Design.



Figure 8. Over 1,200 painted traffic signal boxes by the community form an outdoor art gallery in the suburbs of Brisbane. Images courtesy of Brisbane City Council.

surfaces, underpasses of expressways, and even bin centres can be potential canvases for artists and the community. One example is the Artforce project by the Brisbane City Council and Urban Smart Projects, which invites residents of all ages and backgrounds to design and paint on traffic signal boxes in Brisbane suburbs (Figure 8).

Catalysing spontaneous interactions through small interventions

Inexpensive, light-touch interventions can act as catalysts for spontaneous interactions between members of the public in building social bonds and making the neighbourhood loveable. In the case of Singapore, Urban Redevelopment Authority’s “Making Loveable Places” strategy includes the “Play It Forward programme”, where pianos are placed in public spaces to create spontaneous performances and gatherings. In Hong Kong, the “Seating for Socialising” movement placed small one cubic metre cubes in under-utilised public spaces as an experiment

to improve social bonds. These cubes generated playfulness and spontaneity in both adults and children as they stack and arrange them in different sculptural configurations for interactions.

Small interventions in the urban environment like the installation of mirrors in Taipei and New Taipei City’s underground metro stations and linkways encourages dancers from all walks of life such as school groups, street performers and professionals to rehearse and perform (Figure 9). Members of the public stop and watch, sometimes even spontaneously joining the dancers to dance, creating a jovial atmosphere. In Singapore, we see examples of such spaces in the pedestrian underpass to Esplanade and at the underground connecting corridor at the Singapore Management University (SMU) campus. We can certainly observe more creative activities and spontaneous social interactions if mirrors like the ones in Taipei were installed in these areas and around our neighbourhoods!



Figure 9. Mirrors installed in some metro stations in Taipei provide practice spaces for dancers from all walks of life. Images courtesy of Taipei Metro.

Creative markets in public spaces

In many cities, neighbourhoods are known for their weekend markets selling creative goods or local produce. Apart from making the neighbourhood attractive for locals and visitors, such markets also support artists and creative producers in showcasing and selling their work. Our communities can work with local organisations that specialise in organising flea markets such as Fleawhere and Art Market, by The Local People, to host regular weekend markets in neighbourhood centres. In Ximending, Taipei, the public plaza outside the historic Red House hosts a weekend creative market (創意市集—in Traditional Chinese used in Taiwan, or 创意市集 in Simplified Chinese) where artists and creative producers all over Taiwan are invited to sell their work (Figure 10). This initiative is supported by the Taipei authorities and the Taipei Culture Foundation. Cultural performances can also be curated to showcase local talents. In Harvard Square, Cambridge, the business association curates cultural performances in designated areas, going beyond the selection of buskers to drawing up a detailed schedule of performances and rotations of buskers between designated areas.

Towards a community governance model

In realising the ideas presented in this article, integrated planning with stakeholders across government agencies and community institutions such as local grassroots, schools, businesses, residents and artists is key.

In the spirit of the Singapore Together movement⁹, the cultural character of neighbourhoods can be shaped directly by local communities in taking on greater ownership of their neighbourhoods. A potential model in empowering local communities to take ownership in the ideation, creation and governance of local placemaking efforts is that of the Community Benefits District, a model adopted in San Francisco.

Unlike the Business Improvement District model that is largely made up of large commercial organisations in the city centre, the Community Benefits District model is usually found in mixed-use local neighbourhoods involving a partnership

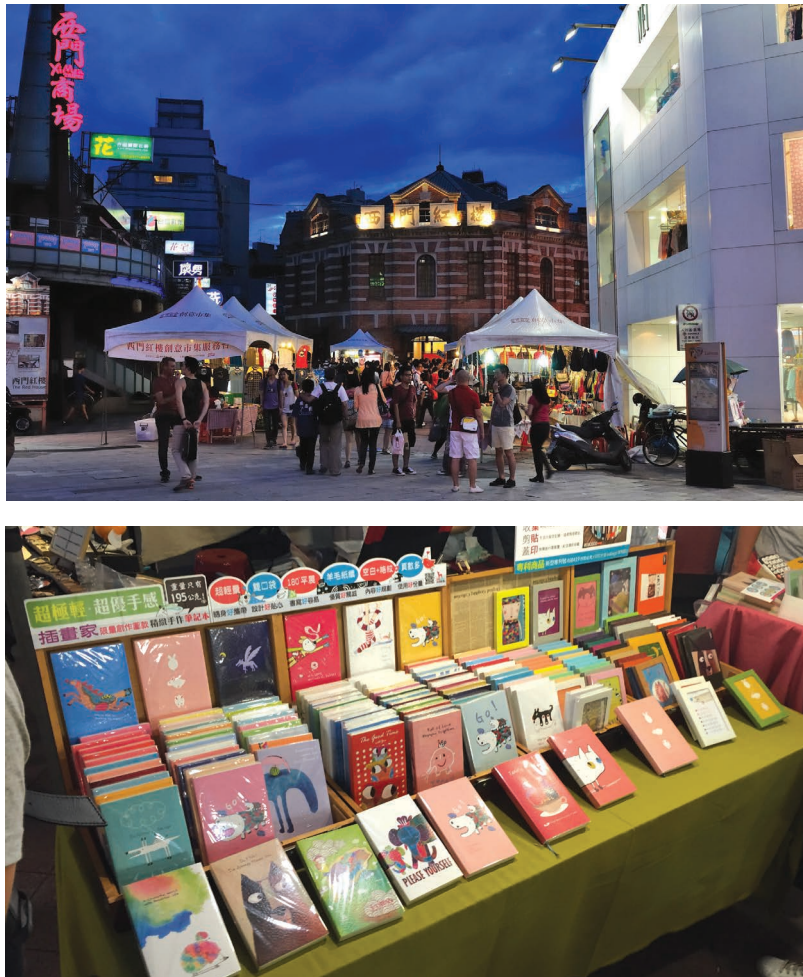


Figure 10. A weekend market selling creative and cultural products at the public plaza in front of the historic Red House in Taipei. Images courtesy of Alain (top) and Tan Xin Wei Andy (bottom).

between the local city council and diverse range of community stakeholders. Once an area has voted to establish a Community Benefits District, local property owners are levied a special assessment to fund improvements to their neighbourhood. For example, some neighbourhoods in San Francisco have adopted the Community Benefits District model where property owners pay a small assessment that goes toward maintaining and improving parks, plazas, gardens, sidewalks and other local improvement projects (Poole 2015).

While a monthly levy for residents may not be applicable in Singapore's context, the Community Benefits District model is useful for bringing community stakeholders together in working with stakeholder agencies on neighbourhood-specific placemaking projects such as mural painting, participatory mapping of neighbourhood trails, street closures, installation and maintenance of street furniture, management of school facilities for public use and setting up community museums. In this way, the community gets to decide what it wants and how much it wishes to contribute towards the projects in terms of financial or manpower resources.

Culture for liveability

Putting our ideas together, we can develop delightful and well-connected local walking loops around our neighbourhoods. These can be linked to the overall park connector system being implemented for Singapore. These trails feature community mural projects, painted infrastructure such as utility boxes, street lamps or park furniture along the way. Markers of heritage sites and information boards can reflect local stories and instil awareness and pride. Together with community museums and public spaces activated with cultural place-making initiatives, we can better tell the story of our neighbourhoods to reflect their unique cultural identity and create many attractive local places for residents to explore and enjoy.

Cultural institutions in Singapore such as museums and art galleries are reinventing and improvising to remain attractive in a post COVID-19 world, particularly in expanding into the digital realm (Tan 2020). While online platforms offer cultural engagements from afar, cultural spaces in neighbourhoods are complementary in allowing residents to physically experience and participate in cultural activities in their specific localities. These ideas are also opportunities to encourage greater community participation in shaping the cultural character of their neighbourhoods, and in the process, building bonds and strengthening social resilience against future crises. With greater community participation and ownership in the creation of everyday spaces of culture, Singapore's neighbourhoods can become even more vibrant and liveable places that offer a high quality of life for its residents. □

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Notes:

1. A Stay-Home Notice is issued to travellers who are granted entry into Singapore requiring them to be isolated for 14 days. The notice may be served in a dedicated facility or in residential premises.
2. The Concept Plan is a strategic land use and transportation plan that guides Singapore's development over the next 40 to 50 years. It is reviewed regularly, and ensures that there is sufficient land to meet Singapore's long-term needs while providing good quality living environment for people. Being a small country with limited land capacity, the plan plays a critical role in balancing our land use needs.
3. The Singapore government announced a period of Circuit Breaker on 3 April 2020 to pre-empt the trend of increasing local transmission of COVID-19. During Circuit Breaker, elevated safe distancing measures were implemented. Singapore exited Circuit Breaker on 1 June 2020.
4. The Park Connector Network is an island-wide network of linear open spaces around major residential areas, linking up parks and nature sites in Singapore. Singapore has 340km of park connectors islandwide and this will be increased to 500km by 2030.
5. The NHB Heritage Trail Adoption Scheme is a flexible programme where schools are encouraged to adopt an existing or new NHB Heritage Trail or school-developed trail, and to integrate key heritage sites as unique learning spaces for students.
6. The "Streets for People" programme by Urban Redevelopment Authority that provides support for community-initiated projects to transform streets into meaningful public spaces such as weekend car-free zones; The "Friendly Faces, Lively Places" fund by Housing & Development Board (HDB) supports ground-up community projects proposed by residents; The "Arts in Your Neighbourhood" initiative by National Arts Council brings art activities and experiences, performed and facilitated by artists and arts group to various neighbourhoods across the island.
7. The void deck is a unique feature of Singapore's public housing estates. Introduced in the 1970s by the HDB, void decks freed up ground-level spaces of HDB flats to create opportunities for residents to meet and interact through the regular use of shared common spaces and to provide residents with the space to hold social and religious functions.
8. Set up by Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, "Our Singapore Fund" supports groups of individuals or registered organisations to initiate projects that promote the Singapore Spirit and shared values and build more socially inclusive communities. The aim is to partner Singaporeans to co-create the future of Singapore and explore solutions to strengthen the social fabric and develop a stronger sense of belonging, pride, confidence and commitment towards Singapore.
9. The Singapore Together movement aims for Singaporeans to partner the government, and one another, to own, shape and act on Singapore's shared future together. The movement opens up partnership opportunities for Singaporeans to participate in, and to provide support for more citizen-led initiatives.