

Connotations of ephemeral spaces of consumption: a case study of Singapore's Little India

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Abstract

The practice of consumption is intrinsically integrated into our post-modern society and is fundamental in exercising, defining and re-defining people and group identity. Consumption occurs somewhere and somewhere it is a spatial activity, it is shaped by time and space. The site of this investigation, the touristic enclave of Little India, appears to hold a "distinct" culture of consumption within Singapore and ephemeral spaces of consumption that are continuously produced and re-produced everyday and every night seem to be essential for the distinctive behavior of consumers. This case study analyzes the processes of production, de-production, re-production of the mentioned temporary spaces of consumption and their significance for a multicultural/multiethnic society.

Keywords: Consumption, ephemeral spaces, social practice, identity, tourism.

Introduction

The street is crowded with people, two taxi drivers are impatient to get through, they will need to wait and make use of creative tactics to negotiate their way - not only with the strollers/consumers, but also with the truck that has parked in second row to upload some additional used cardboard boxes and with a convoy of six trishaws entertaining what seems to be Japanese tourists and one more -this time an old lady, British I guess. It is a 'democratic' space where top-down planning is constantly being contested by multiple bottom-up forces.

This paper is dealing with the role that the urban space of consumption in Little India plays in influencing consumer behaviors and in maintaining a meaningful Indian ethnic community. Consumption, usually described as the exchange of commodities, can be conceptualized in other than economic terms. With the expansion of urbanization and the globalization of capitalism consumption has become probably the most important activity of our contemporary cities and today plays an imperative role in cultural and social terms and is fundamental in our identity formation. There is a need to recognize both "material and immaterial elements of consumption, which conceptualize both cultural and economic dimensions, as well as both its social and political aspects simultaneously" ⁱ

The case study takes place in the city-state of Singapore, a country which process of transformation continues incessantly since more than 45 years. It is a developmental state that on one hand promotes consumerism as a way to achieve high economic growth and to assure continuity, but on the other hand conveys an ambivalent discourse about consumption when dealing with issues of identity. In this nation the practice of consumption is probably what best identifies an important number of its citizens. "Everything also I want" ⁱⁱ expresses the popular character Mr. Kiasu, manifesting what appears to be a prevalent feeling of Singaporeans. While consumption is considered a culture in Singapore, ⁱⁱⁱ Chua Beng Huat - a Singaporean postmodernist theorist and an expert in consumption in Asia- underlines that consumerism cannot be studied as a "coherent and integrated object," ^{iv} and he insists on the need to study consumerism as culture as "an abstraction that can only be examined on fragments." ^v

This study takes place in a specific fragment, the ethnic quarter of Little India, a historic district that has undergone massive transformations and that has experienced the displacement of an important number of its “original” inhabitants, a heritage landscape that today serves as a touristic location, and which is mainly a place of consumption. Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh explain:

“...[H]eritage landscapes...allow the state to claim Singapore’s distinctiveness amidst the homogenization that is assumed to come with modernity and globalization. This distinctiveness, in turn, becomes part of the city’s strategy to expand tourism, thus contributing to Singapore’s continuing economic development and the state’s legitimacy”.^{vi}

Singapore proclaims itself as a multicultural and multiethnic nation and brands its “uniqueness” in this assertion. However, Little India’s landscape is continually being rewritten by the dominant power to the point that this “exotic” site exploited for touristic purposes is in danger of turning completely into a theme park. Contemporary structures are encroaching on the small section delimited as conservation area, and even this small section is the object of constant gentrification, the locus where traditional family businesses are being replaced by ‘anonymous’ ‘SoHo’ type new enterprises, or in a few cases by settlements for intellectual/artistic collectives.

When in the 1980s the government realized the importance and potential of heritage quarters, conservation areas were delimited and a redevelopment plan was put in place. The new plan implied, among other regulations, the renovation and the adaptive re-use of family businesses that were not economically viable. It could be said that even today Little India embodies an atypical reality within the city-state. Its value goes well beyond the physical built structure that has survived the period of extensive physical transformations. Little India can still be seen as an Indian community where at least some aspects of the Indian culture are being practiced. Consumption behavior in this touristic enclave appears to be driven not solely by the advertisement of globalized products, but mainly by actual needs, related to tradition, religions and other culture-related concerns.

I am investigating what enables the distinct culture of consumption in these fragments and if what appears to be the expression of an Indian identity really has a meaningful tread linked somehow to its cultural and historical roots, or if it is just a perfect theatrical setting - with former residents as “indigenous” actors – well exploited as an exotic touristic area to be consumed.

Consumption as a contested space

Marxist theoreticians understand consumption “as an instrument of capital”^{vii} - a powerful tool of domination that serves sovereign power - and perceive consumers as easily manipulated and alienated by advertisement, through commodity fetishism. Postmodernist theorists understand consumption as a more fragmented phenomenon. Chua Beng Huat explains that postmodern thinkers see consumers “as one who actively uses mass-produced and mass-marketed commodities in ways other than those desired or dictated by the producers as projected through advertisements”.^{viii} For Rob Shield “many consumers are now ironic, knowing shoppers, conscious of the inequalities of exchange and the arbitrary nature of exchange value.”^{ix} Consumers then may be conceptualized as completely rational individuals in total control of their decisions and able to freely give the final meaning to commodities. David Clarke dissents with the idea of a full consciousness on the part of consumers. He points out that “[f]or psychoanalysis, the subject is constituted as much as it is constitutive, and is never fully present to itself. There is always the unconscious. ... [He then declares that] “full consciousness or false consciousness [of the consumer are not] the only alternatives...”^x

In line with the idea that consumers are neither fully conscious individuals in total control of their own existence and choices, nor unconscious alienated entities, consumption may be better analyzed as a place of contestation. Indeed, for Michel de-Certeau consumption is a constant interplay between strategies and tactics.^{xi} It is not in ‘power’ of the dominant order, nor in ‘power’ of the consumers. There is a symbiotic relation between the strategies proposed by the ruling class/producers and the

tactics employed in return by popular subject/consumers. De-Certeau conceives consumption as a way of operating, a manner in which something is selected and used; he states that it is by consuming that consumers transform the meaning. It is by “poaching” into the intentional sign-value of a certain commodity -defined by the ruling elite- that users/consumers transform the meaning to their own terms, defining and/or exercising their identity. What is contested in the process of consumption then is the meaning of commodities –their sign-value. In his book “The System of Objects” Jean Baudrillard explores the importance of consumption as the heart of the social order. He asserts that “consumer society is primarily a system of signs,”^{xii} and “consumer objects constitute a classification system that codes behaviors and groups.”^{xiii} He explains that the site of consumption is also absorbed into the system and thus the site is influencing the meaning and is the location where the meaning is contested.

As consumption is arguably the most important activity of our contemporary cities, it can be said that the city is experienced through consumption. In fact not only objects and services are consumed but the city itself is consumed/ re-produced while being experienced. Consumption is a spatial activity; it is shaped by space. “[T]he acts of consumption are situated and contextualized in both time and space; they happen somewhere and somewhen.”^{xiv} The urban context has “direct impacts on behavior and, indirectly [has] a discursive impact on thought and cultural practice.”^{xv} For Lukas Smas “Consumption is inherently a spatial project ... and indeed a geographical issue not only because it takes place and is situated in time and space, but also because consumption forms places ... and because geography is crucial in ‘how consumers consume.’”^{xvi}

Domination and contestation are “played out in and through landscape[s].”^{xvii} Different locations, different spatial situations enable or constrain specific consumers behaviors, specific ways of negotiation. “[C]onsumption subversion and the different meanings which different people assign ... are historically and geographically constructed and negotiated.”^{xviii} “[S]pace itself has a history”^{xix} of social and physical aspects. Is not a fixed entity, never a passive location. The meaning attached to a place changes over time as it is constantly being interpreted. As the site of social activity “space is a unitary yet contingent concept embodying the physical, the mental and the social” [Consuming in space and consuming space is an] “increasingly globally-scaled, yet intensely localized activity,”^{xx} the historical context, the particular cultural and physical properties of the spaces of consumption are fundamental to shape life experience.

Space is not a residual phenomenon where consumption occurs, but a constitutive dimension of consumer’s life experience, consumer’s processes of contestation, and consumer’s decisions and actions.

Singapore’s Little India

The historic quarter of Little India is a space of consumption, a touristic site and still today to some extent an Indian Community.

Back in the 19th century, Little India was the place where Indians established a cattle industry and other cattle related activities. Close to this area, -in Dhoby Ghaut Junction- was the location of an Indian convict jail, which seems to have drawn many Indians working in prison- related services to the quarter. While the area attracted at that time an important number of Indians, it was never exclusively an Indian section settlement. Europeans placed the Race Course for horseracing -in the road that took its name- already in the 1840s. The European influence is seen in the names of many roads and in the presence of various buildings such as for example: the Kandang Kerbau Police Station, the post office, government stores, the lunatic asylum, a government dispensary and the old Kandang Kerbau Hospital, many of which are not there any more today. Chinese influence was also present in the area already at that time; Chinese vegetable gardens are depicted in maps from 1836 and 1844. In addition, a Malay kampong style residential site existed in the area known as Kampong Kapor (see figure 1). From 1830 to 1880, the area “embraced the highest strata of the colonial society, as well as the livelihood of the lowest. Vegetable gardens, cattle-pens, slaughterhouses, and the Race Course

testified to its rural character.”^{xxi} Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Shotam explain that during the last decades of the 19th century and “judging from the number of buildings erected, and the number of new roads constructed, there must have been a substantial influx of population into the Serangoon Road area ... Reflecting the statistics of that time this influx was predominantly male... [and] predominantly Indian... [This] is best indicated by the list of names of those who submitted building plans at this time... Thus in 1885, for example, out of twenty persons who presented plans, three were Chinese and the remaining were Indians, In 1890, out of seven individuals who submitted plans, one was Chinese and the others were Indians.”^{xxii}

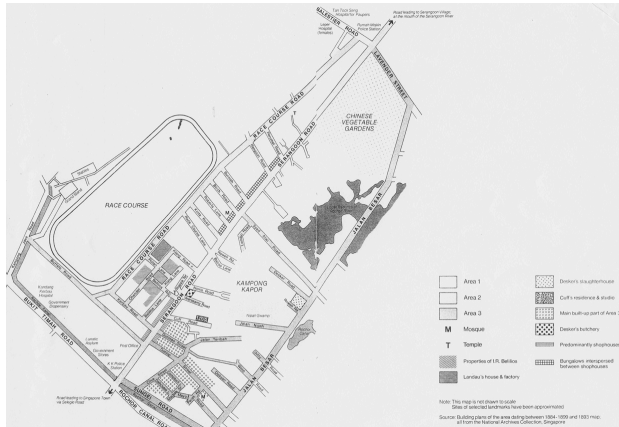


figure 1: Little India 1890s



figure 2: Little India 2011 (demarcated area of study)

This continuous flow of people into the site created the need for more residential and commercial space and started to steadily alter the landscape. When around the 1930s the cattle were forced out of the area, Little India not only survived and grew into a residential commercial centre with small family businesses, but flourished to become the heart of the Indian community, a site for Indian festivals, and for associational and religious activities. At that time, “married bachelors and families in the area reinforced, and was in turn strengthened by the movement of commercial migrants into the area: family astrologers, goldsmiths, garland-makers, *paanwallas*, sari and textiles retailers, provision store-keepers and the like were the most popular traders who set up business at that time.”^{xxiii}

However, during the first decades of Singapore’s independence known as the moment of ‘Nation building’ (1960s-1980s) the clearance of the over-crowded housing situation in the central area was one of the firsts priorities of Singapore’s government, and this included Little India. Being this area an ethnic enclave, dispersion/de-territorialization was for political reasons even more crucial. The urban transformation meant, in the words of Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, an “almost vehemently... cleaning up of people and place to remove social/ moral and physical pollution.”^{xxiv}

Only in the 1980s, when the government realized the importance and potential of heritage quarters, conservation areas were delimited. “[E]thnic neighborhoods were considered repositories of the nation’s fast diminishing heritage which give a sense of place and identity to the country and its citizen. [Conservation was also important given] the poor performance by the tourism industry.”^{xxv} As a result Little India is since 1986 one of the three areas included in Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) Conservation Master Plan. “The URA’s vision was to develop Little India as a distinct historic district within which dwells the heart of the Singaporean Indian heritage,”^{xxvi} and at the same time a civic and tourism asset. The URA selected one part of the whole conservation area in order to “undergo an intensive process of adaptive reuse which includes eviction of former tenants, conservation of facades, renovation of interior areas and resale through a public tendering process... The URA described the selected area as containing the greatest density of Indian trades (URA, 1988).” URA’s redevelopment plan stated that property prices and rental fees in the conserved shop-houses are to be pegged at market value in order to ensure that only commercially viable enterprises are attracted to the area.^{xxvii}

I believe that it is a misconception of what a place means and of what is the essence of architecture and urbanism to propose that the renovation of the physical structure of the historic architecture and its adaptive reuse with 'commercially viable enterprises' could reinforce the place where 'dwells the heart of the Singaporean Indian heritage'. As explained by Ian Borden and others, ... "[a]rchitecture is ambient and atmospheric... architecture is less the constitution of space than a way of watching and comprehending the spatiality of the city."^{xxviii} The situational rhythm of Little India depends more on the relationship between people, objects and actions in a particular space and time. As space is a social production,^{xxix} the daily experience of this urban space/place cannot be re-created or reinforced without taking into account the social relations, the sense of belonging, the meaning of objects and services, the sounds, the scents, the culture as a whole. Little India is an event, and if there is a real interest to maintain it alive, the fast and top-down redevelopment of this ethnic quarter into a place for pleasure consumption may not be the best way.

Little India's process of gentrification continues; nearly every month either a small store is being displaced, or a street stall disappears, or a one-person business located in a five-foot-way in front of a 'formal' business is pushed out. This process of 'de-production' of the Indian-Singaporean's community space seems to respond to a "commoditization process in which local societies are changed for tourists under a consciously crafted scheme initiated by profit-minded entrepreneurs and government,"^{xxx} and it can be understood as part of the global process of redevelopment of heritage sites which tends to transform them into exotic touristic attractions, removing traditional land uses and replacing them by new enterprises. However, the fact that the tourists contribute a smaller percentage to the economy of the area than Singaporean visitors, (see endnote)^{xxxi} and the fact that tourists express to be attracted to Little India "because of the unpretentious local savour"... [and the possibility of] "immersing themselves into a minority culture",... [seems to suggest that there are other forces behind the incessant decline of this home] "to all Indians,... Singaporean Indians and Indian tourists as well as laborers from the Indian sub-continent."... [It is usually stated that modern urban planners and policy-makers understand the landscape] "from a functionalist perspective... [with] a sense of objective outsidersness ... planning and working according to principles of logic, reason and efficiency."^{xxxii} But after all of what has been discussed and written during the past many years, it is surprising that planners apparently maintain the 'naïve' belief that this formula can be successful to sustain identity.

According to the last census, Indians represent 9.2 % of Singapore's resident population. Indians were among the first migrants to Singapore and although they always were a minority group, they managed to maintain and adapt their rich culture to new periods of time and new situations and to significantly contribute to Singapore's multicultural and multiethnic identity. Landscape plays an important role in the construction of identity.^{xxxiii} Little India played and continues to play an essential role for the Indian identity, not only because of the availability of goods and services needed to maintain the Indian culture, nor because of the historical attachment to the community space, or because of the affective bonds forged by ethnicity,^{xxxiv} but mainly because this enclave continues to live the 'Indian-way'.

"As a multifunctional landscape in the global city of Singapore, Little India offers an example of locality shaped simultaneously by global forces (of tourism, commercialism, and post-modern urban change) and local pressures (the assertions of Indians identities and cultural heritage)."^{xxxv}

Signs of a clear Indian identity can still be found in a reduced geographical space, - a fragment within the fragment- an area that is continuously being reduced and that is subject to a clear set of regulations. In this fragment, a distinctive culture of consumption exists, which appears to reflect existing traces of its 'original' traditions. In this reduced amorphous geographical space of Little India one can find a wide variety of provisions and other goods and services necessary to maintain the South Asian culture. Here, consumption behavior is driven not solely by the advertisement of globalized products, but mainly by actual needs related to tradition, religions and other culture-related concerns, and the space of consumption is configured and is being consumed in a unique manner. In addition,

these spaces are occupied by a large diversity of permanent and transient users, many of them Indian Singaporeans who in the past were residents of Little India, Singaporeans of other ethnic groups, residents of different nationalities, an increasing number of tourists, and -especially during weekends- a more important number of migrant workers coming from South Asian countries.

Along the public and semi-public spaces of these fragments one can find dismantlable stalls and other ephemeral and alternative situations of consumption which are continuously produced and re-produced every day and every night. These ephemeral spaces of consumption may help to sustain the still existing “distinctive” consumption behavior- connected to the cultural and historic roots of this place. While the fixed built structure is the result of a strategic urban master plan, the changeable/ephemeral-spaces of consumption are in most cases the result of individual or group tactics. Tactics that are linked with those utilized originally in this district. They are liminal places that have “survived” the incessant transformations of the ethnic quarter; they punctuate the controlled, more homogeneous “official” public spaces and constitute a sort of heterotopia.

Ephemeral places of consumption

...“it is clear enough that space and time, however conceived, are the great framework within which we order our experience.”^{xxxvi}

Our post-modern complex forms of urbanization make fieldwork observation increasingly necessary. I approach the study of the ephemeral spaces of consumptions through an ethnographic and spatial analysis as strolling, looking, buying, talking, smelling, tasting and hearing are essential actions to apprehend the meaningful remaining Little India.

Little India’s meaningful fragments are ephemeral events. The continuous process of production and re-production of these spaces impact the physical configuration, the spatial/social practices and the perceptions of consumers. Consuming commodities in these spatial fragments is also a way to produce and re-produce the space. These ephemeral events are the product of complex contestations, and unlike the fixed built structure that is undergoing an accelerated transformation ‘controlled’ by the those in power, these spaces/places are the result of tactics produced and re-produced by less powerful vendors and re-re-produced by consumers.

With a narrative of my observation and my experiences in the mentioned fragment I hope to be able to convey at least to some extent the sense of place that I felt and that I believe to be important to explore.

Campbell Lane’s vegetables stalls displayed in the street are being replenished continually since these commodities are consumed very fast. An old lady and a middle-aged lady chat while selecting vegetables, the younger one is wearing a pant and Indian blouse, and the older one her pink bright sari. Next to them are standing three men, one -apparently Bangladeshi- is paying the stall vendor, the other two are talking quite loudly- it sounds like Cantonese, they are consuming the space, looking at what is offered, but they don’t seem to have an intention to perform an economic transaction anytime soon. A Muslim lady and her husband are trying to move closer to the vegetables and behind them two curious European ladies seem to enjoy the scenery. Next to the vegetables stall are other stalls with garland flowers and religious paraphernalia. Their displays occupy part of the street, a part of the five-foot-way, and also a portion of the small alley that connects to Dunlop Street. Fragrant jasmines and other bright flowers are being strung together into garlands, probably by a skillful Indian migrant that was carefully selected and brought from an Indian town for that purpose. It is a vibrant scene full of color and vitality.



The physical configuration of these ephemeral stalls, their location -either directly on the streets or in five-foot-ways spilling out into the street and their ephemeral and somehow fragile condition, delineate the socio-spatial dynamics of these active public spaces. The street is full of strollers/consumers. As it is usual in the Indian sub-continent, in these fragments, most people's walk in the street, no matter if the street is not designated for pedestrians but for vehicles. A positive social intercourse takes place in this -sometimes congested- fragment where people from different origins, ages, nationalities, or social and economic condition celebrate the space.

Consuming these fragments could sometimes be a very contested action. Along Serangoon road, in some occasions I have to negotiate my way between commodities that spill out of the stores and almost fill the five-foot-way. Sometimes there will also be moveable booths selling phone cards or a stall selling coconuts or a street-tailor that may also be sharing the reduced space. If the situations is too contested, I may need to step down into the street and negotiate my way with the busy traffic, but since this is Little India -and here people are more important than vehicles- cars will be patient and respectful since they know the codes shared in this space.



However, these exciting consumption-based performances do not happen in every five-foot-way of Little India anymore. The number of 'formal' stores that maintain the five-foot-way free of any commodity or ephemeral booths is increasing, and as spatial configuration and perception changes, so does the social behavior of consumers.

It is a different urban layer where people maintain a greater distance between them, talk less and in lower tones, walk faster and in a straight line. Social behavior in these 'empty' ways cannot be recognized as particularly Indian, but it already is one of the layers that conform this ethnic quarter. Little India's local landscape is a "multi-faceted interactions of different urban layers and scales

Conclusion

Lefebvre declares that every society produces its own space. The fact that the Indian community in Singapore still produces their own spaces -at least within those ephemeral fragments of Little India- is a manifestation that the Singaporean-Indian identity survives, and with it the value that this brings to a nation that 'proudly' declares itself to be multiethnic and multicultural. Identity, is not a fixed reality, it is always in flux and the Indian culture in Singapore is a clear example of this. Especially in multicultural societies, an original culture can be deeply transformed, sometimes into a hybrid culture, maybe losing some of the rich aspects of its origin. From the beginning, this investigation did not have the intention to verify, but to explore the significance of fragments in Little India that appeared authentic, and to invite others to continue this exploration and to document it. In the four years that I have been living in Singapore, Little India has changed a lot, many aspects I did not document, I thought I had time...

*Every day is different;
weekdays are very different from weekends,
morning-time is different from night-time,
rainy days/hours from dry ones.*

I thought about them as exiting circumstances, and they are. I also thought that I could wait for the next weekend, night-time or dry day to document it, but sometimes just what I was waiting to record, disappeared and it did not come back.

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