Activating Urban Spaces and Communities through Arts and Culture: Boosting Local Identity and Social Bonding in Singapore’s Housing Neighbourhoods

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Abstract

‘Community Arts and Culture Nodes’ is an initiative established by Singapore’s National Arts Council (NAC) in 2011, with an aim to bring quality arts closer to the local communities. The pilot study was conducted in five local neighbourhoods to investigate spatial and social impacts of the ‘Nodes’ initiative and strategies employed to activate public spaces through arts. An initial ‘Neighbourhood Arts and Culture Impact Assessment’ (NACIA) framework was applied to conduct neighbourhood spatial opportunities analysis, surveys and focus group discussions with local residents node partners. Enriching public life, activating underused or neglected spaces, shaping stronger sense of identity, boosting community bonding and increasing public participation are some of the initial findings discussed.

Keywords: arts and culture nodes; art impacts; community art; social bonding; neighbourhood identity

1. Introduction - Community Arts and Culture in Singapore

Over the last decade, there has been a substantial shift in the arts and culture initiatives in Singapore, which involved integrating arts into local neighbourhoods and everyday life, alongside the development of premier arts venues, which are predominantly located in the city centre. In result, an increased number of community-focused arts and culture policies and initiatives have been established, aiming to strengthen national identity and build a cohesive society through arts and heritage. In 2010, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth’s (MCCY) launched the ‘Arts and Culture Strategic Review’ (ACSR) to envision Singapore’s cultural development until 2025 (MCCY, 2016). The key goals were to empower the public in shaping cultural development and to ensure its long-term sustainability through provision of platforms for collaboration between artists, arts groups and local communities. One of such platforms is the ‘Community Arts and Culture Nodes’ initiative.
Arts and Culture Nodes’ initiative, started by the National Arts Council (NAC) in 2011, aiming to bring the quality arts closer to local communities throughout the city, while partnering with Community Clubs (CCs), National Library Board (NLB), SAFRA Clubs and Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs). NAC also works with the People’s Association (PA), a national grassroots body who similarly launched the ‘PAssonArts’ programme in 2012. By doing so, the ‘Nodes’ initiative goes beyond the traditional formal art venues and instead incorporates more informal pocket spaces for art activities, including public spaces in the local neighbourhoods. It is envisioned that an island-wide network of 25 of such nodes will be established by 2025. While providing greater access to the arts, NAC also aims to bring buzz to urban spaces, build stronger identity, and increase the opportunities for public participation, social interaction and bonding. Overall, more than 1,000 art programmes, ranging from film screenings to dance performances and workshops, have taken place over the last five years island-wide (NAC, 2017). According to the latest National Population Survey on the Arts (NAC, 2015), the interest level of Singaporeans in the arts has significantly increased since 2005. Attending art events is seen as an enjoyable activity that brings people together, while family commitments and lack of company are reported as key barriers to arts attendance.

This paper overviews strategies employed to activate public spaces through arts in Singapore’s housing neighbourhoods and identifies impacts of the ‘Nodes’ initiative on local spaces and communities.

2. Impacts of Arts and Culture: What Impacts?

Impacts refer to a range of short- and long-term outcomes that may result from arts-based actions, and are often classified as ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ (e.g., Carnwath & Brown, 2014). Intrinsic values are created through subjective encounters with arts and are rarely immediately visible and measurable in terms of fixed or monetary values. Instrumental impacts refer to secondary effects, which could also be achieved by non-arts means. The majority of studies investigate the economic impacts of arts and culture (e.g., Crompton et al., 2001), while the empirical research evaluating ‘non-economic’ outcomes is relatively scarce (e.g., White & Hede, 2008). The key reasons lie in challenges in measuring socio-cultural impacts that include questionable and/or inconsistent research methods and a lack of proving any causality (e.g., Belfiore & Bennett, 2010). Even fewer number of studies focused on impacts of small arts and culture events (e.g., Small et al., 2005). Among the socio-cultural outcomes, most frequently reported impacts are: improved health and overall well-being (e.g., Stuckey & Nobel, 2010), increased educational performance, social cohesion and inclusion, community identity, civic empowerment and civic engagement (e.g., Stern & Seifert, 2009).

3. NACIA Research Framework Development

Based on a comprehensive review of theories, policies and initiatives pertinent to the benefits and impacts of community arts and to the quality of public space, a conceptual ‘Neighbourhood Arts and Culture Impact Assessment’ (NACIA) research framework is proposed. NACIA builds upon the ‘Urban Space Framework’ (Cho et. al, 2016), based on three components of urban space performance: ‘hardware’ (spatial design), ‘software’ (use, sociability and perception) and ‘orgware’ (management and operation). Moreover, it adopts the ‘Theory and Change’ (e.g., Laing & Todd, 2015) and the ‘Triple-bottom Line’ approaches (e.g., Fredline et al., 2005), in which economic, social and environmental impacts are understood in a holistic and interconnected manner, resulting from context specific inputs and outputs. Work by McCarthy et al. (2004), Brown (2006) and Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013), among other frameworks, also provided valuable insights into conceptualisation and procedures of identifying indicators for measuring and evaluating intrinsic art impacts. NACIA framework primarily focuses on spatial and social impacts of arts and culture, while only touches upon operational and economic outcomes (Fig.1).
4. Research Methods: Pilot Study - Impacts of ‘Community Arts and Culture Nodes’ Initiative

Approach and methods employed in this study combine spatial mapping and ethnographic research to gather quantitative and qualitative data about the neighbourhoods’ capacity to build strong art ecology and the impacts of the arts and culture initiatives. The pilot study was conducted in 5 neighbourhoods operated by node partners, namely: Kallang Community Club (CC), Woodlands Regional Library (WRL) and SAFRA Jurong, Tanglin Halt (My Community) and Bedok Town Square (Fig.2).

Selected nodes all differ in respect to their specific goals, target audiences and spatial capacities. Kallang CC primarily targets families with children and senior citizens, organising regular art events with local professional artists and art hobby groups, both within its own premises (indoor multi-purpose hall and open courtyard) and in public spaces in the neighbourhood. WRL and SAFRA Jurong focus on their members, families with children and young adults, mainly offering performing art events and workshops while primarily utilising their own facilities. Tanglin Halt open space is so-called ‘street-level node’, operated by ‘My Community’, a non-profit organisation, whose main focus is on local artists and intangible cultural heritage of
the Queenstown neighbourhood. Bedok Town Square is another street-level node identified by NAC (currently without an anchoring node partner), a large sheltered space next to a shopping mall, public transport hub and a hawker centre. Each node, thus, brings distinct flavours to the local neighbourhoods by employing different strategies, activating different spaces and targeting at different audiences.

**Neighbourhood Spatial Opportunity Analysis.** Neighbourhood spatial opportunity analysis included the area of 400m radius around the node. Two main layers of data were mapped out: (1) general spatial characteristics (scale and shape, level of enclosure and type of ground surface) and (2) intensity of pedestrian movement (proximity to the most frequented pedestrian paths) and number of users engaged in stationary activities. Spaces are then evaluated against ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ design criteria for good public space and suitability for the arts. Generated maps are overlapped to filter out spaces that are most suitable for conducting arts and culture events and activities (Fig.2 & Fig.3). In result, four key types of spaces are identified, indicating the potential strategies to activate public spaces through arts (Fig.3). Type A involves spaces with high intensity of both transient and stationary activities, close to metro stations, shopping centres or food courts. They are suitable for broadening and diversifying the arts audience. Type B comprises spaces near movement paths, but without substantial stationary activity, such as some void decks (empty spaces underneath housing blocks) and covered walkways. In these spaces, arts could encourage residents to pause and engage with space and other users. Category C includes spaces that are away from the major movement paths, but are well-utilised, such as basketball courts and playgrounds. Here, the arts activity can be introduced to facilitate social bonding and deepen arts engagement. Finally, type D involves spaces that are away from movement paths and lack in stationary activity (so-called “white elephants”), such as amphitheatres or roofs of multi-storey carparks. Art activities have the potential to bring more users into these underutilised spaces.

Identifying strengths and weakness of available spaces is one of the prerequisites for creating reach neighbourhood arts ecology, which combines ‘hard’ infrastructure (spaces for rehearsals and performances) and ‘soft’ assets (programming, skills and networks). Connecting specific goals with appropriate spaces,
synergetic uses and art strategies provides greater possibilities for achieving desired impacts. For instance, the Tanglin Halt space benefits from the synergy with adjacent activities and spatial arrangement. Located between supermarket and food court, it attracts local residents on regular basis, and makes the passers-by stop for a while to catch a glimpse of an art performance. Another example is the Kallang CC node, which shows a high level of adjustability. In case of rain, the event moves from an open plaza to a sheltered space next to the subway station or from an open courtyard to an indoor multi-purpose hall.

**Study of Impacts.** To gather insights on perceived, experienced and desired art impacts, we attended 8 arts and culture events, conducted 242 surveys and facilitated 5 post-event discussions with local residents, 1 focus group discussion with node partners and 5 interviews with organisers and local artists (Fig.4).

![Fig.4. Pilot Study - Instruments for Capturing and Assessing Social and Spatial Impacts of the Arts](image)

**Focus Group Discussion with node partners** enabled in-depth understanding of partners’ specific goals and perspectives about the impacts of the arts on community and helped to test, validate and refine the initial NACIA framework, as well as to select impact indicators. **Post-event Discussions with residents**, each about 45-60 minutes long, engendered qualitative data about the immediate and intermediate impacts of arts participation and to understand audience’s perspective regarding the impacts of arts initiatives on their neighbourhood spaces and communities. A total 48 residents joined the discussions, during which they were asked to share their thoughts about two key issues:
- Available spaces in the neighbourhood and their suitability to host arts and culture events and activities (Questions: Do you attend or/and practice arts and culture events and activities in your neighbourhood? Where? With whom? Do you think those venues are suitable? Why? Why not? Where else would you like to see arts events in your neighbourhood?); and
- Impacts of the arts on the community (Questions: Do you think that the arts make any change or difference to your neighbourhood and to yourself? What are the changes?)

5. **Pilot Study Key Findings - Discussion**

**Survey Findings.** The overall survey sample consists mainly of female adults (30-59 years old) of Chinese ethnicity (Fig. 5). The number and proportion of age, gender and ethnic groups across five neighbourhoods could not be fully achieved, as the art events clearly catered to specific target audiences, some of which hosted also more intimate activities (such as the storytelling workshop for children in SAFRA Jurong, for example) as opposed to the others (music and theatre performances in Kallang, WRL, Bedok Town Square and Tanglin Halt). The findings involving two key themes are summarised below.

**Space.** The survey results reveal that public spaces next to metro stations and commercial areas are more frequently visited for both daily activities and for attending arts and culture events. The majority of the
participants find the selected neighbourhood spaces suitable or very suitable for holding art events. The majority also stated that they would participate in arts and culture events more often if the venues are closer to their homes. Moreover, the residents mentioned an array of spaces in their neighbourhoods where they would like to see more arts and culture events (besides the actual art venues), such as parks, other open spaces, sports hardcourts, void decks, food courts, markets and shopping malls.

Table 1. Pilot Survey – Sample Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodes</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young (less than 30)</td>
<td>Adult (30-59)</td>
<td>Senior (60 and above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRL</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAFRA Jurong</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kallang CC</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedok</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanglin Halt</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motivation for attendance, participation and sociability. Most of the participants decided to attend the event after seeing the advertisements or hearing public announcement on site before the event started, or they simply happened to be at the venue, which applies primarily to open plazas and pocket nodes. Other means of getting information about the events include social media and word-of-mouth. The majority of residents attended the events at open plazas (Kallang CC, Bedok and Tanglin Halt) alone, or with family members at indoor venues (SAFRA Jurong and Woodlands Regional Library) (Table 2). The majority didn’t speak to anyone before, during or after the event. However, a considerable number of residents spoke to the people they already knew or even made new friends during these events, which proves the capacity of art events to gather people and boost community bonding (Table 3).

Table 2. With whom did you attend the event?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodes</th>
<th>Myself/Alone</th>
<th>SAFRA Jurong</th>
<th>Kallang CC</th>
<th>Bedok</th>
<th>Tanglin Halt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WRL</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (below 12)</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Did you communicate with people at the event?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodes</th>
<th>No, I didn’t speak to anyone</th>
<th>Yes, I spoke to people I already know</th>
<th>Yes, I made new friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WRL</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAFRA Jurong</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kallang CC</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedok</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanglin Halt</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Post-event Discussions Findings. Qualitative narrative analysis of post-event discussions with residents revealed the following key topics that generally align with the impacts distilled from the literature review: vibrancy of public spaces and neighbourhood identity; community bonding; stronger interest and participation in community arts; and well-being impacts.

Activation of public space and neighbourhood identity. The residents clearly expressed that arts and culture events bring vibrancy and identity to their everyday spaces, making them more attractive and boosting good mood. Through art events, they also see familiar spaces from a new perspective and get to know unfamiliar neighbourhoods.

(…) It [art and culture event] creates good atmosphere and promotes a light-hearted, joyous mood. [Tanglin Halt, 25 Feb 2017]

(…) after watching, you can explore the neighbourhood as well and learn more about different places, which you will seldom have a chance to go to. [Tanglin Halt, 25 Feb 2017]
**Community bonding.** Most of the residents shared the belief that the art has the power of enhancing bonding between neighbours. Arts and culture events provide opportunities for them to progress along all stages of ‘neighbouring’, as defined by Grannis (2009), from passive face-to-face contact and mutual recognition to shared experience, further interaction and, finally, friendship. Moreover, more informal art venues are perceived as more welcoming for social interaction.

(...) [Art] breaks the ice between people who are enjoying the music together regardless of age. [Bedok, 26 Nov 2016]

(...) Sometimes people live next door to each other for years without knowing each other. At the event, people can see each other and know that they live in the same community. (...) Events give people an opportunity to talk about when they bump into each other. If you’re in a lift with a fellow you can say ‘Oh hey, I saw you at so and so event!’ [Kallang, 21 Jan 2017]

**Stronger interest and participation in community arts.** Art events, as described by the residents, build stronger interest in arts and culture, encourage new discoveries and boost creativity. Residents also aspired to be mentored by artists and have their work showcased together at a community venue. Moreover, they expressed the desire for deeper participation and interactivity, which may not only involve practicing arts, but also volunteering in various supporting activities, such as logistics.

(...) People and parents should see arts as a way of building soft skills that can contribute towards building skills for life. (...) [Art] encourages people to think out of the box. People can think of different ways to look at common objects. [SAFRA Jurong, 17 Dec 2016]

(...) There’s also a lot of talent within the community who would be looking for a platform to perform. (...) You can join on a volunteering basis. [Tanglin Halt, 25 Feb ’17]

**Well-being impacts.** The participants also acknowledged the restorative and well-being impacts of arts and culture activities, as they boost positive emotions and encourage active lifestyle.

(...) It's true when you say we live a very mundane life, a lot of people say ‘Singaporeans got no life, we are not happy’, so this [art event] brings the life back to us. [Kallang, 21 Jan 2017]

6. Conclusion

According to Januchta-Szostak (2010), the ways artwork in public space is typically perceived and accepted can take two major forms - the ‘visual landmark’ and the ‘collective anchor point’. Visual landmarks may contribute to visual identity of a public space, amuse and entertain, stimulate interest and interaction as well as provide temporary engagement. On the other hand, collective anchor points enhance mental acceptance and social identification with the work of public art, and thus construct deeper integration becoming part of users’ mental maps (Ursic, 2015). As indicated in this pilot study, a higher level of residents’ attachment to their neighbourhood and neighbours through arts and culture can be achieved through: collective participation in arts and culture events (software) and adequate spatial provisions and arrangements (hardware), which encourage social interaction and synergy of adjacent uses. Apart from the permanent artworks, the findings indicate that temporary arts and culture events and activities can considerably contribute to stronger tangible and intangible identities of the neighbourhood spaces and communities. They can, thus, be regarded as important collective anchor-points for the local communities. They may encourage meaningful and joyful interaction with neighbourhood spaces, boost stronger attachment to spaces and communities, increase the level of public participation and bottom-up initiatives, increase the adaptability of spaces, activate underused or neglected spaces, maximise synergies between spaces, amenities and arts and culture programmes, and trigger healthier lifestyle.

Finally, the pilot assessment of individual nodes serves as basis for the on-going full evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the ‘Community Arts and Culture Nodes’ strategy and drafting recommendations for
enriching and strengthening NAC’s long-term efforts to establish and sustain a self-sustainable network of arts touch points in the local community.

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