

A Cultural Desert Transformed?

–Singapore’s Arts and Cultural Planning for the 21st Century –

Joyce Fan*

목 차

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| I . Introduction | III. The Renaissance City Plans |
| II. The Arts and Culture in Colonial Singapore | IV. Conclusion |

I . Introduction

As one of the four Asian Tigers, Singapore is associated more in the realm of finance and economics than in arts and culture. Deemed as a cultural desert countless of times, Naomi Lindt wrote in a travel feature for the New York Times, “the Lion City has never been associated with the thriving art and design scenes of places like Jakarta or Bangkok. Rather it’s seen as a bastion of sanitised, chewing-gum-free efficiency, admired for its modernity and order in otherwise chaotic Southeast Asia. It’s a place where creative expression hasn’t been cultivated.”¹⁾ Ever since its separation from the Federation of Malayan States in 1965, the one-party ruling government has designed city planning and economic policies for its transformation into a top Asian business and financial hub. It includes the concerted efforts

* The Singapore Art Museum Curator

1) *New York Times*, June, 2011.

in making the city green in the bid to raise its liveability status and hence becoming an attractive destination for foreign investments. A city-state built on meritocracy geared towards economic success for its people, Singapore has indeed come a long way from a small Malay Fishing village in early 18th century to become highly regarded as a bustling modern country in the 21st century. With success stories abound for its largely successful planned urban and national development in the last 40 years, the Government begun turning its attention in the late 1980s with the same tenacity and drive to turn Singapore into a striving arts and cultural hub in the preparedness for the highly globalised environment of the 21st century. *A Cultural Desert Transformed*, this paper attempts a look at a cultural oasis in making through an overview of Singapore's arts and cultural plans as well as a critical discussion of some key issues and challenges it faces as a 21st century global city.

II. The Arts and Culture in Colonial Singapore

The British recognised the potential in the strategic geographical location of Singapore with its natural harbour and established Singapore as a crown colony to be its trading outpost in the region. Expanding rapidly in the 19th century with indentured labour brought in from India and the migration of the Chinese accelerated by natural disasters and unrest in the mainland, the small fishing village grew into a sizeable town with a municipal government. The administrative service in training the locals however had its focus on staffing junior and clerical positions in civil service rather than fostering the growth of the arts and culture. Despite the pragmatism of the Colonial

government, Singapore has its origins of a museum when the Raffles Library and Museum first opened its doors in September 1874 for “the benefit of the inhabitants of the Straits Settlements”. The natural history museum was not surprisingly a repository that grew from the British’s interest in the flora and fauna of the tropics. It only came into its being as the National Museum of Singapore in 1965 with the establishment of the Republic, housed in its original downtown location built in 1949. It remained the only purpose-built building for a national museum till today.



Raffles Library and Museum, late 19th century

The development of visual arts on the other hand in Singapore had its modest beginning in the 20th century with mainly with efforts of the Chinese community. The Sino-Chinese war in mainland China that further fuelled the diaspora that saw a wave of the intelligentsia settling in Singapore. Community leaders not only saw the need for an education system to cater for the Chinese by founding the Singapore Nanyang Overseas Chinese Middle School²⁾ in 1919 but also, an art academy providing formal art education.

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, or NAFA, was established in 1938 with three teachers and Principal Lim Hak Tai helming the school until his death in 1963. With a brief closure during the Japanese Occupation, the Academy functioned unabatedly on funding from the Chinese community during the colonial era and in the present-day it provides a tertiary education in studio and performing arts, fashion and design.



Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts - A painting class in 1949

Besides NAFA, it was also known that art classes were held Raffles Institution. The Institution was a school set up by the British in 1823 to cater for the sons of the British East India Company employees and the children of local leaders. In 1937, Richard Walker, the Art Superintendent of Singapore Schools who was trained in mural painting at the London's Royal College of Art began organising art classes and taught interested students and teachers painting and sketching. The favoured medium was

2) now known as the Chinese High School.

watercolour and Walker's students were known to include Malay teachers. It was also known that a sketching club existed in St Andrew's School, a mission school founded by the Anglicans.



Self Portrait by Richard Walker, oil on canvas

Apart from the schools, the Amateur Drawing Association existed and was formed in 1909 by a group of prominent local Chinese known as Peranakans. Little is known about the Association apart from the two Low brothers well known for their portrait paintings, Low Kway Soo and Low Kway Song. The latter, passed away in 1982, was famously known to have commanded four-figure sums for his commissions as far back as 1927. There were also newspaper reports on periodic art exhibitions, such as that by the Belgium-born Indo-European artist, Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur in 1933 whose Bali-inspired paintings of his local wife Ni Pollok sold successfully to allow him to buy a piece of land on the Indonesian island. The well-known Chinese artist Xu Beihong stayed for few months in Singapore as well as reported exhibitions of Chinese paintings as part of the fundraising effort

for the Sino-Japanese war.

Despite being largely a migrant or a sojourner society without a long and distinct cultural history and a developed art patronage, Singapore during the colonial period could arguably account for some art and cultural activities. Perhaps not a striving art centre by any standards, nonetheless these early developments were to become the foundation for its push as an arts and cultural hub in this present day.

III. The Renaissance City Plans

“A world-class city must go beyond being a well-built city that works in the tropics. The measure of a world-class city lies deeper than the physical attributes of a beautiful, efficient city. A world-class city should therefore contribute to the well-being of its residents. It should promote a sense of pride of belonging among its people.”³⁾

In its bid to be a world class city, Singapore declared its aim of becoming a “Renaissance City of Asia” to excel as a centre for culture and the arts in the region.⁴⁾ The move saw the adaptive reuse of historical buildings as museums with the latest being National Art Gallery to open in 2015 in the former Supreme Court and City Hall. A highlight of the drive was the construction of a mega-development “Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay” for performing arts that officially opened in 2002. Occupying six hectares of waterfront land near the mouth of the Singapore River, the Esplanade

3) Khoon Cheng Lim, then Urban Redevelopment Authority Chairman, *Skyline*, March/April 1996, 4면.

4) *The Straits Times*, 25 April, 1997.

comprises a concert hall that seats 1,600 and a theatre with a capacity of 2,000.



The Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, Singapore



National Museum of Singapore, formerly the Raffles Library and Museum



Singapore Art Museum, formerly St Joseph Institution



Asian Civilisations Museum, formerly Government Offices during the colonial period

The revitalisation of the Civic District with museums and theatres was a distinctive sign of a changing cultural landscape in Singapore. The first

report that signalled a concerted effort in shaping a policy was released in 1989 by the Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts (ACCA) set up to study the role that arts and culture played in the society. The report recognised the integral role played for “developing a culturally vibrant society, giving Singapore a unique national identity and providing the social bond that holds our people together.”⁵⁾ The arts were recognised to be important in uniting a culturally diverse society that Singapore has become, and to promote the necessary cross-cultural understanding and appreciation for a peaceful and harmonious society. The report made far-reaching recommendations that included enhancing arts education at tertiary and pre-tertiary levels; improving cultural facilities; boosting heritage and visual arts collections, encouraging reading and writing and stepping up arts promotion by the media among the community.⁶⁾ In the following decade after the release of the report, the National Arts Council (NAC) was set up to promote the arts in Singapore and introduced The Young Artist Award in 1992 to encourage the development of artistic talents. The National Heritage Board (NHB) was formed in 1993 to oversee the establishment of a museum precinct that included a fine arts museum,⁷⁾ a Singapore history museum⁸⁾ and a Southeast Asian ethnology museum.⁹⁾ Besides NAC and NHB, the National Library Board was formed to develop a National Library and a number of public libraries to boost the literary arts while the two art colleges, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and Lasalle College of the Arts founded in the 1980s

5) Dr Lee Boon Wang, then Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, foreword, *Renaissance City Plan III*, 2005.

6) *Renaissance City Plan III*, 5면.

7) Singapore Art Museum.

8) National Museum of Singapore.

9) Asian Civilisations Museum.

and polytechnics received more governmental funding to improve and establish their art education programmes. Last but not the least, the construction of a purpose-built concert hall and theatre started in the early 1990s that was to become the Esplanade of today.

Ten years after the ACCA Executive Summary, the first Renaissance City Plan (RCP) was rolled out in 2000 that resulted from the need of preparedness for the 21st century. From an industrial to a knowledge economy, the RCP was a roadmap for Singapore to become a “global arts city”: “The idea is to be one of the top cities in the world to live, work and play in, where there is an environment conducive to creative and knowledge-based industries and talent.”¹⁰⁾ The report reiterated the objective of nation-building, this time through the “creation and sharing of Singapore stories, be it in film, theatre, dance, music, literature or the visual arts.”¹¹⁾ The five-year plan rolled out was set to strengthen the “software”, that is capabilities, audiences and vibrancy and resulted in Singapore’s participation at the Venice Biennale, an annual arts festivals and its very own Singapore Biennale. Arts scholarships, grants and bursaries were also increased to nurture and cultivate talents while the Cultural Medallion recipients recognised for their artistic excellence were eligible for a project grant of S\$50,000 for the creation of new works. The RCP also called for cross governmental agencies collaboration to systematically market arts and cultural activities overseas and to increase incentives for arts sponsorship.

Renaissance City 2.0 in 2005 was the shortest phase in the Renaissance City Plan project as the next push for Singapore becoming a “global arts city”: “It... discusses in broad strokes the future strategic direction to unleash

10) *Renaissance City Report*, 2000, 4면.

11) *ibid.*

the full potential of Singapore's arts and cultural assets.”¹²⁾ Importantly, the report drew out a consultative plan that involved the people, private and public sectors as well as identifying the challenges and opportunities Singapore would face. Two studies were commissioned by then Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA)¹³⁾; the first undertaken by the Institute of Policy Studies to understand the impact of the three sectors on the arts and cultural development in Singapore; and the second, a two-pronged study led by Professor Lily Kong of the National University of Singapore that investigated the level of value and relevance the society attached to arts and culture and sought strategies for greater overall engagement. What is significant in RCP 2.0 was the identification of challenges that Singapore had to contend with and specific areas to focus on and develop in the next phase of the Renaissance City Plan project. These challenges were recognised as increasing competition from Asian cities that were looking into the development of its arts and culture sector such as Seoul South Korea, Beijing and Shanghai China, Hong Kong and Saadiyat Island Abu Dhabi while internally, the changing demographics with the increasing inflow of foreign talents were creating a disconnection and social tension that were slowly eroding the fabric of a harmonious society. Interestingly, the report saw these challenges presenting opportunities Singapore could synergise with the booming Asian arts and entertainment sectors as well as a positive response to arts and cultural activities by a maturing and increasingly affluent Singaporean society. RCP 2.0 set the tone

12) *Renaissance City 2.0*, 2005, 9면.

13) In 2012, in the restructuring of two ministries saw the arts component of MICA taken over by the renamed Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) with the national museums now coming under its arm.

in seven areas for RCP III that was released in 2008: nurturing home-grown talents that “highlight our diverse and unique heritage and traditions”¹⁴⁾; creating greater accessibility locally and internationally to information on Singapore arts and culture; a conscious shift from public to private sector with the emergence of specialised art services; provision of affordable studio spaces and exhibition venues; outreach to the masses to increase the level of appreciation and awareness for the arts and culture; and diversifying sources of financial support and art patronage. RCP 2.0 was basically introduced as part of a broader creative industries development strategy defining three thrusts – develop new capabilities, partnerships and to internationalise Singapore arts, and further investments were made towards strengthening the arts infrastructure that the ACCA Executive Summary and RCP had put in place.

The third phase of the Renaissance City Plan project was rolled out in 2008 outlining “the vision, strategic directions and key initiatives”¹⁵⁾ that would be taken for the next seven years till 2015. The report called for defining Singapore as a “Distinctive Global City of Culture and the Arts” as being “a vibrant magnet for international talent” and “a best home to an inclusive and cohesive population, appreciative and knowledgeable about its diversity, and proud of its national identity.”¹⁶⁾ It was clear that three outcomes were desired; namely, content generation that was to see the systematic collation of its heritage and collective experience to inspire new works of art and cultural activities; developing a dynamic ecosystem for high sustainability and the call for an engaged community that recognised

14) *Renaissance City Plan III*, 2005, 15면.

15) *Renaissance City Plan III*, 2008, 3면.

16) *ibid.*, 27면.

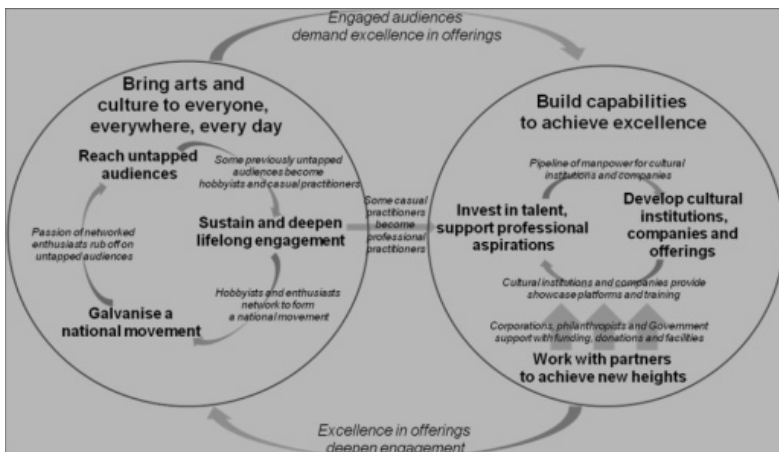
the arts and culture as critical to its national identity, social bonding and education.

Without arts and culture, a nation would have no soul, a community no shared ties of understanding and belonging, and our youth no conception of our history, values, and ambitions for the future.¹⁷⁾

In this phase of development, Singapore is to further realise the cultural and entertainment district with the opening of the National Art Gallery, Singapore at the former City Hall and Supreme Court buildings in 2015 that is to be equivalent in size to Tate Modern in Britain and Musée d'Orsay in France. Connecting Singapore to the region and the rest of the world through art, the Gallery will have a strong focus on Singapore and Southeast Asia art at the core of its collection and a dynamic exhibition programme on international art. The Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall built during the colonial period will undergo a complete refurbishment and reopen its doors in the next couple of years. It will be part of the cluster formed by the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Arts House and the historic districts of Boat Quay and Clark Quay that were formerly the economic lifeline of Singapore. Through these developments, Singapore is therefore poised to be the choice destination for arts professionals and further enhanced by new commissioning and residency schemes. The public platforms provided by the annual Singapore Arts Festival, Singapore Biennale and Singapore Writers' Festivals will be further strengthened for the discovery and promotion of new local and Asian talents. Besides, Heritage Centres – the Malay Heritage Centre, the Sun Yat Sun Memorial Hall, and the planned

17) *Ibid.*, 28면.

Indian Heritage Centre - are to be the focal point for the main ethnic groups and located in different parts of the island. These centres are to bring awareness to the links that Singapore has with the Asian Diaspora in the past and to promote cross cultural understanding. RCP III is also to see a more concerted push outwards to showcase Singapore internationally. The establishment of the Singapore-France Cooperation Fund is to allow for bilateral exchanges with prestigious exhibitions of art and objects from leading French museums in Singapore and for Singapore exhibits to be shown in France. RCP III is to represent a new chapter of growth for Singapore in shaping its cultural landscape geared towards the support of a vibrant and thriving arts and cultural hub.



The Schematic of Renaissance City Plan III

Desired Outcome	Indicator	1996	2007
Diverse and vibrant arts and cultural scene*	No. of performances and visual arts exhibition days	6,000	27,000
	No. of arts companies and societies	400	800
Strong Demand and Audience Base*	% of Singaporeans who attended at least 1 arts event in the past year	1 in 10	1 in 3
	No. of ticketed arts attendance	750,000	1,500,000
	Non-ticketed attendance	990,000 (2003)***	2,700,000
	Visitorship to NHB museums	316,000	1,856,000
	Attendance at heritage outreach events	1,500,000 (2003)***	4,400,000
Economic Contribution**	Total Nominal Value-added (S\$ million)	557	978 (2006)
	Employment	16,000	21,000 (2006)

* Source: National Arts Council and National Heritage Board. Figures are rounded up. Annex A provides more details on key cultural statistics.

** Source: Department of Statistics. Two-year lag in data availability. 2006 figures are preliminary.

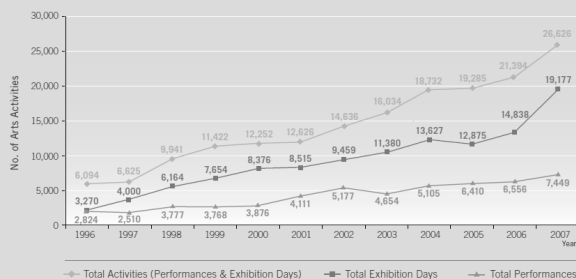
*** Tracking started from 2003.

A) Vibrancy of the Arts Scene

Arts activities in Singapore quadrupled between 1996 and 2007. On any day, audiences now have an average of 73 activities to choose from, compared to just 16 activities in 1996.

Note that this statistic takes into account only performing arts events and visual arts exhibitions. It does not include entertainment, pop-rock, film or media, or other culture/heritage-related events.

Figure A-1: Total Arts Activities (Performances & Exhibition Days)



B) Number of Arts Companies and Societies

The number of arts-related companies and societies registered with the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority and Registry of Societies doubled from 1996 to

2007. Companies include both commercial (for-profit) and non-profit companies.

Figure A-2: Number of Arts Companies and Societies

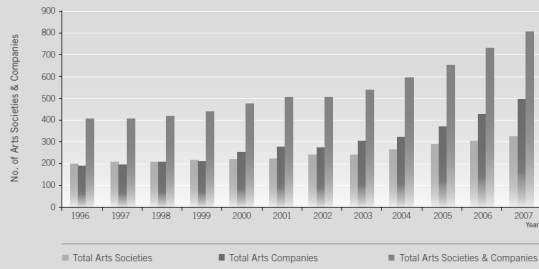


Figure A-5: Visitorship to NHB and Non-NHB Museums

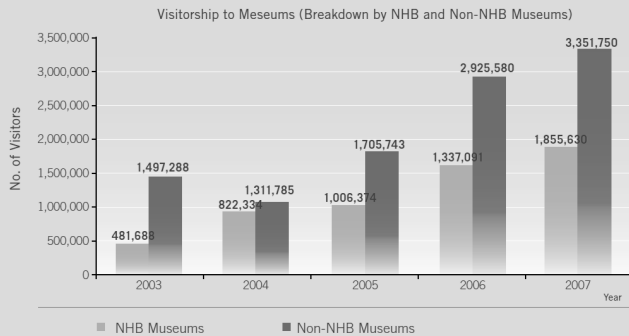
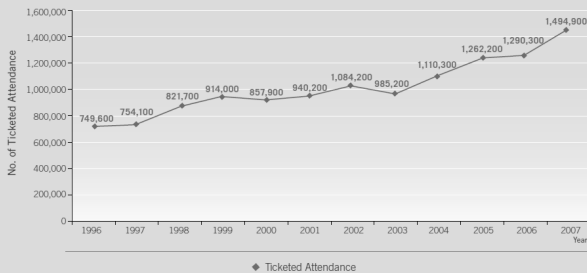


Figure A-3: Ticketed Attendance at Performing Arts Events



Source: National Arts Council

IV. Conclusion

Singapore has indeed come a long way since the 19th century and is regarded today as a thriving and dynamic metropolis, an economic and lifestyle destination and ranks high as a liveable city. Once considered a 'cultural desert', big strides have been made through a blueprint mapped out more than two decades ago to transform the city-state into a culture and arts hub in the 21st century. Recognising that the arts play a key role in place identities where artistic expressions give a sense of identity to the locales in a rapidly globalising world, its development was given much attention and the needed push to awake from a nascent cultural scene. The Renaissance City Plan with the three phases stemmed from the recommendations of the Advisory Council for the Arts and Culture had focused on enhancing vibrancy, building capabilities and strengthening community outreach. It has given Singapore a distinct museum precinct and an arts and cultural district, along with a regional and international reach of its cultural scene. As Singapore now awaits the opening of its latest institution the National Art Gallery in 2015, and with an increasing awareness and appreciation for the arts, Singapore perhaps is a cultural oasis made.

Key Words : Culture, Arts, cultural desert, Renaissance City Plan (RCP), The Advisory Council for the Arts and Culture

[국문요약]

문화적 사막지대를 예술과 문화의 중심으로 바꾸기까지 - 싱가포르 미술과 문화의 변천사 및 21세기 문화예술진흥계획에 대한 검토 -

Joyce Fan*

20년 이상 걸친 계획을 통해 과거의 ‘문화적 사막지대’로 불리던 곳에서 21세기의 문화와 예술의 중심지가 되기까지 싱가포르에는 많은 변화가 있었다. 특히, 빠르게 세계화 되어가는 사회 속에서 현지인들에게 자국의 정체성을 인식하게 하는 데에 예술이 매우 효과적임을 인식하고 이를 적극적으로 활용함으로써 싱가포르는 국가 형성 초기의 모습에서 벗어날 수 있었다. 싱가포르는 문화와 예술의 중심으로 우뚝 서기 위해 ‘아시아의 르네상스 도시’가 되겠다고 선언하였다. 르네상스 도시계획은 ‘문화예술자문위원회’(The Advisory Council for the Arts and Culture)의 조언에 따라, 문화와 예술을 활성화시키고, 이에 필요한 도시의 제반 기능을 향상시키며, 대중에 대한 접근성을 높이는 것에 중점을 두고 세 단계로 진행되어 왔다.

1989년 사회에 문화와 예술이 가져오는 변화에 대해 연구한 Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts (ACCA) 사업계획서의 발표로부터 10년 후, 21세기를 맞이할 준비를 하기 위한 첫 번째 르네상스 도시계획(RCP)이 시작되었다. RCP는 공업경제에서 지식경제시대에 이르기까지, 싱가포르가 ‘국제 문화의 도시’가 되기 위한 로드맵이다. 2005년 르네상스

* 싱가포르 아트뮤지엄 큐레이터

도시계획 2.0은 르네상스 도시계획 프로젝트들 중 가장 짧은 시간 지속된 계획으로, 역시 싱가포르를 ‘세계 문화의 중시도시’로 만들 것을 목표로 하고 있다. 제2차 르네상스 도시계획은 이후 2008년에 발족하게 되는 제3차 계획을 준비하기 위해 일곱 가지 면에서 분위기 형성을 마쳤다. 제3차 르네상스 도시계획은 ‘비전, 전략적 방향성, 그리고 진취성’을 모토로 2008년부터 2015년까지 7년간의 계획으로 시작되었다. 특히, 제3차 르네상스 도시계획은 싱가포르를 국제사회에 알리는 데에 더욱 집중하고 있다. 제3차 르네상스 도시계획은 싱가포르의 문화경관을 한층 더 발전시켜, 이 도시국가를 예술과 문화의 중심지로 만들어나가는데 기여하게 될 것이다. 현재, 싱가포르는 2015년 국립 아트갤러리의 개장을 기다리고 있다. 이렇듯 예술성을 충분히 인정받았고 향후에도 계속해서 인정받을 싱가포르를 어쩌면 “문화적 오아시스”라고 부를 수 있지 않을까 생각한다.

주제어 : 문화, 예술, 문화적 사막지대, 르네상스 도시계획, 문화예술자문위원회

