

Bugis Street: From Rags to Riches, But at What Cost?

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Figure 1. Bugis Street

Flocks of shoppers indulge in retail therapy and satiate their materialistic urges in a frenzy, a common sight found at shopping malls during weekends. Engulfed by endless waves of shoppers, I found myself hopping from store to store at Bugis Junction. As I made my way to Victoria Street, the abrupt switch in landscape caught me off guard. Unlike the air-conditioned shopping haven where I had just left, the scorching sun shined on me mercilessly as I struggled to navigate the entrance to Bugis Street. The aromatic scent originating from the bakeries and the glistening fluorescent lights from

the storefronts came together to formulate a mesmerising concoction that transfixed me to unravel the enigma of this mysterious street.

My sight was bombarded by the insane variety of items that were being sold within the long, narrow alleys. From traditional candies to cheap wholesale T-shirts, the street offered any goods one could ever think of. In a space where sales dictate survival, the sellers were equipped with their shiniest armour to pander to the customers by offering tempting discounts. Not a single corner could have escaped the cacophony of bargaining that invaded the

atmosphere. In this incredibly fast-paced shopping district, one particular store owner caught my attention. She greeted me with warmth as she introduced some of her top-selling purses. From our casual conversation, I learned that the store owner started her business at Bugis Street years before the redevelopment project, a controversial case in the 80s that laid the foundation for new uses of the area, paving the way for the impending high-rise buildings. She reminisced about the glory of old Bugis Street, infamous for its nightlife and transgender prostitutes, a scene that put Singapore on the map.

The vices and sleepless nights of the old Bugis Street battled to prevail in the fragmented recollections of the store owner, yet it came to no avail, but the street was more than just that. The amicable relationship between store sellers and customers that fostered a sense of community was demolished along the street in the mid-80s all in the name of modernisation that prioritised the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit station. The store owner's faint memory of the old Bugis Street evoked a sense of nostalgia within me. After our insightful conversations, one question arises, how do redevelopment and the conservation of intangible cultural assets go side by side in our increasingly capitalistic society?

In her article "There's no place like home: Remembering and experiencing the changing Singaporean cityscape", Evans (2016) argues that redevelopment is deeply rooted in the commodification of culture by the government. The cityscape plays an imperative role for the people to understand the environment and acts as a vessel for the people to create a collective memory of the built environment, which poses a great challenge to the people as the once established culture was indirectly wiped out in the process of redevelopment.

Evans (2016) believes that redevelopment is a guise used by the government to bolster its authority by rebuilding the cityscape and removing any elements that do not align with the government's beliefs and agenda that was primarily based on the "Asian Values" that was promoted by Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that emphasises Confucian ethics. The tension between the ruling class ideology and the social collective memory often hinders meaningful social discourse. The de-contextualisation of Bugis Street is an agenda to reshape Singapore's image to fit into the international stage, which failed to retain the rich sense of street life despite its contrived efforts to recreate the iconic colonial-style architecture (Evans, 2016).

Simply put, the economic and social advancements driven by increased consumerism catalysed the demise of a cultural spectacle, paving the way for redevelopment. The lack of understanding of the country's history and the sense of community shows the government's ignorance. The destruction of existing places to give space for a new project that does not synchronise with the community's pace and rhythm caused the heritage site, that carries rich history of Singapore and offers insights to the past for generations to come, to lose its value significantly. Had the government gained a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and the value of old Bugis Street in the people's memory, would this large-scale makeover begin in the first place? Perhaps more than economic considerations, the redevelopment of Bugis Street was linked to its "sleazy" past, which was characterised by cross-dressing performers and transgender prostitutes, a part of it that the ruling class struggled to conceal from modern societies. Blinded by economic priorities and moral dilemmas, the walls of old Bugis Street were destined to crumble.

Interestingly, "Development and the Reinvention of Bugis Street. Social Cultural Engineering and the Singaporean State" by Kuah (2018) shifts attention to capitalist forces, often the backbone of redevelopment in Singapore. The twenty-first century is defined as the epoch-Singapore embraces shopping malls, places like Bugis Street have become a forgotten relic that ceased to yield substantial revenue in the eyes of the authorities. Kuah (2018) mentioned that with Singapore's rising standard of living, its people have developed a more vivid historical imagination, leading them to appreciate the conservation and aesthetics of heritage landscapes in a manner unprecedented among their predecessors. The old Bugis Street was an intimate neighbourhood housing a close community, yet this feeling will never be replicated in this new, revamped version (Kuah, 2018).

Governments can advocate for preservation of culture as much as they want., but economic rationales will prevail if the people and the government desire to build a country that is abundant in wealth. Yet, the human dimension is often overlooked in a nation-building context. With established ways of living come the human needs to reconnect with our ancestors' history, leading to greater appreciation of culture from the past. The redevelopment of Bugis Street is built over the foundation of the cultural mosaic, which was cultivated for decades by its residents from diverse backgrounds. Preserving a heritage site like Bugis Street that carries decades of history spanning across pre-colonial times to its heyday during the 80s can be fruitful, economically speaking, as such a dynamic place contributes to the tourism sector, if properly maintained. What the street needs is *reinvention*, injecting life into a site that stood the test of time and equipping itself with a refreshed outlook. Instead of transforming Bugis Street into

another tourist spot filled with artificiality that drives away locals, the government should revisit the alternative culture that was previously entrenched in Bugis Street as an antithesis of the popular culture (Kuah, 2018). Reinvention in the context involves resurrecting the unique social ambience that once drew in tourists from all over the world, including locals.

Both Evans (2016) and Kuah (2018) emphasised the government's role in the redevelopment of Bugis Street, but Evans (2016) pays more attention to the dominant social ideology, which indirectly decides the government's agenda. In a society where the notion of preservation is not inculcated in the people's minds, redeveloping a historical site will not cause overt objection which paves the way for the government's policies. Kuah (2018) touches on the role of the government in redevelopment, but he extends the argument by shedding light on the economic factors, and how a balance between humanistic values and economic considerations can extensively facilitate the preservation of cultural heritage in modern societies.

I find solace in the notion of protecting and providing care for an artifact or a place that existed long before we were born, simply to keep our memories alive and to pass down stories to our children and grandchildren. But we must determine which stories are worth inheriting to strike a balance between conservation of culture and capitalism in today's context. Harrison (2013) points out the significance of "forgetting" in his research article to cultivate sustainable conservation practices. Modern society's fear of losing touch with its past in the face of rapid societal changes led to the oversaturation of content and memorabilia which could potentially numb our ability to forge new collective memories. In defence of the

government's decision, the demolition of Bugis Street was an act of challenging the significance of preserving cultural heritage, where modernisation and redevelopment took over the conservation of the olden days' atmosphere. It prompts us to revise and periodically evaluate the definition of 'heritage,' assessing its relevance in today's dynamic world.

In an era of relentless profit-chasing and the race for dominance, where do we draw our limit? Although redevelopment and conservation are not mutually exclusive as there are countless examples of neighbourhoods regaining their glory and popularity among younger generations, but the effects of redevelopment on places like Bugis Street are more apparent on the "modernisation" part rather than the conservation of cultural heritage. As we are intertwined in a community beset with profound challenges like climate change, health crises, and the loss of heritage, now more than ever, profit should not be our top priority. A change of topic, a shift of focus to the humanity within us is necessary for the survival of our souls. Our society must collectively reclaim the identity that is embedded in our cultural heritage, whether tangible or not. However, we face the task of discerning the relevancy and significance of heritage sites. On the topic of preserving cultural heritage to build national identity, is it justifiable for a country to remember and keep the pretty parts of our culture, while the less culturally appropriate parts that do not resonate with current culture get left behind? A perfect balance will truly be achieved when our nation is fully aware of our cultural and societal context and reconciles our past with our present to shape a meaningful future.

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