

WORKING PAPERS

Exploring Informal Social & Cultural Activism in Singapore: A Study on Local Ground-up Initiatives

By Danielle Hong

Danielle Hong
Research Associate at ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute
E-mail: daniellehyh@gmail.com

The ISEAS Working Paper Series is published electronically by ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute.
© Copyright is held by the author(s) of each Working Paper.

Papers in this series are preliminary in nature and are intended to stimulate discussion and critical comment. The Editorial Committee accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed, which rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be produced in any form without permission. Comments are welcomed and may be sent to the author(s).

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author(s), "Title," ISEAS Working Paper on "...", No. #, Date, www.iseas.edu.sg

Series Chairman

Tan Chin Tiong

Series Editor

Lee Hock Guan

Editorial Committee

Ooi Kee Beng

Daljit Singh

Terence Chong

Francis E. Hutchinson

INTRODUCTION

Cai Yinzhou is a 27-year-old who lives in Singapore's red light district and runs walking trails around Geylang, aimed at showcasing the locale through a "social lens" which raises awareness of the various migrant communities living and working there. Alongside his Geylang Adventures business, he also runs several social initiatives such as providing free haircuts and postage-paid letters for migrant workers – with the intention of building platforms to help locals communicate and interact with them as "fellow human beings".¹

In the second half of year 2016, the Singapore Government announced setting up a \$25 million fund for the Our Singapore Fund (OSF) for ground-up initiatives. In the spirit of nation-building, the OSF was meant to fulfil three objectives: build up the spirit of caring and resilience, nurture a can-do spirit and promote unity and sense of being a Singaporean."² Its predecessor, the SG50 Celebration Fund was allocated \$9 million and supported 400 community-based initiatives.³

What is the correlation between Geylang Adventures and OSF? The OSF seeks to continue the state's nation-building exercise via the ideology of an active citizenry, underpinned by a self-help approach which occasionally externalizes social welfare demands onto individual community groups. This is done via outsourcing ideas and programmes to gain greater levels of social capital, creating self-sustaining communities which are enabled to respond to their own needs. Yet at the same time, the state takes on a co-optive approach to these ground-up initiatives, inasmuch as they help to enhance state legitimacy.

The term 'ground-up initiative' has thrown up several synonyms and meanings in the Singaporean context. Are they merely community-based initiatives that disburse social welfare provisions? Seen as both pro and anti-establishment, the term is a catch-all phrase to describe a citizen-based organisational model and/or activity advocating for a community's needs.

Defining the Study

In the permutations of its form, this paper defines collectives such as Geylang Adventures as a breed of informal social and cultural activism. Theoretically rooted in both new social movement analysis and urban studies, cultural activism uses "art and creative practices to disrupt commonly held assumptions and expectations, often by forging alternative spatial imaginaries or meanings" (Buser et al, 2013:2).

Ideologically, the above collectives identify with the "commoning movement" which seeks to regain common wealth, both material and political through implementing participatory processes. Thematically, these collectives address issues of urbanisation, nationhood, sustainability and the building of communities. Within the uneasy government-civil society relationship, they posture themselves (in a spectrum) as both community partner to opposing

¹ <http://news.asiaone.com/singapore/free-haircuts-and-new-friends-geylang>

² <http://www.straitstimes.com/business/economy/singapore-budget-2016-our-singapore-fund-of-up-to-25-million-to-support-citizen-led>

³ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/govt-to-fund-post-sg50-ground-up-projects>

government imperatives. The level of social capital each collective acquires leads to possibilities for expansion and collaboration.

Functionally, these ground-up collectives differ from conventional non-profit ones in that they do not possess a legal structure; being neither a society, charitable trust or limited company. Some may choose to evolve into these types in order to gain credibility and remain sustainable. Ground up initiatives here are defined as; (i) self-initiated and organically formed to respond to a social issue or injustice, (ii) possessing no initial legal status⁴ and (iii) whose activities or programmes benefit a community as selected by the collective. This paper will also alternatively refer to them as informal collectives.

There are an estimated hundred odd such informal collectives operating online and offline, self-organising events and outreach efforts to spearhead causes ranging from arts and heritage to social welfare. Their increasingly visible presence and reach on online platforms bears significance. Are they merely lifestyle initiatives touching upon community concerns, or are these ground-up initiatives part of a new wave of civil society groups engaging in a new form of social activism?

This exploratory paper aims to examine this breed of informal social activism. It first explores the motivations for its genesis and growth. Secondly, it explores the constraints and opportunities facing the model.

Civil Society and going beyond the Banyan Tree

There are two considerations in which the discussion on ground up initiatives will be built. The first is the evolution of civil society-state relations thus far, and the changing strategies of state control on the civic space. The second is the current youthful generation that is behind these initiatives, and what its social milieu dictates.

Singapore's civil society can be said to have experienced changes from pre-independence to present times (Lee, 2005). Pre-independence, it was characterised by strong and autonomous citizen participation. Post-independence saw the start of legal and extra-legal limits to all political and social activities. The third phase saw a rekindling of interest in liberalising the cultural sphere from the mid-1980s, and what was envisioned as a more consultative democracy under ex-Prime Minister Goh. Post 2000s, the appointment of current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong would also see a new lexicon revolving around "civic participation".

In explaining the contesting notions of civil society, Chong (2005) looks at the different paradigms of society-state relations and their politics. Those that bear discussion are as follows. The first is that of a Civic Society in which "the emphasis of citizenship is not on individual rights, but civic and national duty" (ibid, 283). Here the state judiciously controls

⁴ Although in a bid to remain sustainable over time, many will choose to opt for a legal status as a society or a limited company eventually.

the civil society space such that it results in an “ideologically congruent society” with little competition and need for agency. The second, an Intellectual Society “seeks the accumulation of cultural capital not to perpetuate dominant ideology but to challenge it” through alternative constructions of knowledge, histories and ideologies to influence the identity construction of citizenship (ibid, 286). The third, a Consulted Public is the construction of more state mechanisms to encourage public consultation to “institutionalise the process of feedback...establish clear frameworks within which advocacy, protest and dissent are depoliticised” (ibid, 289).

It is only in the fourth notion the Active Citizen where we can see the growth of ground up initiatives closely adhere to. Here, active citizenry is complementary to civic society where “activism is apolitical and grounded in community-based work” (ibid, 291). While it is a space of alleged greater agency, the active citizenry is also under the purview of a corporatist state model.

The appearance of civil society in Singapore since the 1920s started with associational activity such as ethnic communities ranging from an anti-opium lobby to chambers of commerce being set up (Gillis, 2005:73). More importantly, the Societies Act was also introduced in this period, primarily to control secret societies. Post World War Two saw the rise of left wing organisations, some of which were associated with the communist party. Student activism also made its debut in Singapore from 1948, with students being involved in the anti-colonial movement, as well as those advocating Chinese education and/or ethnic Chinese interests (ibid, 161). Moving forward, community centres controlled by the PAP after 1959 played a crucial role as a network for policy transference and government ideology (ibid, 181). These government-controlled grassroots organisations, which accounted for 20% of the organisations registered under the Societies Act, gradually co-opted and depoliticised civil society.

The political sphere has been defined by Chua (2011:17) as being framed by two logics; a collective memory of repression and dissent as well as liberal economic individualism, coupled with individual rights – no matter how legally circumscribed. It is within those perimeters that civil society resides in, “where choice is given greatest freedom as subjective preferences, as self-expression of lifestyles and identities” (ibid).

The AWARE saga in 2009 called for a reevaluation of civil society politics split between the issues of the place of religion, gay rights, citizenry mobilization and the increasing liberal voice in Singapore (Chong, 2011:6). The episode showcased ruptures within state-endorsed constructions of nationhood and exposed the inability of society to handle such an “occasional political-ideological conflict” (ibid).

The 2011 General Elections brought with it a “new normal” of politics, characterised as a higher level of conditionality in trust between the ruling party and an emboldened citizenry (Soon and Koh, 2017). This perspective applauds the governance style evolving from a confrontational stance to a collaborative one, alongside a willingness to co-create policies. Other contributors to the volume who align to the communitarian model of civil society call for “thoughtful and sustainable civic activism” (ibid, xxxi) among youth. This can be angled

towards effective service learning, fulfilling both a self-definition of their individual psyches and a sustainable form of volunteerism.

Prakash (2016) also provides an updated understanding of civil society-state relations, in which he examines the PAP regime's strategies of control. As informed by Barr (2010), these are tools of repression and co-optation, resulting in the "self-monitoring and self-restraint by all elements of civil society". Prakash's thesis on the constant calibration is also informed by George's (2012) concept of calibrated coercion; softer and subtler approaches aimed at minimising political cost and maximising political control (Prakash, 2016:42). The new calibration is thus a calibration of various strategies; coercion, co-optation and liberalisation in tandem.

The Millennial Wave

The second consideration is the generation powering many of these ground-up initiatives. Considered to be in the youth age bracket⁵, this generation represents a wave of Singaporeans who have grown up in the 1990s and have been exposed to both the success and shortcomings of formal NGOs such as AWARE, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) or Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), which have gained visible presence for their work in advocating gender equality and migrant rights.

As such, while younger collectives may have political agendas, they tend not to be explicit about them, positioning themselves more in the realm of cultural and social activism. They identify themselves as informal groups delving into the preservation of local heritage, sustainability of resources and strengthening social capital in local communities. Being focused on domestic development, they utilise local funding and resources without seeking overseas support, although the ideas and models of change are often inspired from abroad.

Indonesian collectives offer a vibrant, competitive, networked and transnational counterpart to Singaporean social collectives. Their experience delves from a national history intertwining art and activism "generating a range of "very particular cultural practices emphasizing collectivity and community engagement" (Crosby, 2010:1). Art and social collectives such as Ruangrupa,⁶ KUNCI Cultural Studies Centre⁷ and lifepatch⁸ identify themselves as "citizen initiatives" developing theoretical knowledge, art content to multi-disciplinary processes aimed at developing local human and resource potential and capacity building. While aiming at domestic community development, they are also very much transnational in nature in seeking collaborations and funding.

Yet, they are similarly constrained by global shifts. Frequently denied access to real economic and political agency, they are also socialised into conventional political, ethical and moral habitus. Coupled with an increasing period of extended adolescence, this has resulted

⁵ Defined by the National Youth Council to be below the age of 35.

⁶ <http://ruangrupa.org/15/about-ruru/>

⁷ <http://kunci.or.id/about-us/>

⁸ <http://lifepatch.org/Lifepatch>

in their economic isolation, a lack of political power and access to political representation (Ginwright & James, 2002).

The context in which they are allowed to contest for ideas is held in perpetual flux. The dilemma of various sources of placation has also been thought to result in efforts being utilised and fitted under labels of community development and change without resistance (Ginwright, Noguera & Camarota, 2005).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Twenty individuals involved in ground-up initiatives were interviewed. They were chosen through purposive sampling to understand the breadth of local collectives aimed at reaching out to the youth demographic. The majority were founders, though others involved in different capacities were also engaged.

Half of them are involved in the artistic and cultural spheres, producing socially-driven outputs via a variety of artistic mediums such as performance art, photography, curation, even literature. The other half are involved primarily in the social sector, again using a plethora of mediums such as urban farming, social media, even the makerspace to achieve various social objectives.

The method of inquiry used was semi-structured personal interviews lasting no more than two hours, diving into their aspirations, aims and thought processes. Secondary sources include material outputs such as creative works and programme collateral.

A short bio of the interviewees can be found in the Annex.

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Polanska & Chimiak's study on Polish civil society which examines informal and self-organised activism provides a framework to understand the motivations of social activists in choosing to create and belong in un-institutionalised initiatives. These are: the social, ideological, political and functional dimensions (2016: 669). In this paper, all four dimensions will be used to analyse not only the motivations, but the constraints and opportunities of these ground-up initiators.

THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The ideological dimension is identified by Polanska & Chiniak as an "ideal or vision they consider worth pursuing" originating from an alternative worldview (2016:670). Broadly, the three themes, or points of discontent, that the collectives engage with are aspects of urbanisation and nationhood: the preservation of places, sustainability and engaged communities.

These points of discontent are also echoed by Harvey's call to taking back the city (2008), in which the processes of urbanisation are dictated by the capitalist dynamic, and where the quality of urban life is a commodity. Consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries are aspects of urban political economy, and it is the individual's right to redress the situation to take back democratic control over these processes.

Complementary to these ideals is Bollier's⁹ vision of a commons movement. The movement aims to regain common wealth, both material and political. The goal is to achieve "effective social control of abusive, unsustainable market behavior". The desire of implementing participatory processes through crowdsourcing, collaborations and circular economic models are manifestations of cultural activism, with the intention of 'commoning' (2016:3).

Preservation of Places

In Singapore, a constantly shifting physical landscape mirrors the economic pace which the state has designated. Recent civic initiatives to save the heritage of numerous pieces of land such as the Bukit Brown cemetery, the Rochor area or even the Dakota neighbourhood question the impetus for urban development.

In this context, the lack of ownership over physical spaces and accordingly, whitewashing of alternative historical memories tied to places has led to forms of national amnesia. Civic groups have sought to rectify this - one example of an unprecedented coalition was over the Bukit Brown redevelopment, which brought activists, environmentalists, academics and artists together. All Things Bukit Brown, SOS Bukit Brown, the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) and Nature Society worked in tandem to initiate strategies such as holding a public petition, urging a moratorium and proposing the cemetery to be a UNESCO World Heritage site (Huang, 2014)

Besides co-funding the advocacy group, SOS Bukit Brown in 2011, Post Museum, comprising of Jennifer Teo and Woon Tien Wei, also conducted guided walks around the cemetery for the next two years, and produced *The Bukit Brown Index*, an artwork, in 2014. It is a collection of texts, objects and artworks used in the campaign to save the cemetery from 2011-2014, including a 'supernatural map' and a census of the deceased soon to be exhumed.¹⁰

"The Bukit Brown project started not because it was an art project, but because we really wanted to save the space. And along the way, we were thinking whether making it into art would push the agenda further, because many of the issues were what we were interested in as artists - how people come together, activism, government and citizen contestation, national identity and ownership of space." (Jennifer Teo)

⁹ <http://thenextsystem.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/DavidBollier.pdf>

¹⁰ Post Museum, <https://postmuseum.wordpress.com/tag/bukitbrown/>

Another younger social collective, started as a one-man mission by Cai Yinzhou, seeks to advocate for the diverse heritage and community working and living in Geylang. Geylang Adventures, which started in 2014, conducts walking trails around the area and also initiates events and activities for the Chinese and Bangladeshi migrant worker communities working and living there. These have ranged from giving free haircuts to badminton matches with them.

“I don’t want to help them (migrant workers) because they don’t need it. I want to break down barriers and encourage social interaction. Humanising them is key. (On Geylang) I don’t even care whether it works or not, it is just about taking ownership of my space.” (Cai Yinzhou)

A prerequisite for taking ownership is intimate knowledge of one’s space, including not just the physical terrain, but the communities, their social activities as well as intersections that take place. Only then can the understanding of social issues surface, such as Cai’s take on Geylang:

“The common stereotypes were that people go to Geylang to visit prostitutes or to eat good food. But Geylang is an ecosystem. My neighbours used to be prostitutes, and they would talk to me after school...I want to shift people out from a tourist perspective. This is Singapore, and Geylang is an integral part of it - if there are policy changes, clampdowns, these affect you as a Singaporean too.”

Sustainability

A common definition for sustainable development is development that meets present needs without compromising the needs of future generations. Several camps that have been borne out of this include the environmentalists, sustainability advocates emphasising cost-benefit analyses, advocates focusing on equity issues and those focusing on the cognitive and ethical dimensions.¹¹ The collectives interviewed also fall under the third and fourth types.

Ground Up Initiative collective’s (GUI) vision is to nurture ownership and responsibility towards society through understanding one’s symbiotic connection with the environment. This connection, be it spiritual and psychological, allows for collective action to take place. Through programmes involving urban farming, carpentry and experiential environmental education, GUI reaches out to a wide range of individuals and groups with different agendas.

“What I’m doing is not about running a garden, programmes or farming. It’s about teaching the meaning of ‘rootedness’...people must feel inspired by what you’re doing. It can’t just be gardening, it’s about the ideas behind it.”
(Tay Lai Hock, Founder)

¹¹ <http://ldachair.ucdavis.edu/LDA-faculty-docs/SW/Local%20Planning%20LP%20111-117%20Wheeler.pdf>

Also, Alexius Yeo is an advocate for the local urban farming movement, having worked with Edible Garden City (EGC) in 2013 as an urban farmer before setting up his own socially-minded business, Carbon InQ in 2015. A social enterprise, EGC designs, builds and maintains edible landscapes. Yeo's business's social mission remains aligned with EGC, but with a stronger educational slant.

“My slant towards education is to get the young generation in schools to get into contact with nature. I want to expose them to organic farming, where the connection is different. It's not just about petting rabbits... This whole connection-disconnection...we are now so disconnected from things.”
(Alexius Yeo)

Besides reaching out to schools, Yeo also opens up his home garden to conduct free workshops for avid gardeners under his Project 33 initiative.

“I wanted to start doing something that gives back to the community. For me, it was natural to convert it into a farm and open it to my neighbours. The hope is to inspire people to convert their homes into farms.” (Alexius Yeo)

Similarly operating in the green space, Foodscape Collective was borne in 2015 out of a vision for discovering and documenting the local food ecosystem, and in doing so, foster a passionate thriving network.

“Foodscape looks at food sourcing, sustainability, but also a sense of pride in local produce. Specific to food, but not produce. We are interested in what can be grown. So while I'm interested in food security and farming, someone else is into food waste. It's also about producing knowledge about stuff, making sure people can participate in that.” (Ng Huiying, Co-Founder)

Such a broad vision pans out through three core activities: visiting gardens (both private and public), mapping them out on a crowdsourced platform as a knowledge repository, and collaborating through linking individuals and organisations up to prevent food wastage.

Engaged Communities

While being focused on a certain cause, such as environmental sustainability or the preservation of cultural heritage, a commonality across groups has been the need to create a communal space - not always as a by-product, but as its core mission. For example, The Hidden Good (THG) is a media outlet (mainly Youtube-based) which works with youth to amplify social activation projects to showcase altruistic acts of Singaporeans.

“We are a group of young people who want to contribute in a way that resonates with us. What we do is to redefine what giving back looks like. It doesn't have to be going to an old folks home, it's in a language that they (the youth) understand e.g. social media.” (Wu Jiezhen)

With about 200 youth volunteers who create and conceptualise all of their projects, THG has covered locally pertinent issues such as National Service, xenophobia, poverty, family life and everyday heroes in their online and offline projects. While their ability to sustain the dedication of these volunteers is surprising, THG's director believes otherwise:

“People want to contribute, and not because they get anything out of it, but because they see the value in it and the impact it has. And it's also organic. We don't do recruiting, I think our work speaks for itself.” (Wu Jiezhen)

While the impact of these projects on social bonds remain unclear, it is the sense of belonging in a community and opportunities for individual agency through participation that matters.

Take Participate In Design (PID), a non-profit which tries to answer what it means to have meaningful public engagement regarding Singapore's built environment. Founded by two architects, they saw a gap in the need for design projects that were also socially good.

“Is there a way to contribute back to the community? When we started...we wanted to build relationships. Look at the state of social capital, which is very low. It is a barrier for now. But we can create platforms to get people to know each other.” (Jan Lim)

With the vision of “helping neighbourhoods and public institutions design with people and not for people”¹², PID offers a participatory design methodology (consisting of 21 design tools and principles), which has since been tested in areas such as Aljunied, Tampines and MacPherson. Residents see the ‘fruits’ of their participation in the design process in alterations made to public spaces.

Changing perceptions on non-tokenistic public engagement has been one goal already achieved, for both residents and decision-makers such as grassroots leaders. As co-founder Mizah Rahman puts it:

“We want to show the residents that after they (HDB) has built it, that this is really what you were talking about...and to have introduced (to the public servants) new ways through design, ways of organising pop-ups and workshops that there are new ways of doing things.”

It can be posited that these manifestations of ideals are descriptive of New Social Movements (NSMs), moving away from “instrumental issues of industrialism to the quality of life issues of postmaterialism”, in that the civic sphere is now the locus of social protest (Picardo, 1997). NSMs also question representative democracies, and in doing so, advocate cooperative styles of social organisation.

¹² <http://participateindesign.org/>

Here, the political ideology of choice is cultural activism, defined as “a set of creative practices and activities presenting alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries to challenge relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship”. It is also typically “framed by diverse concerns around social and environmental justice, authoritarianism, capitalism, and consumption” (Buser & Arthurs, 2012:2).

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

Keeping in mind the move from an era of pure coercion using legal tools such as the Internal Security Act, the current civil society-state relationship operates with the latter using calibrated liberalisation, co-option and coercive measures in tandem (see Prakash, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, since political protests involve too many restrictions, the artistic sphere has always acted as a proxy for political encounters. While providing more breathing room and space, the paradox of the Renaissance City Singapore is that while the government tolerates artistic protest in the name of Singapore’s recent cultural turn (Luger, 2016:208), it also places restraints on the authenticity of activist encounters.

In response, the posturing of these collectives is a combination of amelioration of community needs and opposition to the current political climate. Each collective makes a strategic choice in either aligning with existing OB markers and if or when to take up state funding. With increasingly diverse pockets of funding available for community-based projects, state funding is now but one option.

Methodology as Strategy

The form of participatory art has been used increasingly by local art collectives to bring about empowerment, agency and to strengthen communities. Inspired by Tang Da Wu’s Artist Village, which opened in 1988, working towards opening artistic processes of artistic mediums to the public and engaging them in discussions of the political kind, both Post Museum and Brack exist on a spectrum as alternative platforms to create and showcase socially-engaged art.

The artist becomes a collaborator and producer of situations, the art work reconceived as ongoing project, and the audience as a co-producer and participant (Bishop, 2012:2). For example, Post Museum is guided by three principles: the possibilities of dematerialising art, the creation of micro-utopias and collectivism in art (Woon, 2012:134).

“We had a rough idea that we wanted some form of art, and activism, and it should do good for society. We wanted to push the idea of how art could change the world, and see if that was really actually possible.” (Jennifer Teo, Co-founder)

Brack, a younger collective, self-identified as a “platform for socially engaged artists”¹³ seeks to act as a knowledge repository of participatory art practitioners and their works.

“We are interested in the spirit and philosophy which drives artists out of certain forms...why they do it, what their histories, practice and ethics are. We are not interested in capturing the universal definition (of participatory art) but to go broader than that.” (Melanie Chua, Editor)

Both collectives operate online and offline, and are part of both transnational and local collaborations, such as Maruah, a local non-profit advocating for a range of human rights issues.

On the flipside, the context of Singapore’s creative economy bears discussion. Seen as the latest phase in Singapore’s economic development, it is categorised as clusters - networks formed through traditional and high tech industries in outputs such as resources, end-products and services (Yue 2006:28). The value created is believed to stimulate economic growth, create employment, boost Singapore’s tourism industry and attract global talent. However, this turn has also placed the artist in a prominent yet lowly position, one who is a “creative, not disruptive, is commercially sustainable and inspires people” (Woon, 2012:48).

The instrumentalisation of participatory art and socially-engaged artists is not new. Bishop talks about the New Labour administration in the United Kingdom, which saw the practice as a silver bullet for societal ills from anti-social behaviours to criminal rehabilitation and even unemployment (2012:14). Likewise, local artists find themselves serving policy aims of social inclusion and ‘creative cities’ success.

The issue of funding is undoubtedly tied to the limits of an artist’s autonomy. Most of the artists spoken to acknowledge the National Arts Council (NAC) as the first port of call, although many are wary about the conditions attached. Neo notes the obvious out of bound (OB) markers outlining NAC-accepted projects, such as mild social issues like racial harmony or the elderly. In Chua’s experience, “all artists (who have received state funding) would have some story of being censored”.

Selling the experiential aspect of socially-engaged works has been one way of opening doors to multiple pots of funding, seen as a strategy to counter state censorship. Some funding avenues include corporates, philanthropic organisations, and other stakeholders in the socio-cultural ecosystem. Guerrilla aid, in the form of crowdfunding, has also become a de rigor option.

“If you see value (in your art), why can’t you sell it? In the past, if you wanted to sell nostalgia, you wouldn’t have been able to do that. But now it’s trending.” (Alecia Neo, Participatory Artist)

¹³ <http://www.brack.sg/>

While the idea of selling participation makes for savvy marketing, Neo points out that participatory artists need to be clear of their objectives and priorities. For her, success is defined by the value her work brings to the communities she works with.

Legal Status as Strategy

The other strategy used by ground-up initiatives to “go beyond the politics of anti-politics” (Jacobsson, 2015:18) has been the choice to stay as an informal entity, or proceed to opting for a legal status as either a limited company or society.

One example of how staying informal works was an experimental spin-off initiative from Edible Gardens City called The Growell Pop-Up. It sprung from the idea of “occupying space at a communal table”, to be utilised by different communities so as to “reconnect people with people, and people with forgotten processes”¹⁴. Held over three months, the theme of food security was manifested through workshops, talks and an urban farming school. As a testbed, it allowed for transnational collaborations as well as local ones with biohackers, farmers, artists and even chefs.¹⁵

Others, such as PID, made the transition from an informal collective to a registered non-profit since starting in 2012. The formalisation of legal status allowed for a more structured way of defining their work and to optimise revenue streams.

“We started out surviving on grants. As a non-profit, we will never be able to get out of it, but the goal is to do it professionally. Consultancy, design services and workshops, those are some ways. That itself will help to fund our advocacy programmes on participatory design and citizen participation.” (Jan Lim)

Similarly, Sustainable Living Lab (SL2), which was a semi-outdoor innovation lab and prototyping facility integrated within the Ground-Up Initiative compound started in 2012, but broke away in 2014. It is simultaneously part of One Maker Group (OMG), a limited company, and a social enterprise on its own. SL2 has always been intended for “social innovation through making”, with OMG competing in the entrepreneurship and makerspace arena.

SL2 via OMG has positioned itself at the forefront of the maker movement, aligned with the government’s agenda of pushing for a local maker scene excelling in both design and technological skills.¹⁶ Yet every programme pushed out from the social enterprise remains bedded in addressing a social gap.

¹⁴ https://www.facebook.com/pg/thegrowellpopup/about/?ref=page_internal

¹⁵ <http://greenartlaballiance.tumblr.com/page/2>

¹⁶ <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/makerspaces-allow-students-get-messy-and-creative>

“There is always a social cause (in what we do). For Repair Kopitiam, we want to tackle the buy and throw away culture. It’s also because current environmental programmes are inadequate, we want a more activist programme that actually involves you doing stuff, not beach cleaning.”
(Veerappan Swaminathan, Co-founder)

Both PID and SL2 offer services and products aligned with state desires for a more participatory and active citizenry. PID can even be seen as a conduit for a more consultative government and answers the need for more community engagement. For example, they have worked closely with Member of Parliament Tin Pei Ling on urban renewal projects within the MacPherson constituency.

“Especially after GE11, the sentiment for engagement was high, there was demand. Various agencies wanted to get involved in doing community engagement in whatever definition.” (PID)

There are thus various postures in how these initiatives choose to align themselves vis-a-vis state ideologies, although many are in agreement that nothing good comes out of being visibly anti-establishment. It has also been to the advantage of these collectives to use viable products and marketable services as their form of activism. As Swaminathan commented, “how effective is going on the streets to protest?”

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

In their study, Polanska & Chimiak articulate the importance of socialisation in informal initiatives, and the role it plays in defining an initiative’s success (2016:669). In this study, the accumulation of social capital is essential not just in furthering and expanding on an initiative’s objectives, but is also part of the zeitgeist of many collectives in the search of an alternative socio-political imagination.

First, the ‘network society’ allows for the “construction of communicative autonomy” and has also allowed for collective emotions to translate into collective action (Castells, 2012). All the collectives interviewed used a variety of social media platforms to advocate, recruit volunteers, inform and fundraise for their programmes.

“You need social capital (to advocate). I fundraised 8K on the basis that I would go to Nepal (after the 2015 earthquakes) and buy things there...and it was just through Facebook. I have to be aware of social media brownie points...I have to conserve them, if not your audience can feel your desperation amidst the message saturation.” (Cai Yinzhou)

Secondly, the accumulation of social capital through networks forged via interactions and collaborations is significant. The borrowing and learning of organisational strategies is a crucial takeaway for younger collectives.

Swaminathan of SL2, is cognizant of the impact established initiatives such as The Thought Collective (TTC) and GUI have made in the scene. He likens the two as being part of the new wave of civic groups starting out post-2000 with a “philosophical backgrounding” and focusing on methodologies, as compared to issue-based groups before them such as AWARE.

“These groups (TTC and GUI) focus on methods of upliftment. TTC started with tuition to trails and publications. GUI’s approach is through farming, nature-based green living, and are also strongly programme driven, offering a communal space.”

Inspired by different aspects of their models, SL2 has incorporated a few strategies. First is TTC’s brand diversification, in which co-founder Kuik Shiao Yin describes as “each brand having a market angle, and all being a private limited, including the parent company, Thought Collective.” In doing so, resource sharing and external partnerships can be compartmentalised. The second has been GUI’s volunteer management model, which has managed to sustain a constant stream of volunteers.

“With volunteer programmes, you have to do it regularly, come hell or high water. That’s part of the reason Repair Kopitiam or Balik Kampong (a GUI programme) works. Then we started public repair programmes, and training. Once you start doing these things, you gain attraction and you can start monetising it.”

Lastly, encounters with other collectives and civil society actors also work to affirm “countercultural milieus”, maintain and transform critical orientations (Della Porta and Diani, 2006:117). An example of this is the Growell Pop-Up:

“To the end of the Pop-Up, Green Drinks and Post Museum had a reunion in the space..those intergenerational stories showed me what was possible in the future. We wanted (to continue) as an experimental lab for artists to have residencies, or others to use the space for exhibitions.” (Ng Huiying, Foodscape Collective)

In itself, Foodscape Collective was the product of iteration and synthesis from past experiences with other collectives, such as GUI. Some of the core team met at Edible Garden City’s Urban Farm School. The objectives, carrying on from Growell, was centered around sustainability, food security and farming, producing knowledge through mapping out gardens and creating a knowledge repository on food wastage. It also made sure people could participate in the process via crowdsourcing data and bartering produce.

This is reminiscent of Bollier’s ‘commoning’ movement, where methods can include nurturing direct sovereignty and control over common spaces ala Harvey (2008). Alternative economies such as bartering or time banking and through engaged action are utilised, in which opportunities for personal agency are created, going beyond roles of citizen, consumer or voter.

This is also apparent in the vision for Foodscape Collective, where inculcating practices such as barter trade help to expand the notions of what a community can be; producing information and stories and creating a collaborative lab model.

THE FUNCTIONAL DIMENSION

Polanska & Chimiak mention the choice in informal collectives to be flexible in form and function, from “repertoire, content, degree of activity” and so forth, so as to enable quick reactions and effective decision making (2016: 671). This holds true for many of the ground-ups interviewed, for varying reasons.

Although seemingly counterintuitive, not all ground-ups aim for sustainability of their initiative. They may choose to focus on one or a series of projects before agreeing to dissolve the organisation collectively, and/or come back as another kind of ground-up, sometimes with different co-founders. The reasons are multidimensional; ranging from shifting life trajectories as young adults, the lack of resources and funding or a change in approach or focus. This shift in how ground-ups approach a beneficiary group or a perceived gap in community needs begets more exploration, insofar as they appear to be using phase-based, modular and collaborative entrepreneurial techniques. One example is The Hidden Good, which has been keen on taking over ideas from unsustainable initiatives:

“I’m trying to catch initiatives before they fizzle out, one of them started before they entered uni, and they couldn’t continue so we took over. My goal is...we have incubators for all these start-ups, what if we could incubate social initiatives?” (Wu Jiezhen)

Secondly, akin to observations that bureaucracy and economic responsibilities are seen as limitations can be traced back to ground-ups use of varying strategic legal statuses as discussed earlier.

Perhaps a case can also be made here on how some of these ground-ups purposefully distance themselves with more traditional-type NGOs that carry the weight of political baggage with them - even if collaborations between them exist - to acquire a greater extent of independence.

“Brack might be part of civil society, but i wouldn’t say we have an agenda in terms of specific issues...we can’t say that we are like other kinds of collectives that push a specific cause.” (Alecia Neo, also a co-founder of Brack)

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at examining the phenomena of ground-up initiatives as a breed of informal social activism and understand the motivations, constraints and opportunities they faced.

Through the analysis presented, namely through the social, ideological, political and functional dimensions - a clearer understanding is formed.

Stemming from a desire to regain democratic control over processes of urbanisation, we see these initiatives attempting to regain common wealth through advocating participatory processes. By no means an exhaustive list, three themes presented have been the conservation of heritage sites, the sustainability of resources and nurturing social capital via engaged communities.

This paper also showcased the political positioning these initiatives utilised. Their level of acquiescence with existing OB markers corresponded with the availability of government funding and resources. Notably, the agendas of these initiatives toe a fine line between state-accepted narratives and creating alternative socio-political imaginations. Through these, the new modalities of these initiatives are uncovered - more ad hoc and entrepreneurial in nature.

Through the above analysis, it is clear to see how these ground-up initiatives overlap both Chong's descriptions of the Active Citizen and a Consulted Public. As manifestations of active citizenship, these initiatives promote a sense of "noblesse oblige and voluntarism" (Koh and Ooi, 2005:171), encouraged by the state's own need for more extensive and sustained public consultation.

While some of these initiatives take a clear stance of specific causes such as haze, advocating migrant worker rights or the preservation of heritage sites such as Bukit Brown, the others such as THG and GUI seek to focus on national imperatives via building strong local communities in aiding the evolution of a national identity and spirit. Their relationships with the state thus remain warm and tied by funding opportunities or collaborations. When advocacy efforts clash with those of state narratives, these initiatives will likely be co-opted.

However, a case can be made for ongoing negotiations that increase the agency of these ground-ups; in that they introduce new methodologies and practices enabling citizens to regain democratic control of urban processes, and accordingly, present alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries.

The use of multidisciplinary forms and models, such as utilising artistic forms, social science methodologies and crowdsourcing technologies help to push these narratives further. It is possible then, to make a differentiation between Isin's active and activist classifications (2008), in which activist citizens are able to "engage in writing scripts and creating the scene" (ibid, 38), instead of merely following and participating in scenes that have already been created.

References

- Barr, Michael. 2010. "Marxists in Singapore?." *Critical Asian Studies* 42(3):335-362
- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso Books.
- Bollier, David. 2014. *Think Like a Commoner*. New Society Publishers.
- Buser, Michael and Arthurs, Jane. 2013. "Cultural activism in the community" *The Connected Communities: University of the West of England*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 (<http://www.culturalactivism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CULTURAL-ACTIVISM-BUSER-Update.3.pdf>)
- Buser, Michael, Bonura, Carlo, Fannin, Maria & Boyer, Kate. 2013. "Cultural Activism and the Politics of Place-Making." To be published in *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 17(5).
- Castells, Manuel. 2012. "Networks of outrage and hope – social movements in the Internet age." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25(3): 398-402.
- Cherian, George. 2012. *Freedom from the press: Journalism and state power in Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Chong, Terence. 2005. "Civil Society in Singapore: Popular Discourses and Concepts." *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 20(2): 273-301.
- Chong, Terence. 2011. *The AWARE Saga: Civil Society and Public Morality in Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Crosby, Alexandra. 2010. "Alternate arts collectives and the festival phenomenon." Presented at the Cultural Performance in Post-New Order Indonesia 2010 International Workshop.
- Della Porta, Donatella and Diani, Mario. 2006. *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Gilis, E. Kay. 2005. *Singapore Civil Society and British Power*. Singapore: Talisman Publishing
- Ginwright, Shawn and James, Taj. 2002. "From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing and youth development." *New Directions for Student Leadership* 96 (Winter): 27-46.
- Ginwright, Shawn, Cammarota, S.J. and Noguera, P. 2005. *Youth, Social Justice and Communities: Toward a Theory of Urban Change*. *Social Justice* 32(3).
- Harvey, David. 2008. "The Right to the City." *New Left Review* (53):Sept-Oct.

Huang, Jianli. 2014. "Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 87(2): 307.

Isin, Engin. and Nielsen, Greg. M. (Eds.) 2008. *Theorizing Acts of Citizenship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jacobsson, K. (Ed.). 2015. *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*. Ashgate: Franham.

Koh, Gillian and Ooi, Giok Ling (Eds.). 2005. *State-Society Relations in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies.

Lee, Terence. 2005. "Gestural Politics: Civil Society in "New" Singapore." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 20(2): 132-154.

Luger, Jason. 2016. "Creative Singapore, Paradoxes and Possibilities: The Geographies of Cultural Activism in an Authoritarian City-State." PhD Dissertation, Kings College London/National University of Singapore.

Picardo, Nelson. 1997. "New Social Movements: A Critical Review" *Annual Review of Sociology* 23(1997): 411-430.

Prakash, Pravin. 2015. "The Leviathan Prunes the Banyan Tree: Calibrated Liberalisation and the Spectrum of Control in Singapore." Masters Dissertation, National University of Singapore.

Polanska, Vergara Dominika and Chimiak, Galia. 2016. "Organising without organisations: on informal social activism in Poland." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 36(9/10): 662-679.

Woon, Tien Wei. 2012. "Arts in a knowledge-based economy: activist strategies in Singapore's Renaissance." PhD Dissertation, Curtin University.

Yue, Audrey. 2006. "Cultural governance and creative industries in Singapore." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 12(1): 17-33.

Annex: List of Ground-Up Initiatives/Related Informants Interviewed

BRACK

Brack is a platform for socially engaged artists and their work, gathering projects, people, and ideas that feed a progressive philosophy of life.

Chap Lau Chu

Chap Lau Chu: The Re-Opening of Commonwealth Drive (Tanglin Halt) is a project that playfully engages themes of popular memory and urban space. Aerial Lee, Bernadette Lee and Malvina Tan, under the guidance of AP Lucy Davis of the School of Arts, Design and Media narrate, illustrate and share the memories embedded in one of Singapore's first 10-storey flats, more affectionately known as Chap Lau Chu.

Carbon Inq

Carbon Inq aims to reconnect city dwellers with Nature and with each other through education and meaningful communal activities. We offer expertise in areas of: education, community development and product development.

Foodscape Collective

Foodscape Collective is a community active in our Singapore foodscape, and centred on growing food well, cooking well, eating well and living well. Foodscape envisions to grow and foster compassionate and resilient networks integral to our local food ecosystem, and explore better approaches to food and sustainability. We believe that the future needs better systems; better use, selection, and dissemination of information; and inquisitive, adventurous spirit in everyone to ask better questions on our foodscape(s).

From Walden to Woodlands

From Walden to Woodlands is an interfaith anthology of poetry about nature in Singapore. Showcasing a diverse range of writings from a kaleidoscope of faith perspectives, this collection draws inspiration from native flora, fauna, and natural habitats, besides exploring humanity's relationship with the environment. Poets featured include familiar names in the Singapore literary landscape like Alfian Sa'at, Wena Poon, and Gilbert Koh.

Geylang Adventures

Geylang Adventures was started for the purpose of exhibiting the not so commonly known/seen side of Geylang as a cultural and food enclave in the business of whoring. Since our conception, we have directed our focus on the different societal dimensions of Geylang, adopting a spontaneous approach of showing love to the people in this area with real actions. This is done through a pop-up of social initiatives involving ordinary Singaporeans, doing work in extraordinary ways. As with all initiatives, we believe the intended outcome is not to change the lives of the disadvantaged in big ways, but to alter public perception towards the challenges of being nice, that underneath the layers of everyone we are only human.

Ground-Up Initiative

Ground-Up Initiative (GUI) [pronounced Gee-U-Aye] 《聚友爱》 is a volunteer-driven non-profit community that values connecting with the land for the many things it teaches us. Since April 2009, we have been shaping a Sustainable Living Kampung in Bottle Tree Park, Yishun, Singapore. The SL Kampung encourages projects and challenges that cultivate environmental awareness, a hands-on culture, leadership, personal responsibility and teamwork. Doing things together has nurtured a community that cares about humanity and the Earth.

Jay Koh

Jay Koh is founder and director of the International Forum for Intermedia Art and author of *Art-Led Participative Processes: Dialogue & Subjectivity within Performances in the Everyday* published by University of Arts Helsinki (2015). He is also a participatory artist.

Kathleen Ditzig

Kathleen Ditzig is an independent curator and co-founder of offshoreart.co. With experience in cultural policy, she is interested in the relationship between art, globalism and power. She has been published in *Art Forum's Critics' Picks*, *Flash Art* and *BOMB* magazine among others.

Koh Nguang How

Koh Nguang How's artistic practice started in 1988 and encompasses photography, collage, assemblage, installation, performance art, documentation, archiving, curating and research. He worked in the National Museum Art Gallery as a Museum Assistant from October 1985 to December 1991. He photo-documented the activities of The Artists Village since its first open studio show in 1989, to the Post-Ulu show in 1999. His collection of materials on art and culture also enabled him to initiate his Singapore Art Archive Project in 2005. His newspaper cuttings collection under the title *Artists in the News* were part of the 3rd Singapore Biennale (2011).

Michael Tan

Michael Tan is a Visual artist and an Assistant Professor at the School of Art, Design and Media in Nanyang Technological University whose research interest explores issues related to Art and Design in Healthcare, Health Communication, Creative Aging, Social Design. As an advocate for Arts and health development in Singapore, he has been establishing conversations with key stakeholders while mapping the state of Arts in Healthcare development in Singapore as a preparation to facilitate future work in the field and to raise the level of specialty.

People's Movement to Stop Haze

People's Movement to Stop Haze (PM.Haze) is a movement initiated in February 2014 by a group of ordinary people in Singapore because we believe that everyone can make a difference in stopping the haze. Our vision is a world where everyone feels responsible for the clean air we all enjoy. Our mission is to empower people in Singapore with the knowledge, values and means to be drivers of global action to stop haze.

Post Museum

An independent cultural and social enterprise which aims to encourage and support a thinking, caring and pro-active community in Singapore. Our previous premises included Food #03 (an F&B artwork, Show Room (an exhibition cum performance space), Back Room (a multi-purpose room), artist studios and offices. As of mid-Aug 2011, Post-Museum has moved out of its Rowell Rd premises and is currently nomadic.

The Hidden Good

Our aim is to celebrate a vibrant and positive culture amongst Singaporeans. With a team of independent undercover citizen journalists, we seek to acknowledge and more importantly, appreciate the good deeds performed by citizens that would otherwise go unnoticed. The existing misguided pre-conceived notion of an unfriendly, selfish society, where every man functions for himself is a school of thought we challenge. We strongly believe that there is an inherent good which underpins the social dynamics of our society.

The Thought Collective

The Thought Collective shares the common purpose of building up Singapore's social and emotional capital. Our group of social enterprises offers new possibilities in the way we think, live and serve as a community. Since its genesis in 2002, School of Thought has continued to promote innovation in education and civic learning in both the private and public sectors. With a growing group of 5 social enterprises, we have since evolved to become The Thought Collective - reputed to be at the forefront of social innovation in Singapore with our work in building social and emotional capital. The Thought Collective consists of School Of Thought, Think Tank Studio, Thinkscape, Food for Thought and Common Ground.

Sustainable Living Lab

Founded in 2011, Sustainable Living Lab (SL2) aims to build a Sustainable Future through community building, technology experimentation and social innovation. Our affiliate organizations are Makedemy, Repair Kopitiam and OneMaker Group (OMG). We are a founding member of the SG Makers Association, member of the Singapore Centre for Social Enterprise (raiSE), member of the Southeast Asian Makerspace Network (SEAMNET) and an Autodesk Cleantech Partner.