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Standing the Test of Time: Urban Heritage for Resilient Communities

Ann Sandra Godly 1 and Eingeel Jafar Khan 2

1 University of Waterloo, Canada; annsandragodly@gmail.com
2 National University of Singapore, Singapore; eingeelkhan@u.nus.edu

Research highlights
1) Does the conservation of urban heritage encourage resilient communities?
2) A critical analysis into the pros and cons of popular conservation strategies as implemented in two globally removed cases

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1. Introduction

Renowned planner Geddes (1916) championed placing local communities and their intangible place attachments at the heart of urban heritage conservation and planning in a landscape-based approach. Meanwhile, Daher (1996) understood heritage conservation as a “complex activity aimed at revitalisation, reuse, and reinsertion in the society of national and local identity with a sense of belonging to a shared place.” As cultural tourism, it brings revenue, civic pride, and fosters better understanding of cultures (Assi, 2000).

Thus, place, heritage, and identity are closely interconnected in the urban context with the representation of heritage having social implications for individual and ethnic identity (Moore 2007, Shaw 2007, Waitt 2000). While conserving the interdependent tangible and intangible heritage is ideal (Powell, 1987), rather than enforcing the outmoded lifestyles of the past, it is necessary to instill new life to old districts and facilitate the adoption of new activities relevant to the globalising world. Unfortunately, on the flip side, such intervention often alienates local communities with a deep connection to the past (Kong and Yeoh, 1994).

Can urban heritage enrich the lives of communities in the throes of rapid urbanisation, growth, and unprecedented stress? Can they be transformed from derelict structures to spaces of meaningful social engagement? These are questions heritage conservationists have been trying to answer for decades. In response, they have come up with some ingenious ways to bring new relevance to these relics, but the long-term ripple effects of their implementation towards the people they serve is a subject that begs greater research.

This paper investigates the efficacy of two popular, globally recognised conservation strategies by comparing intent with outcome. In particular, it explores the effect they have had towards creating sustainable, resilient communities.
2. Theories and Methods

A systematic literature review and case study methodology was adopted to identify and synthesize the relevant research linking urban heritage with social resilience. Based on the methodology advocated by Flyybjerg (2006), who believed in using examples in the social sciences to help understand realities and devise explanatory theories, the paper analyses two case studies. Further employing his classification of cases, both the Distillery and Kampong Glam might be deemed ‘critical’ for their capacity to generate generally applicable principles, but are also ‘deviant’ in the light of particularities likely to produce rich knowledge (Henderson, 2015).

On the surface, Toronto’s Distillery District and Singapore’s Kampong Glam could not be more different as case studies for this treatise, being so geographically removed, culturally contrasting, and contextually varied. However, a closer look reveals that they are connected by more than just their colonial past – both are textbook examples of the use of the increasingly popular, globally favored strategies of “heritage preservation” and “creative economies” as a way to breathe new life into decaying socio-spatial manifestations. Indeed, this two-pronged approach can be seen practically everywhere – from Hauz Khas in New Delhi to the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, and 22@ in Barcelona. But, is this universal appeal justified? Kampong Glam and Distillery District give us a glimpse into the eastern and western context, providing generic lessons that can be applied to other locations, as well.
3. Results

Case Studies:

The Gooderham and Worts Brewery in Toronto began as an alcohol factory in 1832, but was briefly repurposed to produce acetone in 1916, during Prohibition. However, its Victorian era and early 20th century structures caught the eye of film directors, who saw the site as a backdrop for their movies, connecting this landmark to art, media, and pop culture. By the 1990s, even though the Distillery’s future as an industrial complex was shrouded in doubt, forces like the Parks Canada’s Commercial Heritage Property Incentive Fund, Toronto Historical Board and the Ontario Heritage Act pushed for its preservation as a site of historic import and architectural heritage (Mathews, 2010).

Ever since its establishment, the Distillery has always remained privately owned. This ownership model continued even after the City Council approved a mixed-use redevelopment masterplan in 1994, when Cityscape Holdings made an investment, promising to transform the place into an entertainment, arts, and culture district (Mathews, 2010). This proposal came at a time when the global west was seeing a marked change in urban leisure. With city folk finding themselves with increased disposable incomes, public space began to become more consumer-oriented, and entertainment began to be commoditized. Shopping malls, theatres, amusement parks, museums, galleries, and night clubs raked in large profits, pointing to promising returns for the Cityscape venture (Kohn, 2010). To further incentivize landmark preservation, the city permitted the construction of three 40-storey residential towers. And so, the newly reinvented “Distillery District” first opened its doors to the masses in 2003 (Mathews 2010).

The adaptive reuse of this brownfield development was conceived as a celebration of Canadian culture; the past – preserved in the heritage structures, the present – reflected in local goods, food, and entertainment, and the future – embodied in the expression of local artisans. Indeed, today, the Distillery District is Toronto’s iconic festive marketplace, home to the city’s most widely anticipated pop-up galleries, food fairs, and seasonal bazaars.

In contrast, the Kampong Glam district in Singapore was demarcated by Sir Raffles in the early nineteenth century for a Malay settlement as part of his masterplan’s spatial and economic rationalisation process. It became a popular stop for Islamic settlers and merchants from the Indo-Malay Archipelago and beyond. The impacts of such a settlement manifested considerably on the physical and economic landscape of the neighborhood, imbuing the space with both a distinct identity and spirituality. The Sultan Mosque became a landmark, supported by other cultural symbols such as the Royal House of Istana, Gedung Kuning (the chief minister’s house), Islamic schools, royal burial grounds, and a concentration of trade-related activities catering to the social and religious needs of the community. Once the major transit point for East Asian Muslim pilgrims on their way...
to Mecca, the Kampong Glam district became a hub for business, travel arrangements, temporary lodgings, and other religious preparations. This legacy continues today, with pilgrimage-related services available across the street from the local mosque.

During the 1980s, the Singaporean Government conserved nine hectares of Kampong Glam to curb excessive, unchecked urban redevelopment and bolster tourism (Henderson 2012, Yeoh 2005). The following decades saw many smaller conservation efforts like the conversion of residential shophouses to commercial businesses, the creation of the Bussorah Street pedestrian mall, and the conversion of an area near Sultan Mosque into a thriving food paradise. Today, Kampong Glam is a bustling commercial area, frequented by shopping enthusiasts, food lovers, entertainment seekers, and tourists. The Urban Redevelopment Authority also commissioned artists to create street murals and graffiti in an attempt to attract more tourism to the area (Chang and Huang 2011).

Figure 4. Historic timeline of Case Study 2: Kampong Glam in Singapore

Findings:

Both The Distillery District and Kampong Glam owe their dramatic transformation to the popular two-pronged adaptive reuse approach of “historic preservation” and “creative economies.” Following is a brief description of how these strategies were used in both cases:

- **Heritage Preservation**

  “. . . marketplaces are particularly manipulative heritage commodifiers, selectively capitalizing on whatever heritage spin has most appeal to their clientele, fundamentally in the values of a market and reclaimed urbanity but also in their buildings where possible, and in ornamentation, association, and environs.” (Tunbridge, 2001)

Central to The Distillery District’s redevelopment strategy is its identity as an industrial relic. Its unique architectural vocabulary has been retained with money dedicated to its restoration. However, creating an educational, historical narrative is limited to plaques, signage, and an official website alone (Mathews, 2010). Instead, the developers market the site’s heritage through artful imagery and scene-setting. Objects like barrels, millstones, and heavy machinery exploit nostalgia by providing the consumer the experience of stepping into a bygone era (Kohn, 2010). Like actors in a performance, these spatial reconstructions create a dialogue between the people and the past.

This commodification of culture is not unique to Toronto alone. Although Kampong Glam boasts of a proud and rich Malay heritage, it underwent a massive makeover to cater to more popular tastes. The palm-lined paths, onion domes, and arches echo a more Middle-Eastern than Malay vibe. Although this exoticisation has proven to be a tourist-
pleaser, it comes at a cost, as seen in the case of Bussorah street – a vista to the Sultan Mosque, the original site of the “seasonal space” of Ramadan food bazaar for decades. The Ramadan Bazaar was (and still is) an integral part of the Singapore Muslim culture with intangible historic value. The “living heritage” affirms the community’s identity while providing a “sense of place.” However, the street’s redevelopment into a pedestrianised mall pushed gentrification, leading to an erasure of local culture, and evoking a deep sense of loss among the Malay-Muslim community (Ismail 2006).

- Creative Economies

“[Creative economies arise when], in order to create spaces conducive for the creative class, officials use zoning variances and tax incentive schemes to convert older manufacturing sites into mixed-use projects, reconfigure the transportation system to promote public transport, cycling, and walking, encourage environmental-friendly urban design and architecture, and/or create spaces that facilitate cultural events like shows, concerts, and festivals . . .” (Hague 2017).

It is no secret that public art drives placemaking, employment, social engagement, and change, strengthening community ties and disseminating ideas. At the Distillery District, arts-led regeneration is key to its creative economy strategy. The abundance of free and unordered space onsite makes it the perfect venue for improvisational, flexible, and transitional use (Wung, 2007). Artists, designers, craftspeople, and performance groups can use the Distillery’s ephemeral quality of space as a stage to showcase their talents. In addition to this, the non-profit organisation Artscape signed a 20-year lease with Cityscape in 2002 to provide offices and studios for the “long-term residency and protection” of around 60 members of the arts community (Mathews, 2010).

Meanwhile, in Kampong Glam, the government has adopted the creative economy strategy through the adaptive reuse of shophouses along the periphery of the Central Business District. Bustling cafes, boutiques, and nightclubs instill new life into the western part of the district. State institutions and local stakeholders encourage diversity of occupants and usage. Having learnt from past mistakes, they prevented it from becoming an exclusive tourist hub that has no relevance to the resident population (Kumar, 2020). The emergence of a mixed cluster typology in the northern part of the district promises a neighborhood steeped in culture and diversity.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Once decaying and on the cusp of being obsolete, the twin strategies of “heritage preservation” and “creative economies” have, no doubt, brought the Victorian-era Distillery and Malay-Muslim ghetto of Kampong Glam into 21st century relevance. Today, these are thriving landmarks that form an integral part of their city’s identity, drawing flocks of locals and tourists alike. Communities can now experience a connection to their roots while simultaneously celebrating the evolution of their own modern culture and lifestyles. The tourism and leisure industry has contributed to positive economic growth, and by providing employment, livelihoods have improved and set people on the path to becoming self-sufficient. As centers for civic engagement and a forum for unfettered creative expression, both cases have played a pivotal role in uplifting society.

These are giant strides towards the goal of urban resilience, and their accomplishments must be applauded. It is no wonder that adaptive reuse projects across the globe constantly champion heritage preservation alongside creative economies as the solution to the issue of dynamic, sprawling cities outgrowing the use of their tangible, architectural history. However, this dual-pronged regeneration strategy is not without its flaws:

- The inauthentic representation of history: In both the cases of Kampong Glam and the Distillery District, heritage is used as a marketing tool to attract people and generate revenue. The Distillery does little more than the bare minimum to weave historical narrative. More time, effort, and resources have gone into creating an experience that has visitors reaching for their wallets.

“Visual theming” for the consumer’s sake and the inaccurate depiction of history is better explained in Kampong Glam, whose leisure and amusement infrastructure reflect a distinct Arab aesthetic, capitalising on the fact that this was once a
stopping point for devout Muslims on pilgrimage to Mecca. Shisha bars and middle eastern restaurants are a far departure from the Malay-Muslim society that once thrived here (Tantow, 2012). Nevertheless, this deliberate appropriation of a foreign, exotic culture has proven seductive. With these half-hearted and even untruthful portrayals of the past, one must ask if the term “heritage preservation” is gradually becoming a misnomer.

- The alienation of local communities: In the case of Kampong Glam, ongoing gentrification has drastically hampered representation of the region’s Malay population. The convenient side-stepping of its roots in favour of appropriating Arab culture is a snub to the indigenous way of life. Furthermore, certain youth-centric activities such as bars and nightclubs, which reflect an excessive, consumerist outlook is frowned upon by the traditionalists, who value a quiet, moral, and spiritual life (Imran, 2007).

Meanwhile, the Distillery’s private ownership has limited the city to the role of a facilitator – providing guidelines and building codes, grants, and easements (Abusaada, 2015. Mathews & Picton, 2013). The discussion around privately-owned public space has been hotly debated, and it is no secret that entrenchment of private interest in the public realm is gaining momentum. Cityscape Holdings has been the true force behind the direction of the precinct’s redevelopment. While the Distillery’s adaptive reuse has already led to a wave of gentrification, further developments like the high-rise residential towers are feared to exclude weaker sections of society (Mathews, 2010). The lack of public engagement and consultation in the planning process is worrying, as it means that the Distillery District will cater to the masses only as long as it remains profitable (Mathews, 2014).

For urban heritage to speak to the needs of an ever-evolving city, the growing disconnect between the past, space and user must be mended. The sanitization of histories and consumer-driven leisure will only stunt true cultural, social, political, and economic progress. The question is, in the pursuit of urban resilience, can planners and developers resist the temptation of short-term gain of commercial success and turn their attention to what truly matters – the people?

Contributor statement

Eingeel Jafar Khan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Kampong Glam case, Original Draft, Review & Editing.

References