Voices of the People
The Making of Civic Fora

by

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Abstract

Singapore Society has seen two parallel kinds of transformation throughout the course of the post-Independence decades. First, there is the increasing integration of a diverse population within the evolving framework of the nation-state. In the process, the emphasis has been on economic development and nation building. The success story of economic development is quite clear, although it should never be taken for granted. The story of nation-building – not the same as state-building – is more ambiguous.

More than three decades after Independence, there are periodic debates on whether Singapore has become a nation, the doubts being raised by leaders at the highest level. And there have been periodic official efforts at defining and promoting “national values” such as “Shared Values” in the early 90s.

Other than these state-led attempts to chart the course of nation-building, we observe sporadic and spontaneous instances where sentiments very akin to a sense nationalism – of belonging and civic consciousness, or even public spirit – arise from a fledgling civil society movement, non-government groups and individuals who acted on their own accord to debate on national issues. Indeed, in order to be sustainable in the long term, Singapore society need to reclaim her submerged spiritual and cultural landscape mopped aside by three decades of depoliticisation and de-historicisation.

What are the material manifestations of the ideals of a vibrant civil society thriving in a more open and transparent political climate in Singapore’s political coming-of-age? Is there a space for Singaporeans to work out – to affirm, contest, debate, negotiate, and in the process, reinvigorate – the multi-faceted meanings of being Singaporean?

This thesis explores and attempts to manifest these pertinent issues via the design vehicle of “Civic Fora – in the Making”. By contextualising the socio-political in the urban and spatial terms, the design investigations of the notions of “Public Place” and “Civic Architecture” underscore the process of creating a long-awaited avenue for citizens to collectively redefine and shape the political norms and particular way of life which make each community the social entity that it is.

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