

Power, Place and Space in a Sustainable City: A Case Study of Buskers in Singapore's Orchard Road

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Introduction

“As part of the government's plan to make Singapore a global city of the arts, [reinforcing] the Renaissance spirit of creativity, innovation and multi- disciplinary learning [is] deemed vital to a knowledge-based economy.”

(Straits Times 9 May 2000)

Sustainable cities can be defined as urban areas that balance ecological, social and economic goals in a way that they may, in principle, be continued into the foreseeable future. Within the context of Singapore, sustainable development constitutes efforts geared towards environmental enhancement made possible through 'green' habits, practices and infrastructure. However, in the pursuit of creating a sustainable city, the role of culture and art are often neglected. Where efforts have been made to inject spontaneity in the streets of Singapore, strong economic motives often underlie such attempts.

Nonetheless, in recent years, the Singapore government has made some efforts to add vibrancy to the streetscapes, such as by welcoming street performers also known as 'buskers.' 'Buskers' is a term used in Singapore to describe those who sing with live music accompaniment, play musical instruments, dance, mime or perform other suitable theatrical acts or acts that are considered 'artistic' (National Arts Council 2012). By using Orchard Road as a landscape where buskers can exercise their power, this paper will discuss how different groups of buskers express, maintain and enhance this power through challenging social 'norms' and taking personal efforts to assert themselves in the social fabric and landscape. It will also show how Orchard Road, deemed as a landscape of dominant culture to many, could become a landscape of power, resistance as well as an alternative landscape to these buskers. As landscapes are experienced and so tangible, it has the capacity to make ideologies and values natural to us over time. By acknowledging the different social groups found along Orchard Road, this paper will analyse how power operates through the production of particular forms of difference and how it could be spatialised and inscribed onto the landscape.

1. Methodology

This study employs a mix of primary and secondary data collection. Qualitative data collection includes in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 buskers in Orchard Road in order to uncover various attitudes towards busking in Singapore. Interviews with the buskers took place along different busking spots in Orchard Road. Interviewees were chosen through ‘purposive sampling’ based on their potential research contribution (Cloke et al. 2004). In order to ensure a fair representation, respondents from different age groups, genders and nationalities were approached. Informed consent was sought from the interviewees before the interviews were conducted in order not to interrupt their performance.

In addition, a plethora of secondary sources was analysed to gain insights into officially endorsed representations of busking. Together with other resources on busking, Tan’s (2000/2001) “The Great Singapore Busking Experiment: A Discourse Analysis” dissertation informs this study about the history, evolution and challenges that buskers face in Singapore. One shortcoming of research is the lack of academic sources on street performance and busking, especially those in Singapore. This could be due to the relatively short history of busking in a country where state influence is strong. Nonetheless, there are relevant websites such as the National Arts Council (NAC)’s, as well as useful media like the Straits Times and online forums that augment this research. These sources are not only highly relevant but also provide updates on the latest government regulations on busking.

2. General Overview of Busking in Singapore

The aims and objectives of the NAC busking scheme are to:

1. Help enliven the streets of Singapore and to add colour to city life
2. Provide an opportunity for Singaporeans to exhibit their artistic talents in designated public spaces
3. Make the arts more accessible to the public

(NAC website)

From the government’s perspective, busking is important in order to create a vibrant arts scene especially in central tourist areas like Orchard Road. This is especially crucial after a tourist participation survey of Orchard Road suggested that “the entertainment outlets, cultural attractions... are lacking and poorly developed in Orchard Road” (Chang 1993). However, a strong economic motive may lie behind this government attempt. On the part of the buskers, this paper argues that their main aims are to gain experience or exposure, showcase their talent, reach out to the public and to a lesser extent, supplement their income.

Before buskers are legally permitted to perform on the streets, they face many bureaucratic ‘red tapes’. For instance, those who are interested to apply for a Letter of Endorsement are

required to go through an audition at NAC. Over the years, after the liberalisation of the busking regulations towards late 1998, they are continually revised. More often than not, new regulations would put buskers in a seemingly marginalised position. Despite this, this study follows in the vein of Atkins, Simmons and Roberts when they posit that “all landscapes transmit messages of power, subtly in most cases, that reinforce and reproduce existing cultural norms” (Atkins 1998, 224). It also aims to uncover the power buskers possess within the streetscape.

3. Measures of Power

Buskers, popularly misconceived as beggars, are often overlooked as active shapers of the landscape. Through their crafts, they actually have the power to shape the landscape. Power can be expressed and measured in very different forms. It is the immediacy of feedback- instant rewards of laughter, applause and donations central to busking that demonstrates this power (Campbell 1981, 213). Thus, the audience is the main factor. Benchmarks include the number of people amassed by the buskers, the time people spend watching the buskers and response of audiences, which can range from applause to interaction with buskers through compliments or song requests. Recognition for performances also comes in more tangible, qualitative forms, such as donations and even ‘gigs’. However, these are secondary. Nevertheless, all these legitimise their presence in the landscape. Despite being on the fringes of society, they are able to gain recognition. In addition, power can be viewed in terms of empowerment of the individual. This will be elaborated upon below.

4. Buskers Have Power Too: Ways of Expression

Street performers along Orchard Road are faced with many bodies of resistance. However, it is not a losing battle for them. Their passion and dedication see them asserting their own claims to place in spaces of dominant culture. In recent years, there have been changes to legislation with regard to busking locations. From March 2009, all applicants of new busking licenses are limited to certain busking spots along Orchard Road amongst which now excludes underpasses. This is in light of complaints from the Orchard Road Business Association (ORBA) about noise pollution (Sunday Times 22 March 2009). Furthermore, there have been grouses from the general public of buskers adding to the ‘clutter’ of Orchard Road and diminishing its status as a global cityscape (Straits Times 5 October 2008). These tensions arise due to Orchard Road being seen primarily as a premier landscape of tourism and consumption as reflected in a perception survey:

...Orchard Road can be regarded a tourist-shopping district since the majority of visitors consider shopping its main function. (Chang 1993, 197)

40 million dollars has been spent to improve the physical exteriors of Orchard (STB 2009). However, there are no corresponding measures to inject colour into street life. Not only is there a lack of government initiatives in support of buskers but new restrictions also impinge on the true spirit of busking by delimiting space and freedom. As one interviewee, Jason, 30, argues:

I was once at Lido when I encountered a busker painted in gold paint from head to toe at the basement. I am not sure if he is still around now but he would just stand there motionless. This man is an icon within the Orchard Road cityscape. However, he did not carry a license with him. So, there was a scuffle among him and us (the rest of the buskers) who are licensed.

Despite these, tensions that may arise from contestation of performing space between busking groups do not faze them due to an unspoken etiquette whereby different groups respect the space and performance times of others (Sunday Times March 22 2009). While it is too soon to judge the effects of the new legislation, buskers are aware of their place as colourful additions to an otherwise sanitised Orchard landscape. Each individual performance site is an alternative enclave. Collectively, by virtue of bearing a little bit of humanity in their acts, the buskers transform the Orchard landscape culturally and “such colour is anything but an eyesore” (The Online Citizen). From 9 year old drummer Ethan Ong (Figure 1), to veteran couple ‘The Highlights’ (Figure 2), to a pipa player from China (Figure 3), to a visually impaired keyboard player, a city that embraces diversity is encapsulated by the multifarious streetscape.



Figure 1: Ethan Ong performing for a group of audience outside The Paragon shopping mall

Source: <http://www.ethanong.com/2007/03/why-busking-by-christina-lim-ethans.html>



Figure 2: Veteran couple 'The Highlights' busking along Orchard Road

Source: http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/STISStory_353215.html?vgnmr=1



Figure 3: A Chinese pipa player performing outside Ngee Ann City Shopping Centre

Source: http://www.asiaone.com/A1MEDIA/news/10Oct08/images/20081005.082855_20081005-st-busker-d.jpg



Figure 4: A visually impaired busker who is often spotted along the underpass leading to Orchard Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station.

Source: <http://sunnysideupfoodie.blogspot.com/2008/11/busker-in-orchard-underpass.html>

Buskers resist the dominant culture of tourism and consumption on Orchard. Apart from that, they also assert power against the dominant Singaporean culture of pragmatism, where practicality is often valued and creativity in the form of art is often overlooked and its importance underestimated. Street performers go beyond boundaries with their passion. They speak from the heart through their art, enjoying a freedom of expression which in its truest form, is absent in the public spaces of Singapore. They are a manifestation and constant reminder of the “Art for Art’s Sake” movement, a philosophy that denies other functions except for the purity of art (Digital Nanyang Chronicle). For those like local busking group ‘The Highlights’, performing is not just a passion but also a source of income without the humdrum of an ‘office’ landscape. There is added pleasure in such a ‘job’ and this is captured well by John Timothy, 34, a travelling pianist:

I’m working for myself and that’s always a good feeling. It doesn’t mean I’m working any less- in many ways I’m working even more, but I like that kind of independence and freedom.

Some may even question the extent to which busking can be a first choice vocation for buskers. This is based upon the realisation that some buskers only earn a meager amount out of busking. For elderly buskers like Tan, 62, busking does help to supplement his income:

If a busker targets “hot spots” like the areas outside Isetan or Wisma Atria, he can actually earn a lot in a day. Yes, some passers-by may only drop a few cents into the busking

box. However, there are also generous ones who will leave 10 to 20 dollars as a token of appreciation. Such monetary rewards will only spur you on to perform better.

Likewise, according to younger buskers such as Paul, 28, at the end of the day, the amount that a busker obtains from his busking activity does not matter despite how negligible it is as it is the satisfaction derived from entertaining the crowd that matters. That includes the hard work and long hours put in busking. Furthermore, the benefits of busking are not only confined to the parameters of Orchard Road. For buskers like Paul, busking is viewed as a platform that may open up doors to penetrate the larger entertainment market in Singapore.

Power is empowering in and of its own right (Arendt, in Allan 2003). The power derived from transforming the landscape translates into an inner power. Such gratification comes in many forms. Not only are the buskers motivated to hone their craft but are given the exposure that helps build up important performing traits such as self-confidence and stage presence. To perform in the presence of complete strangers is not only a test of their courage but also adaptability to changing circumstances and ability to engage a crowd. Veteran performer Peter Diaz considers busking “quite challenging” since there is “no ready audience, or script or microphone”. For Rhythm De Passion, taking the step to record their first Extended Play (EP) is attributed to busking experiences which have boosted their confidence (Straits Times 26 February 2009). All of this is part of developing self-actualisation and esteem as put across by Maslow in his hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) (Figure 5).

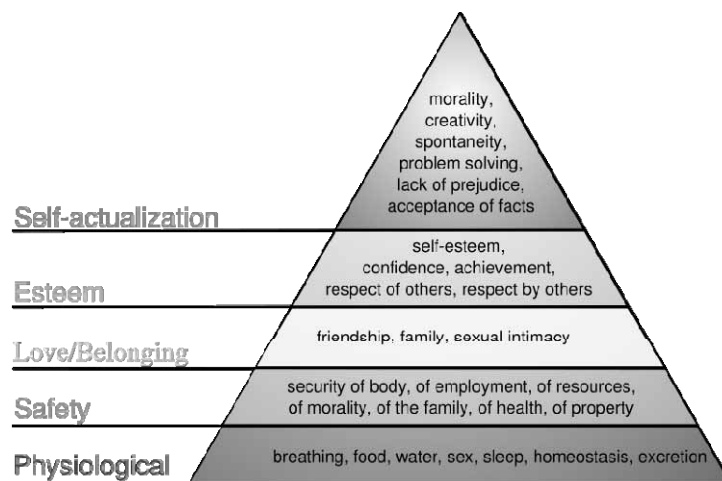


Figure 5: Model that depicts Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Source: <http://acumenfellows.wordpress.com/2007/11/29/a-theory-revisited-in-reality/>

The group, ‘buskers’, is not a homogeneous one. Bearing that in mind, this research also analyses disabled buskers (Figures 6 and 7). Disability is socially constructed by devaluing bodies that do not straightforwardly conform to conventional time-space work regimes (Parr

and Butler 1999). Recognising this, this paper argues that disabled buskers, on top of other resistances they face, go further to challenge stereotypical notions. The power they put across is that they are as qualified as abled members of society and that their lives are even more meaningful through art. Through evoking sympathy and awe, the position of the marginalised disabled person is improved, at least superficially. Empowerment through performance also helps them assert themselves in a landscape of dominant culture. Their presence and power shape the societal landscape, thereby increasing awareness of minority groups in Singapore.



Figure 6: A handicapped busker performing outside Ion Orchard

Source: http://technobiography.edongskey.com/wp-content/photos/eric_busker1.JPG



Figure 7: Another handicapped busker performing outside Ion Orchard

Source: <http://media.photobucket.com/image/buskers%2Borchard%2Broad/feetless72/16-1.jpg>

5. Maintaining their Power

For buskers to maintain power would be for them to continue entrancing audiences and deriving value from their effort. With this is a connotation of territoriality and its sustainability. This can be for the period of different 'sets' within the day or even over months. Location is a very important factor for buskers and different spatial and temporal strategies are employed. Mark Tay of August Man observed that a position such that people had time to locate some change, which is between when the busker is heard to when the passer-by reaches the performer, works best (August Man Nov 2008, quoted on Low Intensity Site).

The choice of location within Orchard has to be a strategic one with considerations including pedestrian traffic and proximity with other street users. Popular choices are intersections in front of Ngee Ann City, Wisma Atria and Tangs Shopping Centre (Sunday Times 22 March 2009). At the heart of Orchard, such areas have the greatest potential for audience numbers and so a large crowd can be drawn to legitimise the buskers' presence. In addition, there is relatively more space for buskers with instruments and the advantage of capturing people's attention as they wait for the traffic lights to change (Figure 8).

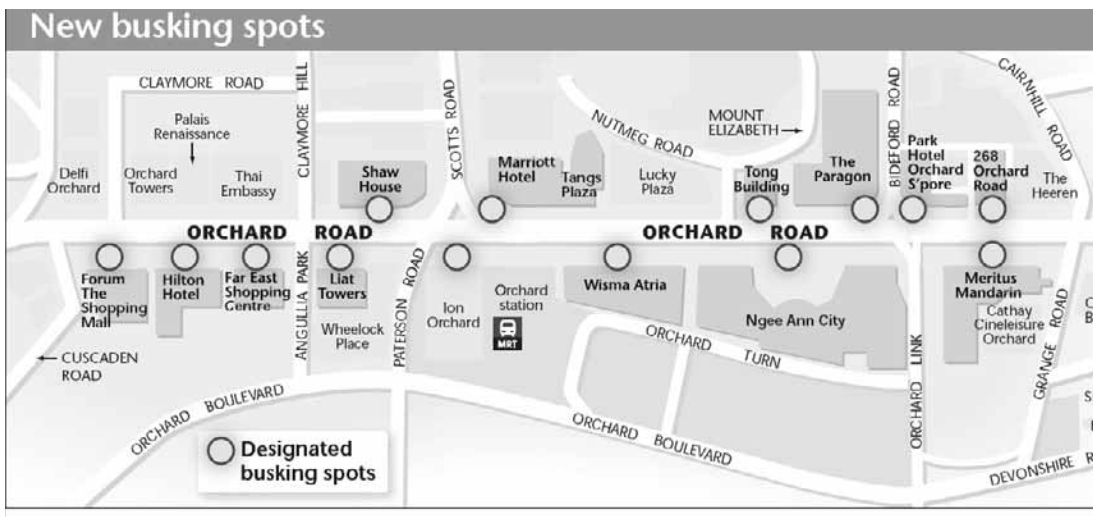


Figure 8: Spots along Orchard Road where buskers are allowed to perform

Source: http://www.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/pdf/20090321/OrchardBusking_map.pdf

The underpass is another location where buskers have to seek approval from NAC before being allowed to perform as underpasses are not a designated busking location. Compared to traffic junctions, audience numbers are sparse. However, this is advantageous because there is less competition with other users of the street, such as those who distribute flyers to passers-by. Also, street noise is diminished and the enclosed space helps improve the acoustics for performances. To some extent, as there is less scrutiny from human traffic, there are fewer

complaints of clutter and noise pollution. Therefore, such a location appropriate to each performance will help sustain buskers' ability to impress passers-by.

Buskers know that it is important to optimise their location and eventually turn it into a 'field of care' (Yi Fu Tuan 1930). Over time, repeatedly good shows in the performance space of choice leads to an identification with the busker as a personality and helps to cultivate a sense of place and sustain territoriality. Moreover, the license that buskers must obtain legitimises their performances for a year (NAC website). This alone is insufficient as strategies employed to enhance their power, as discussed below, reinforce their maintenance of power.

6. Enhancing their Power

Power is a fluid medium intrinsic in extensive and intensive social interaction over space (Allan 2003, 100). Since the basic premise for busking is engagement with the audience, active interaction helps to enhance the performers' power and sustain their act. There are a number of measures that buskers could adopt to reach out to the public, to increase public acceptance and appreciation towards them and the local arts scene in general. These include increasing their competency and skill in performance, expressing themselves confidently, engaging with the audience and being innovative and original (NAC website). Sometimes, buskers might even tend to overlook apparently "petty" issues like the attire to don in order to capture audience's attention. Thus, as veteran Ngee Ann City busker Leticia Caya, 55, puts it, audience engagement could involve "making enough eye contact with passers-by", making an "effort to wear something bright" and using a speaker system that is loud enough for everyone to hear" (Straits Times 22 March 2009).

Furthermore, the stricter ruling by the government is welcomed by some buskers who view it as a measure of their talent. Because "...tighter reins on quality of performance should be an important consideration in granting a licence" (Straits Times 3 March 2009), it implies to some that only the more "talented" buskers could obtain this recognition, hence distinguishing themselves from the less talented or less experienced. This is supported by the statement of Ms Lim Ruo Lin, whose group has obtained a busking license:

As part of a group that has got a busking licence, I welcome the stricter rules... As a quartet where every member had performed in school ensembles and orchestras, we felt busking could enhance our music education in school, and it was indeed a refreshing experience. (Straits Times Online Forum, 3 March 2009)

Besides, some even hope that the more stringent controls will "raise the arts scene in the streets by a notch" (Straits Times 3 March 2009). Hence, the tighter governmental controls on busking may not necessarily be bad news for buskers, especially for those who want to

establish a distinct recognition from the rest and who wish to use this to their advantage to hone their skills. In doing so, it could further assert their power and eminence in the landscape because the obtaining of license alone is not just a sign of their talent but also of success in overcoming so many administrative hurdles, which not everyone can attain.

Conclusion

Duncan and Duncan put forth that “landscapes should be read as a text where its different layers of meanings could be peeled back and interpreted” (Duncan and Duncan 1988, 118). By analysing buskers as important actors within the Orchard Road landscape, this study has gained valuable insights on their assertion of power. Not only do buskers carve out alternative spaces for themselves in Orchard through the power of expression but a deeper sense of empowerment is derived as well. By choosing a suitable space, their ability to carry out social interactions with audiences can be maintained. Finally, strategies such as audience engagement help to reinforce and legitimise their act. The continued presence of buskers is a signal that every social actor is equipped with power, reinforcing the idea that power relations is not a static concept and entails complex relationships with different sections of society. Finally, the power of busking is captured succinctly by Turcotte:

Street performances are viewed as a sign of hope in a society plagued by a multitude of problems... It's not going to topple the system, but combined with other private, personal and heartfelt commitments it can have a tremendous impact. (Turcotte 1993)

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