

REFRESHING THE HISTORIC SINGAPORE RIVER

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Once the centre of entrepôt trade in Singapore, the Singapore River was cleaned up in the 1990s and has since evolved into a popular lifestyle destination filled with hotels, shops, restaurants and waterfront housing. Restored shophouses and warehouses flank the river, giving the area a unique and eclectic charm. Set against the signature skyline of Singapore's Central Business District (CBD), the river stretches three kilometres long and has three distinct zones. Boat Quay next to the Central Business District is home to many waterfront dining establishments. The middle zone, Clarke Quay, is bustling with nightlife and entertainment. Further upstream, Robertson Quay has a quieter ambience for residential and hotel use.

FINDING THE RIGHT APPROACH

In 2010, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), Singapore's national planning and conservation authority, initiated efforts to identify a more effective placemaking approach to further realise the precinct's potential as a major destination. Finding the right line of action took two years.

It involved engaging placemaking experts to assess the feasibility of forming a partnership between the public and private sectors and identifying suitable champions to do so. As part of the process, a rigorous approach was taken to identify key issues in charting the river precinct's future and to engage various stakeholders in understanding the importance of placemaking, and the value of working together.

The initial conversations led to the formation of a voluntary, informal Singapore River Task Group, made up of both public and private sector stakeholders. The group was co-chaired by Mdm Fun Siew Leng, Chief Urban Designer of URA and Mr. Colin Wang, former General Manager of the Grand Copthorne Waterfront. They demonstrated a shared commitment to building a strong public-private partnership, and the group served as a sounding board to provide ideas and support for initial plans to revive the precinct.

Several teething issues that tarnished the image of Singapore River for many years were quickly brought to the table. One such issue was touting and over-charging at Boat Quay. In response the group launched A Better Singapore River campaign in December 2011, encouraging Boat Quay tenants to sign pledges to adopt good business practices. Hotels helped to market the efforts and agencies carried out regular patrols to warn businesses against these activities.

The campaign was a success, and the effectiveness of the platform paved the way for a stronger commitment from stakeholders to set up a more permanent group. This led to the formation of the Singapore River One (SRO) in 2012, a non-profit company dedicated to the place management of the river precinct.



Since 2012, SRO has worked closely with government agencies and its stakeholders to improve the river precinct's image through quick-win projects. SRO also refreshed the river's appeal through active programming ranging from river festivals to regular street closures. Riding on the positive change, membership increased from 12 members in 2012 to 121 in early 2020.

Charting the way forward in placemaking, the Singapore River became the first precinct to come on board a pilot Business Improvement District (BID) programme that was launched in 2017. Under the programme, the Singapore Government provides matching grants to encourage business / property owners to pool together their resources to manage their precincts in a more sustainable way.

LESSONS LEARNED

SRO's active efforts to shape the river precinct over the years offer useful lessons for effective placemaking, especially for an area

with such a diverse range of stakeholders and needs.

DO'S

- **Develop a clear vision.** The vision and plan for the area should consider the identity, activities, and uses within the precinct, and reflect what the place means to the community. SRO's first five-year business plan focused on active programming and projects which create a stronger identity for the precinct, such as the Singapore River Festival. New murals along the underpasses also enlivened the connections between the three quays of the river. Initiatives were also tailored for each quay, such as regular weekend car-free zones at Circular Road / Boat Quay to increase foot traffic, and a new playground at Robertson Quay for children. To draw more visitors, precinct and business promotions were rolled out, tapping on a range of marketing and communication channels.

- **Engage the community.** It is the people who use a place that can offer the most valuable perspective and support. SRO regularly consults its group of diverse stakeholders ranging from landlords to business owners and residents. An open channel of communication (through one-to-one sessions, newsletters, town hall meetings, etc.) is maintained to encourage dialogue.
- **Start with simple, short term actions.** These can help test ideas and demonstrate positive change. Quick-win projects such as the anti-touting campaign carried out during SRO's infancy saw a significant reduction in touting and helped galvanise support and inspire stakeholders to do more together.

DON'TS

- **Don't plan for one-time events.** Entice people to keep coming. Beyond comfort and image, it is active programming that will attract visitors. Major SRO events such as the Saint Patrick's Day Street Festival and the Singapore River Festival have attracted more than 100,000 people with each edition. The regular weekend street closures at Circular Road (initiated by SRO) have led to increased footfall and a 20% increase in sales.
- **Don't only invest in the short-term.** Build strong partnerships for the future. SRO has worked closely with the government and its diverse stakeholder groups to drive initiatives together, for example, to revamp the outdoor dining areas along the Boat Quay waterfront. URA undertook the design and implementation of the project in close collaboration with SRO, who took the lead to engage and consult the stakeholders over the course of the project. Because of the strong public-private partnership, significant improvements were made possible, and more stakeholders have come on board to join as members.

THE NEXT STEPS

Since SRO joined the pilot BID programme in 2017, it has continued to pursue substantial plans in shaping the precinct. As part of its four-year business plan (2017-2021), it will focus on promoting the full breadth of offerings and activities for the river, enhancing visitors' experience, as well as supporting and creating value for property owners and businesses.

