

BUILDING A PLAYGROUND FOR FOOD

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ASEAN neighbours often decry the small, urban city-state of Singapore as a fabricated landscape where culture has to be imported and is consumed like a luxury. Daniel Tan saw his homeland differently: as a teeming hotpot of the flavours and fusion of the country's Indian, Malay and Chinese immigrants bound together through the sharing of food, culture and precious little space. He also saw past the glitzy towers of Marina Bay and the city's emblematic Merlion, recognising that the oft-cited, pristine portrayal of Singapore excludes a lot of people — like stay-at-home moms, seniors, those trying to make ends meet and especially those struggling with mental health.

To combat these shortcomings, Daniel built a playground of food for these outsiders. Daniel's Food Playground is a social enterprise where home cooks gather together to teach over 4,000 visiting tourists and curious locals per year about Singapore's food and cultures through the preparation of some of the nation's treasured dishes like Hainanese chicken rice, *laksa*, *chai tow kway* and *kuih dadar* in a 19th century 'shophouse' in the heart of Chinatown.



In Asia, where public space often falls under the control of governments or large commercial interests, Daniel's heritage shophouse stands out as a self-sustaining community space where the celebration and dissemination of local food culture represents placemaking at its most fundamental level. In practice, non-government organisations (NGOs) in Asia often serve the critical role of creating infill 'public' spaces on a continent with no 'full democracies' (according to The Economist's Democracy Index, 2018).

FOOD AS A WAY OF BONDING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Daniel's cooking campus employs stay-at-home moms and seniors who are typically left out of the workforce in Singapore. Despite boasting one of the world's fastest rising economies, 63% of women are locked outside the workforce, citing family responsibilities as the top reason (according to the Manpower Research and Statistics Department, 2018).

The campus provides flexible schedules and doesn't hold classes on weekends so that women who would otherwise be isolated at home due to their child-rearing activities can contribute to society, preserve local heritage and earn income in one of the world's most unequal countries (according to the Oxfam index on efforts to tackle inequality, 2018).

"I tried to rejoin the workforce several times but it didn't pan out. Many companies were looking for full-time staff and, even for part-time jobs, the working hours didn't fit my schedule,"¹ said Lesley Lim, a 47-year old former corporate warrior who spent the last 16 years as a stay-at-home mom before gaining meaningful employment at Food Playground.



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Lesley's experience reminds me of the placemaking book *Palaces for the People*, in which author Eric Klineberg explores how social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarisation and the decline of civic life. While Klineberg visited Singapore in his book and waxed poetically over the city's inclusive public housing design, he missed out on visiting Food Playground, which he would've appreciated as a social infrastructure that brings people out of the home to be together in a meaningful way. After all, according to Klineberg, some of the critical ingredients for social cohesion are formed through the (1) pursuit of healthy activities and (2) shared learning in (3) safe spaces that are regularly accessible.

What's exciting here is that Food Playground's founder has adapted Klineberg's thesis into a sustainable business model and social enterprise. Before Food Playground, Daniel graduated with a master of business administration degree and spent a decade in the tourism industry before taking off on his own sojourn through Asia and Latin America. While on the road, Daniel became obsessed with taking cooking classes. He explains: "It's a good way to get to know a place: cooking-class teachers bring you to the markets. You get a crash course on local ingredients. It's a complete cultural immersion."² He was particularly inspired in Bangkok at a class held in the city's

forgotten slums that was called *Cooking with Poo*. "Don't worry," Daniel asserts, "the word *Poo* (ปู) means crab in Thai."

While visiting the Galapagos islands, Daniel survived a shipwreck. He returned home thinking of ways to integrate his passion for cooking with a social enterprise business model that would support the many Singaporeans he felt were being left out of his homeland's meteoric economic rise.

Though Daniel doesn't deny the difficulty and expense of operating a business in Singapore, he shows no signs of slowing down. His concept has won many awards including a Singapore Tourism Award and a World Food Travel Trekking Award, as well as praise from the Straits Times and The Business Times. In the future, Daniel plans to create more working opportunities for stay-at-home mothers and seniors by advocating to businesses to create more remote jobs.

Under-employed Singaporean women have found a great advocate in Daniel. He is sensitive to their plight and asserts that the biggest challenge his team faces is their lack of confidence. Helen Teo, one of Daniel's team members agrees: "The biggest obstacle is confidence. We have been out of touch with the corporate world."³ Some of the teachers struggle with leading a class in English, often reverting to 'Singlish' phrases which may



embarrass them even though these slips of the tongue seem to delight Food Playground customers.

Mary Ng argues that the typical thinking of a stay-at-home mom in Singapore is that she is someone who's lost touch with society — a kind of economic eunuch. "But people forget that a lot of us are well educated and that we take care of kids and ageing parents by choice."⁴ But now with opportunities like Food Playground, a Singaporean stay-at-home mom can have her carrot cake (i.e. *chai tow kway*) and eat it, too.



NOTES

1) Goy, P. (2015) *Food Playground reaches out to seniors and stay-at-home mums who get to pass on culinary skills*. [online] <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/food-playground-offers-cooking-classes-with-a-social-mission>

2) Lalley, H. (2017) *A life-changing year of travel inspired Daniel Tan, '11 (AXP-10), to start a social enterprise with sizzle*. [online] <https://www.chicagobooth.edu/magazine/daniel-tan-food-playground>

3) and 4) Ang, V. (2019) *Bringing mums back to the workforce*. [online] <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/life-culture/bringing-mums-back-to-the-workforce>