





REIMAGINING HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

Johannes Widodo (National University of Singapore)

Margaret Brooke (Heritage Hong Kong Foundation)

Ester van Steekelenburg (Urban Discovery)

PEOPLE AND PLACE

People and place are inseparable; a two-in-one. A place without people is dead, and people make spaces into places through their attachment. There are many ways for people to be attached to a place — from a mere glimpse, or a brief visit, to inhabitation. The longer one stays in a place, the more intense the interaction with the local community, and slowly attachments to the place form and grow into love. This process requires time; there are no quick fixes.

The intangible traditions and tangible forms carry the memory and the identity of a place. It is the 'DNA' of the place that needs to be preserved and nurtured amidst inevitable changes along the historical timeline. The management of permanence and change is the essence of heritage conservation.

The built environment reveals layers of the unique history of a city and its inhabitants. Placemakers value the soul of a city, and love to bring back life that may have gone missing over time. Old buildings and places have stories to tell, and placemaking has the power to reinvigorate that in new ways. Often historic parts of a city have unique and existing human-scale qualities that tend to get obscured by the longing for modernity in development. How to care for our heritage while moving ahead?

Placemaking comes with challenges and opportunities in any urban setting. However, Asia's historic city centres present a particularly complex environment — with a complex and a continuously shifting multi-ethnic population that have different values of identity and place, often beleaguered by complicated or even contested ownership of properties. Immense pressure on space and competing interests for the use of that space between different segments in the community may result in tensions between long-time residents and newcomers, old and young generations, and also between residents and visitors. Each of these groups may have different locational preferences. They may benefit from rising property prices, or not, they may use public facilities or not, they may use the space at different times of the day or year (day, night, seasonal), they may have a different sense of place (for some a temple, market or tree is a daily necessity, for some just a nice backdrop) and they may have a different sense of ownership and belonging (collective identity).

STORYTELLING

The story of a place is the story of the people and the community who love it. One person tells the other of the love stories about the relationship between people and place. The story is then handed down from generation to generation, fostering the memory of place.

The internet and social media have helped to spread and to perpetuate these stories. Dynamic social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, etc. help to spread information and attract interests across the globe, beyond static portals like Websites and Blogs. Travel Apps that work on multiple platforms help to connect local communities and places to global individual travellers and visitors.

PLACEMAKERS

To deal with this complex landscape, both the outcome and the process of placemaking should respond to the specific challenges of each historic district. Moreover, today's planners and place-makers need to do so with urgency. From Bangkok to Beijing, urban development takes place at such a fast pace that the soul of the city can get lost within one generation. In striving for modernity, old neighbourhoods are being demolished to make way for modern infrastructure and skyscrapers, often with little reference to the architectural or historical significance of the place. Gentrification is a global phenomenon, but in Asia, often the speed and scale ruthlessly disrupts the existing social and cultural urban fabric. It is not just buildings that are demolished to make place for taller structures, but whole streets which are erased from the map. And with the disappearance of the tangible, the intangible values comprising collective identity and memories of place also vanish. In Asia's historic districts, we see many examples of lost heritage, uprooted communities, and damaged streetscapes.

Compared to well-resourced municipal governments in the West, often local or district governments in Asian cities have limited resources or budget to manoeuvre or to make significant scale investments in the renovation and upgrading of buildings, infrastructure, or public space. With some notable exceptions, the local tax base is usually limited, political leverage constrained, and therefore it is typically property owners and developers that dictate development. In Asia's competitive land and real estate markets, a meaningful discussion about city planning boils down to economics. In older neighbourhoods, demolition and newly built is the norm, and one cannot simply blame property owners or developers. Without incentives, co-investment or a district-wide approach, it is difficult to build the business case for preservation. Their financial advisors will insist that by preserving a historic property, their return on investment is compromised, and while others may benefit, they carry a disproportionate financial loss. As a result, not all concepts that are successful in 'the West' may work in 'the East'. Solutions need to be tailored to the country and city context and the challenge is to look for creative and innovative ways to involve and entice multiple stakeholders, in particular, the ones that drive development.

“

Not all concepts that are successful in 'the West' may work in 'the East'. Solutions need to be tailored to the country and city context and the challenge is to look for creative and innovative ways to involve and entice multiple stakeholders.

”

STRATEGIES

The examples in this book show a variety of ways in which different parties in historical inner cities have found common ground to upgrade, revitalise, and reenergise their districts with an emphasis on the public space component. The cases presented here select a broad range of interventions and partnerships and highlight specific and contextual complexities. What we can learn from these cases is:

- **Start at street level** — Streets are the most common public space and typically the most accessible. People of all walks of life come together on the traditional street, it does not discriminate, it is an inclusive and democratic space, and it forms a neutral location for encounters between

people from all walks of life. In dense inner-city districts where more and more shared space in and beyond buildings is privatised or commercialised, the risk is for spaces to become introverted and exclusive. Therefore it is imperative to protect the street level and keep it open, walkable, extroverted, and inclusive for all. The cases show convincingly how simple initiatives like street sign improvement, storytelling projects and pedestrianisation schemes can have a big impact.

- **Expand to district level** — To make real change happen in historic city centres, there needs to be a district-wide approach. Some streetscapes are so unique — architecturally or historically — that they even have a value beyond the district they are in, often thanks to their distinctiveness, identity, and sense and spirit of place. These places, therefore, merit protection and investment not just from those that own or develop the properties, but also from the residents, entrepreneurs, and visitors that directly or indirectly benefit from the value of its uniqueness. The direct financial return of upgrading these places (both the public and private components) may not always make short term fiscal sense, but the long term economic, social, environmental, and cultural impact is undeniably positive. The cases from Jakarta and Penang show that area-based schemes, with a clear vision and fair rules, can create attractive value propositions, whereby developers, public or private, are keen to participate.
- **Embrace public, private, and people partnerships** — The public sector may be able to take care of master planning, setting regulations, and making public space accessible, but private developers, homeowners, and community caretakers are needed to co-invest. Not just in maintaining and renovating their properties concerning the historic urban fabric but also to co-invest in the design, programming, and maintenance of public spaces that connect them.
- **Appreciate historical narrative** — In historic districts, placemaking without storytelling is meaningless. For the (re)designing and programming of a public space, it is essential to understand its narrative and unveil the different historical layers of place; the geographic location may be the same, but its use, its architectural style, and its story may have changed over time. Multiple times perhaps. Only by putting a place into its historical context, can it contribute to a sense of continuity, and give identity to a place. Storytelling encourages people towards place attachment and can provide an inclusive anchor for people in the community (from residents to street vendors) to connect and relate to a place. It can also uncover the strengths and assets within communities — including skills, associations, and cultural resources — and mobilise these for future development. sociations, and cultural resources - and mobilize these for future development.

- **Understand layers of place identity** — Collective identity in historic cities is not uniform, it is layered. The multiple layers are defined by socioeconomic status, ethnic background, education, religion, age, and other factors. The identities of specific communities are unique and exclusive, and so are their perceptions and values of a place. So for successful and inclusive placemaking, an intimate understanding of these local communities is required. Cultural mapping is a key tool to build trust and create inclusive processes and, in turn, inclusive public spaces. This cannot be a one-time engagement exercise but rather, a continuous process throughout the whole journey, from conceptualisation to implementation. Only then, can the design of public space accommodate the different layers of time and place.
- **Heritage is more than just buildings** — In many Asian cities, ‘heritage’ has long been associated with monuments, referring to publicly owned or ‘listed’ buildings. However, heritage is much more than that; it is streetscapes, open squares, bridges, tunnels, ordinary buildings, small shops, narrow streets, and the memories, recipes, customs, crafts, trades, and festivals that live in these places. Buildings have no meaning without their context, so the preservation of tangible assets has no real impact without also tackling the intangible aspects. When it comes to management and programming of historic streetscapes and districts, the job of city planners, placemakers, and urban designers becomes intertwined with the domain of cultural officers, archaeologists, historians, conservators, educators, and creatives. They complement the technical expertise needed to comprehend, articulate fully, and interpret the value, significance, and relevance of historic buildings and streetscapes in today’s urban context. Public spaces offer great opportunities for storytelling, to keep memories and identities alive that may no longer be there physically, and make them relevant for today’s dynamic urban environment.



Buildings have no meaning without their context, so the preservation of tangible assets has no real impact without also tackling the intangible aspects.



- **The community at heart** — Voices from various communities play a crucial role in creating inclusive, friendly, and meaningful spaces. In the vastly diverse melting pot of co-existing cultures in Asia’s historic districts, it is essential to acknowledge and realise that community representation

is of the utmost importance and goes beyond what one would typically assume it would entail. Placemaking is not a product, it is a process, and the community needs to be at the heart of it. The cases in this chapter show that to create loveable places; conversations need to go beyond the superficial level of meeting community leaders and dive deep to discover the intricacies of the inner connective tissue that makes up the urban fabric. The approach needs to include ordinary individuals, shopkeepers, and street sellers and allow them to champion and lead the process of urban change for their favourite streets and squares, developing a new way towards community-led placemaking.