



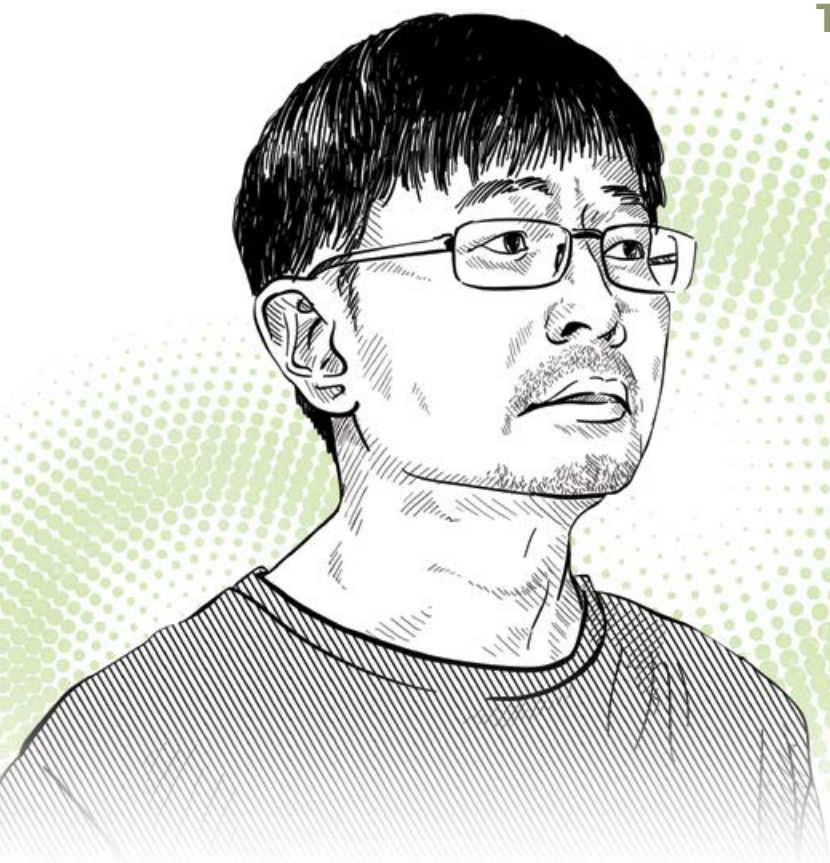
OPINION

Counterpoint: Tan Tarn How

The Festival Effect is Transient and Superficial



What happens after the tentage has been taken down, the buntings removed, the litter cleared and the roads re-opened? The area goes back to its old quiet self.



Vibrant spaces and places that evolved organically due to their historical, cultural, community and commercial roots continue to stay lively in the long term, in contrast to large-scale festivals that tend to spark short-lived vibrancy, argues **Tan Tarn How**, a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore, and a playwright.

Large-scale festivals and events can no doubt inject unprecedented vibrancy into places.

Indeed, the list of such exciting happenings that enliven cities, towns and places within them is a long one. They include the Rio de Janeiro and other street carnivals, religious festivals like the Ati-Atihan parade in the Philippines, music mega-events such as the Montreux Jazz Festival, the Olympics, and New Year celebrations all over the world like the Songkran water festival of Thailand.

Singapore too has its own large-scale street events. They range from the traditional Thaipusam religious procession to the modern National Day Parade, and the more

recently-minted ones such as the Night Festival, and the Singapore River Festival. These events—which are big draws for locals and tourists—often meld spectacle, culture, art, drama, participation in one setting and over a certain period of time.

Some like Thaipusam or National Day Parade arose naturally out of, and are embedded in, a religious, cultural or political calendar. Others were specially created to bring buzz to otherwise moribund places and spaces such as the Night Festival and Singapore River Festival, which were aimed to spark vibrancy in the city centre.

The effect and the sustainability of the latter was the subject of the “Roundtable on Place Management and Placemaking in Singapore” jointly hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Singapore Art Museum. The roundtable, from which I draw partly for this article, focused on the government’s strategy called “place management” that aims to bring “heart and soul” into the city.

In the decade or so since they began, the newly-minted festivals have gone from strength to strength. For example, the 2016 Night Festival pulled in a record 600,000 visits over its two weekends. The event turned Bras Basah—a historic, cultural and commercial district in the city—into a venue for a “midsummer’s celebration of sorts” when “art and culture spill onto the streets when dusk falls”, according to the organiser the National Museum.

From the narrow yardstick of whether the fun and revelry entranced the citizens, other residents and tourists who came, the Night Festival was a huge success. Streets that were normally deserted and buildings that were usually empty at night came alive.

But what happens after the tentage has been taken down, the buntings removed, the litter cleared and the roads re-opened? The area goes back to its old quiet self. The effect is

transient and (because of safe unchallenging programming) superficial. They create busy spaces for a time, but are not vibrant in the sense of a sustained or deeper connection of people in a place.

What are the reasons for this lack of vibrancy?

First, some of these areas are structurally not amenable for people to hang out in. They may be unfriendly to pedestrians, have no clear focal point such as a plaza, or be made up of disconnected parts not easily and intuitively accessible to one another. The success of the Night Festival, for instance, was only possible because roads had to be closed to allow free movement of people. Once the cars return, the same fluidity of movement becomes difficult.

Second, the activities and facilities on offer are not of wide enough interest for many people to frequent them.

Third, these spaces and places lack a special, usually local, flavour that gives a reason for people to visit them.

Fourth, the large-scale festivals are often organised from the top down rather than ground up—grafted by some higher or outside agency onto a community that might not buy fully into the idea or the same ideas

of enlivening their neighbourhood. Indeed sometimes the local community is left with as many problems as benefits from a big event, as some research on the Glastonbury Music Festival has shown.

Contrast this short-lived vibrancy with places in Singapore that are vibrant the whole year round and quite often round the clock as well. Among them are Little India, Arab Street, a resurgent Chinatown and even the Geylang red light district.

These hotspots of liveliness grew organically and spontaneously and not because of—some would say in spite of—government intervention or encouragement. One participant at the roundtable memorably called the bustling 24-hour giant shopping complex in Little India, Mustafa, “the Night Festival that Singapore has every day”.

The existence and vibrancy of these places are deeply connected to their cultural, historical, community and commercial roots. Each satisfies to a greater or lesser extent the four conditions for intrinsic vibrancy listed above.

Away from the city centre, non-government efforts have been made to add buzz to satellite towns in suburban Singapore. For instance, the theatre company Drama Box has organised exhibitions and forums, and staged plays in the Toa Payoh town square.

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Its activities are deeply embedded in the locale, and encourage residents there to reflect on and discuss community and national issues. It is noteworthy that Toa Payoh is one of the few Singapore suburbs with a proper town square, a structural feature that makes such community-oriented activities like Drama Box’s even possible in the first place.

It remains to be seen whether the ground-up and grassroot efforts like Drama Box, together with other initiatives, will bring a long-term liveliness to these town centres. This is where government’s or the local authority’s role is needed—but as facilitators for what the community needs and wants, and not as a lead organiser of big events. ○