Art in Singapore

Can the government foster an artistic society?

Think “Singapore” and the images conjured rarely vary: order, prosperity, strong government, cleanliness. The more cynical may note the peculiar brand of arrogance identified with Singaporeans, but the economic statistics are difficult to argue with. In this article, Dr Uma Rajan, a member of the Singapore National Arts Council, steps beyond GDP figures, inflation statistics, trade data to examine new ground: the arts in Singapore.

Yet, as with most things in Singapore, the economics matter. The government’s attempt to transform Singapore from a “cultural desert” to a “global city of the arts” involves tourism, money for infrastructure and, almost bizarrely, the grandly-named “International Business Hub 2000 Vision.”

One may reasonably ask if a vibrant arts scene could ever be the result of government blue-prints, the STPB, the EDB, the NCB and other such portentous acronyms. We are told, apparently with little irony, that the arts have been much encouraged by “increasing patronage of the arts groups by political leaders.” Can an arts scene develop through sheer government will - or perhaps despite it?

The ever-irreverent Oscar Wilde famously proclaimed, “In art good intentions are not of the smallest value. All bad art is the result of good intentions.” Ignoring this warning, the Singapore government seems at least determined to try its hand. Even its critics recognize that the government’s record of successes is difficult to ignore. This will be an interesting experiment to watch.

--Editors
Bringing the arts into malls and shopping centers

SINGAPORE USED TO BE REFERRED TO AS a “cultural desert.” Even fifty years ago, there was a marked absence of art galleries, opera houses and the like. However, recent years have seen a marked improvement in the arts scene. With its strategic location, well-developed facilities, secure infrastructure and multi-cultural richness, Singapore hopes to attract students and connoisseurs of the arts from around the world. Rich ancient immigrant cultures of the east have left a legacy that fosters indigenous art forms and stimulate the creation of world-class exhibits.

The Singapore Government announced in 1965 its intention to create a culturally vibrant society by the year 1999. Under an Act of Parliament in 1991, the National Arts Council (NAC) was set up with a goal to promote and nurture the arts, enabling Singapore to achieve the status of a global city of the arts. The NAC is dedicated to developing the arts by nurturing artistic and creative talent, providing facilities for artists and events, attracting a wide range of international artistic talent and creating a partnership between the artistic community, the private sector and the government for the promotion of the arts.

In keeping with its objectives the NAC is today one of the major presenters and organizers of art events and activities in Singapore. In addition, there are numerous visual, literary and performing arts projects organized by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information and other cultural exchange programs. These activities, while promoting goodwill and cooperation with foreign countries, have had an educational impact on the local arts scene and helped to stimulate public interest in the arts. Moreover, the Arts Education Program (AEP) actively promotes art appreciation among the young in schools: local arts groups create and develop special performance or arts courses for schools.

Brigadier General (NS) George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts said in June 1995, “In the millennium, a cultural renaissance of historic importance will accompany the dramatic economic transformation of East Asia. By being of continuing service to the region and the world, Singapore hopes to do for the arts what it has done for banking, finance, manufacturing and commerce, and help create new ideas, opportunities and wealth.”

Singapore’s strategic location as a business hub with excellent business infrastructure allows it to present the region to the world and bring the world to the region. The Singapore Government’s International Business Hub 2000 vision of becoming a “vibrant, cosmopolitan center” has encouraged closer relations with the business community as sponsors and partners in developing culture. The Ministry of Finance offers sizable support, although the NAC requires more resources in order to achieve its goals with greater speed. Increasing patronage of the arts groups by political leaders have also helped.

Agencies including the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), National Computer Board (NCB), Economic Development Board (EDB), and the National Heritage Board (NHB) are united in their efforts to keep careful watch over the ever-growing arts industry. The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) promotes a lively calendar of cultural activities targeted at meeting the rising demand for leisure from the affluent population in the region. A creative marketing strategy can tap the region’s potential to provide an audience for the arts industry. The success of top West End hits, Cats, Les Miserables and the Phantom of the Opera indicates evidence of Singapore’s viability as a venue for musicals of first-rate quality.

Singapore can be an artistic and cultural bridge to the world in view of its understanding of both eastern and western cultures. It is in an ideal position to harness the creative energies of the region to provide windows of opportunity for not only the region but the whole world. Its global outlook has set the stage for its becoming a global city of the arts.