



ESSAY

Evidence-Based Approaches to Place Management

Finding Common Ground in Historic Ethnic Districts

How can cities manage multiple stakeholder demands and complex ground realities in historic ethnic districts? **Gurubaran Subramaniam** explains how researchers developed a mixed-methods, evidence-based approach in a study of Singapore's Little India to identify opportunities for positive interventions—an approach that could be relevant to similar districts elsewhere.

Globally, historic ethnic districts are often sources of both pride and frustration. Their rich heritage and street life bring a much-needed sense of authenticity and community to modern cities, and their vibrant public spaces boost cities' liveability, making them attractive also to tourists. For many, they are proud emblems of a communal as well as cosmopolitan identity. But such districts also tend to be densely built-up, with ageing infrastructure and limited space or scope for interventions due to conservation. With their polymorphous narratives, multitude of stakeholders and competing interests, these districts may also be flashpoints for social tensions, which can dominate the discourse over their planning and governance.

How can cities make sense of these complexities, address their challenges and build on their strengths? Researchers at the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) tackled these issues by developing a mixed-methods approach in a recent study focused on Singapore's Little India district. The study suggests some ways to understand such districts, to inform planning and governance interventions to develop a more inclusive, meaningful and vibrant space for all stakeholders.



Gurubaran Subramaniam is a researcher at the Centre for Liveable Cities.





Bustling street life, and a myriad of sights, sounds and scents compose Little India's peculiar allure.

Little India's Multifaceted Realities

Little India developed from the cattle trade that initially drew Indian immigrants to the area in the 1860s. After the abolition of the trade in the 1930s, commercial activities catering to Singapore's Indian community thrived, from goldsmiths and sari shops, to parrot astrologers and Ayurvedic medical shops. The introduction of public housing from the 1970s introduced a new, multi-ethnic residential population. Later on when Little India was gazetted a conservation area in 1989, many buildings were restored, but the area also became managed as a tourist space. Then from the 1990s, as Indian and Bangladeshi guest workers came to Singapore, Little India naturally became their favourite public space for gathering in the city. More recently, hotels, bars and co-working spaces catering to cosmopolitan locals and tourists have also started to sprout, drawn to the area's unique atmosphere.

Little India has thus served as the enduring centre of the country's minority Indian culture and heritage, and an icon of Singapore as a vibrant, multi-ethnic city. But following Singapore's first major riot in over 40 years in December 2013, public discourse about Little India grew increasingly dominated by a narrative of crowdedness, messiness and even volatility linked to South Asian guest workers who regularly gather there. In response to the riot and such perceptions of "disamenity" in Little India's public spaces, several measures were implemented, including heightened surveillance and crowd reduction. Much of Little India was also designated a "Liquor Control Zone"; with the sale and consumption of alcohol—deemed a factor in the riot—heavily restricted.

These measures received mixed reactions initially. For example, some merchants were unhappy about the impact on their business, while others welcomed the initiatives,

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including some guest workers. As one Bangladeshi worker told CLC researchers, “It's good that people cannot drink here anymore ... Last time we always see people quarrelling, fighting and stealing things. Now, with no alcohol and more police, it is much safer. We never had problems with the police because we don't make any trouble.”

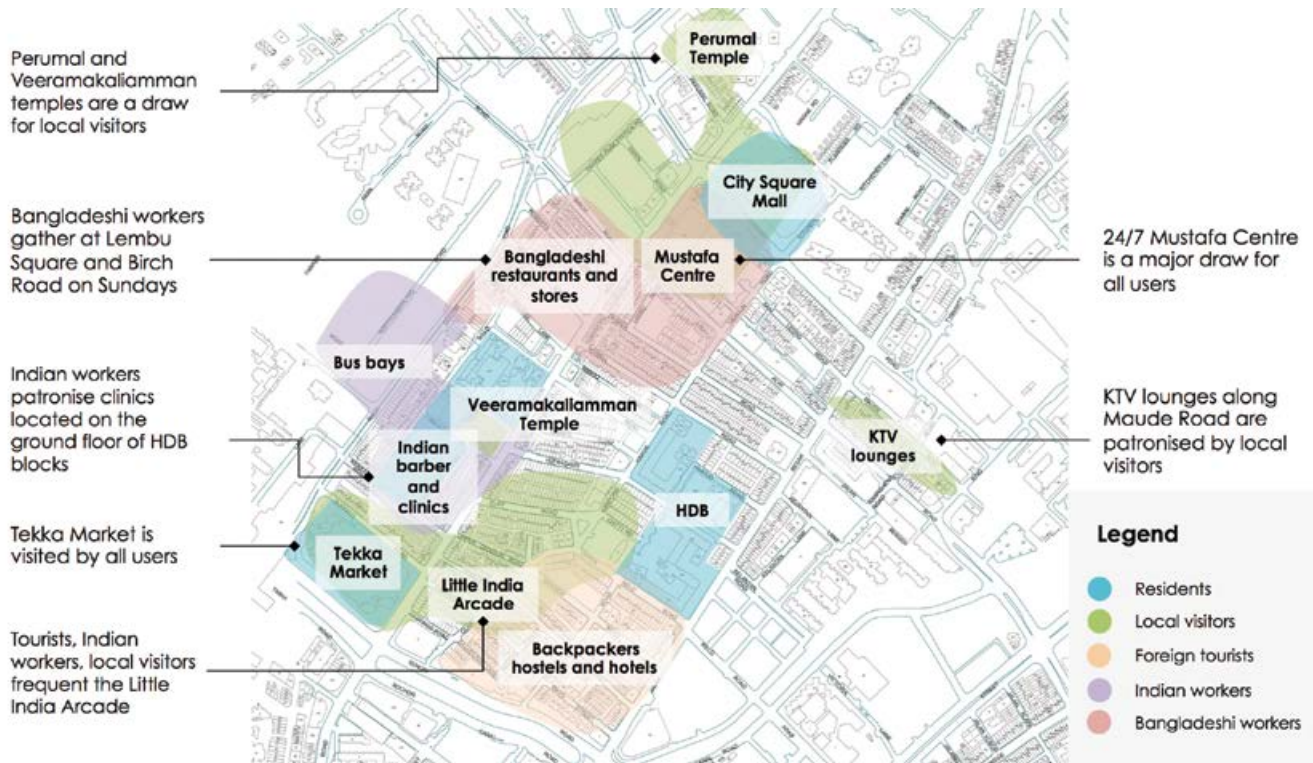
But recently, public debate was sparked again by a letter to the press in December 2016 suggesting Little India be further spruced up for tourists. Opponents contended that, to preserve Little India's unique charm as Singapore's most authentic historic district, its “organised chaos” is best left as it is without heavy-handed overhauls.

Developing a Mixed-Methods, Evidence-Based Approach

To formulate appropriate interventions in contested districts, planners and policymakers should eschew pre-conceived notions and instead try to holistically understand the complex ground realities. To do this in the case of Little India, CLC conducted a mixed-methods study to systematically



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- 01 Deepavali celebrations at Little India.
- 02 Tekka Market is popular with both nearby residents and visitors alike.
- 03 Interviews and ethnographic observations show how Little India is meaningful for diverse groups.

“Yes, it is inconvenient for
awhile, but it’s their only day off
and they need their space.”

– Local resident,
on Sunday guest worker crowds



unpack the interests of different stakeholders. In so doing, researchers also uncovered opportunities for improvements to public space and infrastructure.

CLC's research team collected and analysed a range of datasets from government agencies, and conducted interviews with over 300 respondents, including residents, local visitors, shopkeepers, business owners, tourists and migrant workers in Little India. The team also interviewed staff from the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association (LISHA) and other non-government organisations operating in Little India, like Transient Workers Count Too.

Ethnographic site observations were also conducted over a span of three months to gain an in-depth and grounded qualitative understanding of the spatial experience and environment in Little India. A visual survey of the type and mix of businesses and pedestrian counts at locations known to have high pedestrian flows were also carried out to gain granular understanding of Little India's commercial landscape, and to obtain a comprehensive sense of crowd flows over a typical weekday and weekend, respectively.

Key Findings

More than Guest Workers: Little India's Diverse Stakeholders

Although the presence of South Asian workers often dominates contemporary discourse about Little India, CLC's interviews and ethnographic observations found that Little India is a meaningful

place for other major stakeholders, specifically residents, merchants, Singaporean visitors, foreign tourists, as well as government agencies and non-government actors operating there. Mustafa Centre, a 24-hour shopping mall, and Tekka Centre, which houses a market, food stalls and clothing stores, were frequently cited as places respondents could get anything they needed. Textile houses, thrift stores, religious paraphernalia shops, quirky cafes, bohemian bars and chic co-working spaces that now pepper Little India have further endeared it to Singaporeans and visitors. For example, a Chinese Singaporean respondent said: "This is a place where you can find everything you could possibly need. You can have lunch at Race Course Road, buy vegetables at Tekka Market, exchange money at Mustafa Centre, watch a movie at City Square, then go to a cafe at Jalan Besar."

In Perspective: The Six-Hour Crowding "Problem"

Despite Little India's reputation for human congestion at its public spaces, researchers observed this happening for only about six hours a week, from 4 pm to 10 pm on Sunday evenings. This occurs when guest workers visit the district on their weekly day off. Even then, in interviews, many business owners, shopkeepers, tourists and local visitors perceived these crowds of guest workers as injecting life into the area. Eighty-six per cent of the 220 residents interviewed were also largely tolerant or even sympathetic towards the crowds of workers. As a resident in the Rowell Court public housing estate said, "Yes, it is inconvenient for awhile, but it's their only day off and they need their space."



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Interviewees with negative perceptions of the crowds articulated their grievances mainly in terms of a lack of space, rather than security or safety concerns.

Other Challenges: Vanishing Trades, Declining Authenticity?

Researchers also found a decline of traditional trades in Little India. While such trades are an important part of the area's image, visual surveys found that only 6% of the businesses in Little India are considered "Special Trades and Services" in Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) Use Classes: trades that are unique to Little India, such as henna artists, Ayurvedic clinics, garland makers and sari stores. Researchers also observed the emergence of "non-traditional" businesses such as backpacker hostels and upscale restaurants. Meanwhile, smaller traditional trades such as spice mills are vanishing as increasing rent and changing consumer preferences render them commercially unviable. While the disappearance of these trades can be attributed to the hand of the market, there are concerns that Little India is succumbing to gentrification. As Little India's variegated commercial landscape has been instrumental in its attraction and relevance to a wide range of people, the vulnerability of the smaller traditional trades would be worth addressing

CLC's study suggests that addressing the multiple concerns of historic ethnic districts like Little India need not be a zero-sum game.

to preserve its authenticity and resonance with its diversity of visitors.

Opportunities for Improvement

Crowdedness on the streets could be addressed as part of a broader multi-pronged strategy to improve Little India for the benefit of all its stakeholders while also alleviating the issue of crowdedness on Sunday evenings.

Develop a Long-Term Vision and Blueprint

Since 2006, the URA has led a taskforce of various public agencies to work with other stakeholders on improvements to the public spaces in Little India for the benefit of pedestrians, motorists and businesses. New interventions could build upon this foundation. Given the complexity of managing Little India, enhanced coordination



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would be crucial in preserving its safety, vibrancy and attractiveness. This can be achieved by developing a long-term vision and blueprint for Little India, with support from all key stakeholders. Apart from the physical dimension, this could encompass other elements such as placemaking and programming strategies.

Improve Pedestrian Infrastructure

Chief among the taskforce's mandates was to make Little India more pedestrian-friendly. This was achieved through infrastructural upgrades, such as widening of walkways, paving over open drains and improving lighting in backlanes. Since 2014, several roads in Little India have been temporarily or permanently pedestrianised. Apart from giving crowds more space to spill into during peak periods on Sunday evenings, researchers found that these road closures created a more convivial and vibrant atmosphere, and a more comfortable walking experience for all groups, at all times. Conversations with stakeholders and site observations revealed that these

enhancements made walking more pleasant and safe.

The study also highlighted opportunities for similar upgrades in other areas. Replicating these infrastructure upgrades would markedly enhance the walkability of the district. The expansion of pedestrianisation efforts would also alleviate the risk of a traffic accident—the trigger event of the 2013 riot. Such changes could come under a broader “car-lite” vision for the area. For instance, backlanes could be upgraded into alternative capillary thoroughfares to the more congested arterial roads. Additionally, the creation of a central plaza, by amalgamating vacant or underused land, could alleviate crowdedness on Sunday evenings while also providing a civic focal point for the area. Finally, designated loading and unloading points for delivery vehicles, as well as the gradual removal of surface parking lots, especially along roads with high human traffic, could be explored.

01 Little India's traditional trades are declining, unlike those catering to guest workers.

02 A section of Campbell Lane was permanently pedestrianised in November 2014.

Promote Community-Led Placemaking

Programming and place management strategies have complemented infrastructural enhancements. These include the annual Deepavali and Pongal street light-up and festivities, dance performances organised by the Indian Heritage Centre, and Project Oasis, an initiative managed by LISHA and supported by the Singapore Tourism Board to bring art installations and cultural events to the area. While businesses and local visitors interviewed agreed these efforts contributed vibrancy, these initiatives had to be driven from the ground up for them to be sustainable. An innovative calendar of community-led events could augment existing placemaking efforts. Such events could take place during off-peak periods, from Mondays to Saturdays, to attract a more diverse audience that would also help dispel the perception of Little India as an area of “disamenity”. Examples include street carnivals similar to the wildly popular Urban Ventures and Keong Saik Road Carnival (both organised by business operators along Keong Saik Road), pop-up stores such as Temporium, which enjoyed considerable success at Little India’s own Dunlop Street in 2012, and regular flea markets.

Support Little India’s Unique Trades

Measures to retain a diverse commercial landscape may be worth considering, as the loss of traditional trades could significantly compromise Little India’s authenticity and its appeal to key stakeholders. These could include creating designated zones for such endangered trades or awarding grants to sustain or revive them.

Sustaining Vibrant and Inclusive Districts

CLC’s study suggests that addressing the multiple concerns of historic ethnic districts like Little India need not be a zero-sum game where conservation, vibrancy and security are traded off against each other. Instead, infrastructural interventions, place management strategies and heritage conservation efforts can be complementary to make these districts relevant and attractive to a larger diversity of stakeholders. Even as the disamenity of public spaces resulting from the hordes of guest workers is a legitimate concern, attempts to manage this six-hours-a-week issue must be balanced with other stakeholders’ needs. Hence, the study demonstrates the value of a mixed-methods research approach for holistically understanding the ground realities and perspectives of the various stakeholders. A balanced view of the situation reveals the right opportunities for intervention, which allows more comprehensive local planning and governance.

The case of Little India underscores that the architect’s pen, the engineer’s calculator, the artist’s paintbrush, the policeman’s baton and the citizen’s initiative—all useful instruments in their own right—by themselves are inadequate for managing complex and contested spaces. But when brought together, they constitute a powerful inventory that yields far-reaching dividends. ○

01 Mural along Buffalo Road, created as part of the Artwalk Little India Festival.

02 Regular events organised by the Indian Heritage Centre cater to different crowds.

03 Urban Ventures is an initiative that aims to reimagine the public space on Singapore’s streets.





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