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Title:

Impacts of Community Arts and Culture Initiatives: A Study of Five Singaporean Neighbourhoods

Authors:

TRIVIC Zdravko, TAN Beng Kiang, DUONG Quyen and MASCARENHAS Nina

Abstract. The last few decades of cultural development in Singapore experienced a substantial shift towards embracing community-centred arts initiatives and more informal venues for arts engagement, as compared to previously predominant focus on “high Arts” and formal cultural venues (such as museum or theatres) typically offered in the city centre. The result is an increased number of recent community-focused arts and culture policies and neighbourhood initiatives island-wide aiming to provide the public with a greater stake in shaping Singapore’s cultural development and identity.

One of such initiatives is ‘Arts and Culture Nodes’ strategy, started in 2011 by the National Arts Council (NAC), with the primary objectives to bring regular quality arts programmes closer to where people live, enrich identity and public life of local neighbourhoods, empower ground-up initiatives and build stronger community bonds. To achieve such objectives, NAC started establishing a comprehensive network of node partnerships with local artists and neighbourhood institutions (e.g., libraries, community and recreational clubs, and non-profit organisations) across the island. Moreover, a range of neighbourhood public spaces have been activated as more informal venues for a variety of arts and culture events.

This paper outlines key methods and findings from the 2-year-long research conducted in five Singaporean neighbourhoods, which investigated the role of arts in placemaking strategies, the capacities of node partners to develop strong neighbourhood arts ecology and the impacts of arts and culture initiatives. The study developed a ‘Neighbourhood Arts and Culture Impact Assessment (NACIA)’ framework, with qualitative and quantitative methods, tools and indicators to capture and measure such capacities and impacts. It involved ethnographic study, neighbourhood spatial opportunity analysis, surveys, focus-group discussions with residents and node partners, and interviews with event organisers and community arts practitioners.

Findings show that the ‘Arts and Culture Nodes’ strategy is overall effective in overcoming the physical barriers of bringing arts closer to people, attracting diverse participants and offering a variety programmes that are overall well-received by the audience. Investigated nodes may have different spatial capacities, level of employment of neighbourhood public spaces, human resources, target groups and outreach strategies, but each contributes to the strategy as a whole and bring a distinct flavour to its surrounding neighbourhood. Findings reveal numerous positive spatial, social, wellbeing, educational and participation impacts of arts on local neighbourhoods and communities, ranging from bringing vibrancy to public spaces and boosting positive emotions to community bonding, volunteerism and building new skills.

Keywords

Arts and Culture Nodes, Community Arts, Arts and Culture Impact Assessment, Community Building, Placemaking and Arts Ecology