

# MAKING SPACE FOR THE ARTS

Cultural infrastructure is important in building international competitiveness and providing a fresh identity

BY CHRIS WRIGHT

**A**RTS and cultural destinations play a central role at the heart of city life. They help to inform our public debates and bind us as a society. They also provide a platform for the exchange of ideas, from global trends such as 50s and 60s pop culture to the re-imagining of districts and even entire cities. Singapore's cultural landscape has been transformed over the last 10 years by substantial investment in national museums. The star attraction is the National Gallery Singapore, a world class visual arts museum which opened in 2015, housed in the historic former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings.

Smaller scale projects are also underway, including the recent launch of a tender process by the Urban Redevelopment Authority to invite innovative proposals for re-use of individual heritage buildings. But is this enough, and can Singapore find inspiration from developments elsewhere?

## MONEY CAN'T BUY LOVE

City governments tend to justify large investments in arts and culture by emphasising the importance of cultural infrastructure to international competitiveness, as well as the potential for major attractions to deliver wider benefits from tourism as in Bangkok or to provide a fresh identity akin to the Guggenheim Museums in Bilbao and Abu Dhabi.

These broad aspirations can take on different flavours. In the Middle East, the main strand is economic diversification with a dash of cultural diplomacy; in post-industrial cities, it is urban regeneration and boosting the creative industries.

Yet creating thriving, sustainable and impactful cultural destinations from scratch is no easy matter, especially when building large projects at speed. The richness and variety that is so appealing in historic cities comes from character areas being built up and reinvented over time. This context is vital. Too often, new cultural landmarks appear detached; delivered without enough thought to fostering a supportive eco-system and engaging new audiences.

## FOCUS ON EXPERIENCES

Changing consumer expectations have added new challenges as arts and cultural destinations compete with other activities for our precious leisure time and spending. Traditional formats such as exhibitions or theatres are increasingly integrated with public gathering and event spaces. Interactive content, social media and new technologies have become mainstream. Pop-ups and "artainment" are everywhere, tapping into the "fear of missing out" (FOMO) and appealing to younger audiences who favour informal, flexible and personalised experiences.

Visit London's Southbank on a busy summer day



GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM BILBAO

to see how a planned cultural quarter can come alive as a destination and, over time, help to uplift the surrounding area.

Tai Kwun, a complex of historic buildings in Hong Kong, has been sensitively redeveloped to include an unusual blend of arts, food and beverage within a unique setting. Tai Kwun reported footfall of one million visitors within little over four months of opening last year despite operating a pre-booking system for visits at peak times.

To step inside Xiqu Centre – a stunning new 28,000 sq m venue dedicated to Cantonese opera – is to see at close quarters Hong Kong's growing contribution to the global wave of investment in major new museums and performing arts centres. Xiqu Centre is the first significant attraction to be delivered within the West Kowloon Cultural District. West Kowloon promises all the features of a cultural mega project: iconic, headline-grabbing designs by famous architects (the cranes still hover over Herzog de Meuron's M+ museum); complex and expensive buildings that strain public budgets (Xiqu Centre cost a reported US\$346 million); and high-profile international partnerships (the plans for a branch of Beijing's Palace Museum).

Notably, Xiqu Centre shows some intriguing responses to the changing times. With its large and inviting central space, which is open to busy Canton Road, it encourages people to mingle, linger and explore. Xiqu's Tea House, a small and intimate dinner theatre, offers 90-minute shows to introduce new audiences to Cantonese opera over tea and *dim sum*. In the future, it is possible to imagine this building as one of the main gateways into a busy arts and commercial district that is active in the day and evening.



NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

## CHANGING TIMES, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Not every city is planning a new arts hub on the scale of Hong Kong and Abu Dhabi or can mobilise charitable funders like the Hong Kong Jockey Club and other wealthy patrons. Nonetheless, a secure funding stream and a strong champion sits behind most successful arts and cultural projects, whether from the public, private or not-for-profit sectors or a mix of all three.

Here are three very different examples of initiatives based on novel approaches to partnerships and audience development:

- **Al Serkal Avenue, Dubai:** A collection of basic industrial sheds that has been transformed since 2008 into Dubai's leading arts and creative hub. Concrete, a new mixed-arts space designed by OMA, opened in 2017.
- **Centre Pompidou, Malaga:** The Pompidou's first pop-up outside France opened in 2015. The initial five-year partnership with the city government was recently extended and a new partnership with the West Bund Art Museum in Shanghai is planned.
- **Delicious Art, Seoul:** The National Gallery in London is pioneering overseas retail extensions through the Delicious Art brand. A café has opened in the Lotte World Mall in Seoul and other pop-ups are planned in Asia.

Creative and fleet-of-foot approaches such as these can be impactful in a targeted way. They can also be initiated relatively quickly, without a commitment to build and sustain large, permanent new institutions. It is exciting to see established cultural organisations looking to experiment in emerging locations.

While Singapore has a strong portfolio of arts and cultural destinations, in a fast-changing context there will always be new opportunities to explore – whether through strategic global partnerships, locally-based initiatives to revitalise spaces and places, or using the arts as a creative force to drive new ideas for future cities. After all, is that not what Singapore is all about? ■

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