

Harmony in Motion: Sustainable Cultural Tourism and the Water Narrative along the Singapore River

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Abstract: The Singapore River precinct, beyond its role in promoting economic development as a tourist area, holds a more significant and enduring significance in establishing Singapore's national cultural image externally and deepening domestic cultural identity internally. This paper scrutinizes the sustainable development of cultural tourism along the Singapore River, with a particular emphasis on the construction of a water narrative. The study delves into the role of public art installations in showcasing Singapore's achievements in water resource management. By intertwining art with the city's unique cultural background and commitment to environmental sustainability, these installations not only enhance Singapore's global reputation but also stimulate public awareness. The narrative emphasizes Singapore's history of achieving water independence, shaping a distinctive cultural background that attracts tourists. While recognizing the effectiveness of public art, the paper calls for further examination of its potential to inspire environmental concern and the need to balance historical accuracy in shaping Singapore's image. This research provides valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between public art, cultural representation, and sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Singapore River, Cultural Tourism, Public Art, Water Narrative

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The Singapore River is a significant symbol of Singapore's history and culture, witnessing the transformation of Singapore from a small fishing village named Temasek to a modern metropolis. As part of urban renewal and beautification efforts, the Singapore government has invested substantial resources along the riverbank to preserve and restore cultural heritage. Public art installations have been established to enhance the experiences of both residents and visitors. In terms of cultural heritage preservation, the government has taken measures to protect many historical buildings along the river, such as the Old Parliament House, Empress Place Building, and Fort Canning Fort. These places have not only been restored to maintain their original charm but some have also been repurposed into museums or educational centers for public exploration and learning [1]. These initiatives not only enrich the lives of locals and tourists but also safeguard Singapore's local characteristics and culture.

Simultaneously, to elevate the artistic atmosphere along the Singapore River, the government and private institutions have collaborated to introduce various public art installations. These art pieces may include sculptures, murals, and installation art, reflecting Singapore's diverse cultural features and innovative spirit. They showcase the international and modern aspects of Singapore [2].

1.2. Research Questions

Regarding the cultural and artistic development along the Singapore River, some people argue that public art installations should highlight Singapore's local characteristics, emphasizing historical memories, and fostering national pride. On the other hand, another group believes that, as a diverse and modern metropolis and a renowned tourist destination, the public art installations along the Singapore River should lean towards constructing international and contemporary artworks. Public art refers to any form of artistic expression, including sculptures, murals, street furniture, cultural events, etc., located in places accessible to the public for free [1]. This art form aims to inspire public reactions to space, behavior, and issues, creating an environment where people can identify themselves based on their use or behavior in public spaces. Singapore has aimed to become a "Global Arts City" since 1996 and has placed increased emphasis on the role of *Public Sculptures Master Plan* (2002) and *Urban Art Initiatives* (2005) [3].

However, there have been debates. Why is it essential for public art installations along the Singapore River to possess a combination of historical and modern characteristics? What kind of public art installations can establish and deepen the memories of Singapore for both locals and foreign visitors, as well as build Singapore's unique cultural background? Despite the controversy, cities in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, have embraced the trend of revitalizing urban economies, beautifying urban spaces, and fostering a sense of identity through the construction of art and cultural landscapes. This paper focuses on two main locations: Boat Quay and Clarke Quay. These locations were chosen because they are prominent attractions along the Singapore River, showcasing the predominant styles of artistic and cultural facilities.

1.3. Literature Review

In the late 1970s, the Singapore River was heavily polluted and considered valueless. However, ecological cleaning efforts were undertaken, including the demolition of abandoned warehouses and boats, transforming the river into a clean and beautiful waterway. In the redevelopment of the waterfront, Singapore adhered to its destiny planning, transforming it into a commercially vibrant and leisurely area through expanding trade, preserving historical buildings, and developing new retail options [4]. The transformation of Singapore's urban landscape represents not only physical changes but also a symbolic process. Different societal groups have varying perspectives on urban memory and forgetting, with collective memory being a dynamic process generated through group interaction and commemorative activities [5]. In summary, the attitudes of "remembering to forget" and "forgetting to remember" hold significant implications for understanding Singapore's history and shaping the urban landscape. Therefore, in-depth research into the design and construction of cultural landscapes along the river contributes to Singapore's efforts to help both locals and foreigners better "remember" Singapore's culture [6].

Scholars have conducted on-site explorations of Singapore River art installations, including visits to cultural and art institutions such as the Asian Civilizations Museum, to understand the current situation. Through on-site research, they focused on the role, status, and various functions of artistic and cultural facilities within the community. They have documented the differences between historical and modern facilities and how they shape the cultural landscape [6]. In addition, some literature investigated the content encapsulated in art installations that combine historical and modern

elements to showcase Singapore's unique characteristics. Using qualitative methods, researchers gather materials through various means, including written abstracts (historical books, archives) and reference information from websites [3]. The data collection encompasses four major areas: comprehensive data acquisition, collection and analysis of written materials, obtaining a holistic understanding, and revealing the development of historical and modern facilities.

2. Sustainable Development of the Cultural Tourism Industry

This chapter primarily explores the feasibility of a tourism development model centered around thematic areas in ensuring the sustainable urban tourism of the Singapore River precinct. In the past, tourists were predominantly adventure seekers, yearning to experience authentic culture and natural landscapes during their travels. However, with time, the motivations of contemporary mass tourists have shifted towards hedonism, expressing enthusiasm for shopping, collecting souvenirs, and engaging in light-hearted entertainment activities [3]. To meet this evolving demand, both the government and private companies have consciously created artificial activities and designed attractions, such as theme parks, aquariums, Disneyland, and themed hotels. Singapore stands as a typical example, utilizing thematic areas as a strategic means to achieve its status as a global tourist destination, with a specific focus on sustainable tourism development along the Singapore River. Singapore's tourism development began in the early 1970s when the government recognized the importance of diversifying the economy through tourism. Unable to compete with other nations in natural attractions or beach resorts, Singapore opted to develop urban tourism. The government continuously sought innovative approaches to make Singapore a competitive tourist destination. By incorporating the concept of thematic areas into the Urban Redevelopment Authority's urban design schemes, efforts were made to address diverse needs. The research emphasizes the potential advantages of thematic areas as authentic, unique, and attractive tourist attractions that can appeal to both local residents and visitors. At the policy level, thematic areas are considered an effective strategy to meet various interest demands and contribute to the sustainable development of urban tourism [7].

Employing historical review and policy analysis as the primary research methods, some research traces the development process of the cultural tourism industry along the Singapore River, revealing the government's strategic decisions in tourism [3]. Using the Urban Redevelopment Authority's urban design schemes as a research foundation highlights the introduction of thematic areas as an innovative approach to meeting diverse needs. This method aids in understanding the evolution of Singapore's tourism industry development and provides a reasonable background and framework for subsequent discussions. The thematic areas are considered positive, in terms of feasibility and effectiveness [1]. However, there is a need for a deeper discussion on whether artificially created thematic areas could lead to environmental impacts and if excessive commercialization might undermine cultural authenticity in terms of sustainable development. A critical examination of the impact of thematic areas on local culture and whether the government has genuinely implemented effective measures for sustainable development is necessary for further exploration.

3. The Cultural Landscape in Historical and Modern Combined Public Art Facilities

Previous research generally emphasizes the importance of imbuing public art installations along the Singapore River banks with a combination of historical and modern elements. This fusion reflects Singapore's identity as a city that blends "Asian culture" with "modernity" and "Asian vitality," catering to the needs of visitors from different regions and cultural backgrounds. Such art installations enrich the city's landscape, promoting the dissemination of Singapore's cultural heritage and the ideology of sustainable development. While Singapore focuses on tourism development, it also faces

the challenge of balancing sustainable development and preserving local traditional culture. Art plays a crucial role in this process, shaping how places and people interact, revealing relationships between individuals and the natural environment, as well as perspectives and interactions between artists, decision-makers, and the public concerning the urban environment.

Public art is a controversial subject due to the inherent disputes over the definitions of "art" and "public." Although the study centers on public sculptures, urban art encompasses various forms such as monuments, architecture, art events, cultural festivals, and even graffiti and billboards. The new forms of public art go beyond traditional commemorative "hero" sculptures, influencing the cultural economy of the city profoundly [3].

With a focus on public art, scholars have observed the combination of historical and modern elements along the Singapore River banks, presenting Singapore as a culturally integrated city [6]. By highlighting the profound effects of art in the urban environment, the research methodology prioritizes observation and on-site investigation, providing tangible cases for the role of art in cultural heritage and sustainable development. The discussion of public art involves controversies in defining "art" and "public," requiring clearer definitions. Additionally, the emphasis on the fusion of historical and modern elements raises questions about whether this fusion genuinely reflects the richness of local culture and if there is a deliberate aspect in practical implementation, which merits further discussion.

4. The Construction of Water Narratives

Public art installations emphasize Singapore's new water and water resource independence history along the Singapore river banks to meet the memory and unique cultural background needs of Singapore

By presenting significant achievements in water resource management through artistic works, sculptures, or murals, these installations not only enhance Singapore's global reputation in water resource management but also stimulate public awareness of environmental conservation and sustainable development [8]. These art installations strengthen the sense of belonging for locals and help foreign visitors gain a deeper understanding of Singapore's history and culture, thereby deepening their impressions and memories of Singapore [9]. By emphasizing the history of Singapore's new water and water resource independence, relevant public art installations shape Singapore's unique cultural background, showcasing its cultural diversity, innovation, and commitment to the environment and sustainable development. This attracts more tourists to experience and appreciate this distinctive culture, driving Singapore's tourism industry and cultural exchange [10].

By presenting Singapore's new water and water resource independence history, previous research underscores the role of these public art installations in deepening public memories of Singapore and establishing a unique cultural background [9]. This method allows the research to directly convey information about Singapore's water resource management. Although public art installations are considered effective means of emphasizing Singapore's unique culture, further scrutiny is needed to determine whether these installations can genuinely inspire public concern for environmental conservation and sustainable development. Additionally, examining whether there is exaggeration or distortion in shaping Singapore's historical narrative through these installations and how to balance the promotion of Singapore's image with authentic historical storytelling are topics worthy of further exploration.

5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the controversial issue of establishing public art along the Singapore River banks. Some argue that public art should highlight Singapore's local characteristics, emphasizing historical memory and fostering national pride. Others believe that, as a multicultural modern metropolis, public art along the riverbanks should lean towards constructing international and modern artworks. The core of this controversy lies in balancing the relationship between historical heritage and modern development, finding a point in cultural art that resonates with local residents while also attracting visitors from around the world.

It is evident that the cultural landscape design and construction along the Singapore River banks are a trend encompassing urban renewal, economic revitalization, and the beautification of urban spaces. Public art goes beyond sculptures or murals; it includes various forms such as cultural activities and festivals, becoming a means by which people identify with the city. Since 1996, Singapore has been committed to becoming a "Global Art City," continually emphasizing the importance of public art in urban planning and artistic initiatives. Scholars have presented the current state of art facilities along the Singapore River, documenting the differences between historical and modern installations and the roles they play in the cultural landscape.

Many studies have placed a particular emphasis on the significance of water stories. The Singapore River, historically a severely polluted and seemingly worthless waterway, has undergone a remarkable transformation through ecological clean-up and urban redevelopment. By highlighting Singapore's water stories, especially the history of new water and water resource independence, the government can use public art installations to communicate Singapore's outstanding achievements in water resource management to the public. This not only contributes to enhancing Singapore's global reputation in water resource management but also stimulates public interest in environmental conservation and sustainable development.

In conclusion, Singapore has successfully shaped its urban image and enhanced international competitiveness through the construction of art and cultural landscapes. The integration of historical and modern elements, with water stories as a central theme in public art, not only meets the expectations of local residents for cultural heritage but also provides international visitors with a unique and profound Singaporean experience. The design and construction of this cultural landscape have become a successful strategy for Singapore's urban development, contributing significantly to economic revitalization, spatial beautification, and the cultivation of a sense of identity among residents.

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