

By Invitation

The ethics of naming buildings after luminaries

Naming rights can add lustre to a family's legacy, or can be viewed as a giant billboard advertisement on a building. It depends – on the person's reputation, and also how history views him or her.



Simon Chesterman

For *The Straits Times*

Last Monday, the National University of Singapore named its Centre for Law and Business after Mr E. W. Barker, Singapore's longest-serving Minister for Law. The Prime Minister and members of the Barker family attended the launch.

A day earlier, on the other side of the world, the United Nations withdrew its support of a West Bank Palestinian women's centre that had been named after a notorious terrorist, saying the move was "offensive" and glorified terrorism.

Why do we name things after individuals? Why do others put up good money to help do so? And what are the pitfalls associated with naming rights?

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

For some, naming an institution – whether it is a physical structure, like a building, or something less tangible, like a scholarship – is a way of preserving a legacy. For others, the very act of putting a name on something in exchange for money looks like a form of advertising, a glorified billboard.

It is usually possible to distinguish between philanthropic and commercial motives. No one would suggest that the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies was named with an eye to business development. When Coca-Cola sponsors the Olympic Games, by contrast, it is transparently an effort to sell more

of the company's sugary beverages. Universities, cultural institutions and healthcare facilities are frequent beneficiaries of philanthropic naming. Some argue that the absence of a self-interested motive can best be assured if names are bestowed only after the person in question is deceased.

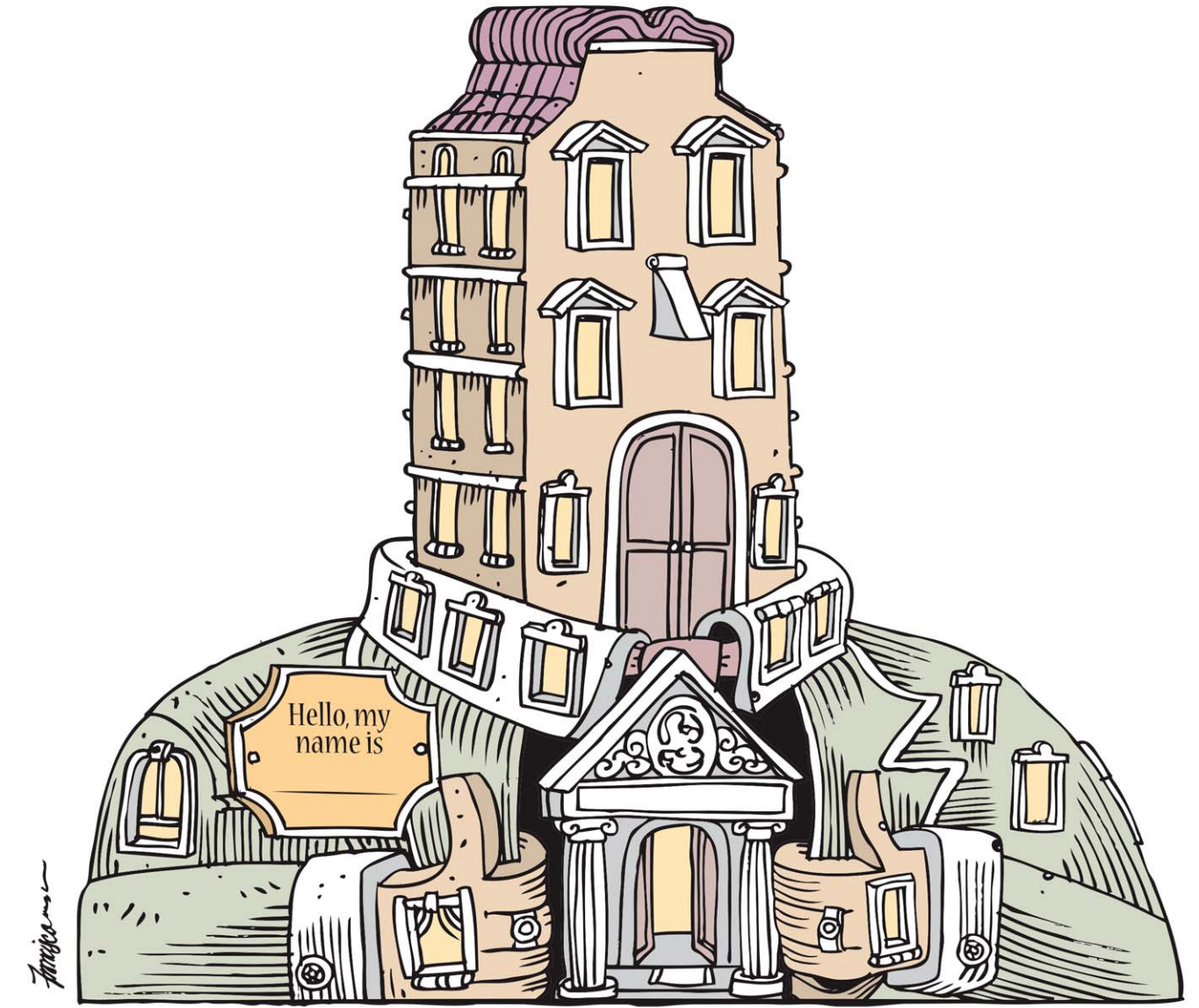
However, it is unrealistic to make that a hard and fast rule. The Faculty of Law's neighbour at NUS is the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Named after Singapore's founding prime minister on the occasion of his 80th birthday, this enabled Mr Lee to be recognised in his lifetime and celebrate his commitment to good governance and leadership excellence in Singapore and the wider region.

Nonetheless, it is prudent to be clear about whether naming is a commercial opportunity or a philanthropic contribution. Yet if it is not a commercial decision, why do it? What is in it for the named individual, and for the institution itself?

For the individual, it offers a kind of immortality. A name on something larger than a tombstone is a wish to have an impact that goes beyond one lifespan – a corporate titan who loved the arts, say, or the owner of a small enterprise who wanted to inspire and create opportunities for those less fortunate than herself.

On occasion, naming can also help to transform a legacy. Most people associate Alfred Nobel with the Nobel Prizes. Yet the money that made them possible came from inventing dynamite and gellignite, making him one of the biggest arms dealers of the 19th century.

Nobel was unusual in that he had a chance to see what his legacy might have been. On a trip to France in 1888, his brother died – but a French newspaper mistakenly published the obituary for Alfred himself. It was not



positive. "The merchant of death is dead", ran a typical headline.

Seven years later, Nobel signed the will that bequeathed the vast majority of his estate to establish the prizes. (His obituaries were rewritten.)

For the institution, embracing a name associates it with the values and the memory of that person. In the case of a university, it encourages both faculty and students to learn more about the person – and, hopefully, to aspire to live up to those values themselves.

It is also, it must be said, an opportunity to bring in additional resources.

THAT DEAR PERFECTION

In Singapore, we are lucky that the Government provides a strong financial foundation for institutions of higher learning. But as we at NUS Law strive to be one of the best law schools in the world, while ensuring that no deserving student is left behind for financial reasons, we need to reach out for additional support.

Gifts like those that supported the launch of the E. W. Barker Centre for Law and Business enable us to enhance the quality and impact of our research without raising fees or asking Government for more tax dollars. I was particularly pleased that we also launched a new bursary bearing Mr Barker's name. Such financial support enables us to say truthfully that no student is denied admission to university due to financial difficulty.

Some universities take this to extremes. In the United States, for

example, university tuition is the most expensive in the world. Tuition has risen around four times the rate of cost-adjusted inflation, increasing by a factor of 10 in the past 30 years. Much of this is offset by loans, but also by philanthropy.

The result may seem perverse. At Princeton, the nominal cost of attendance for a freshman student is almost \$90,000. Yet less than 40 per cent of students actually pay that amount. The rest receive varying amounts of financial aid – much of it coming from alumni donations. It is far easier to ask alumni to support needy students than to pay for salaries and utilities.

The first thing many American graduates do, upon receiving their degree, is offer another cheque to the university in the form of a donation. In part, this is because the universities can be relentless about asking for money; in part, it is due to peer pressure. There is also less of an expectation that government will provide in areas like education.

But underlying all of this is a realisation that a university experience provides value that lasts a lifetime, and that gifts to a university can have a tremendous impact on the students that pass through its doors and the ideas that percolate through its buildings.

'TIS BUT THY NAME THAT IS MY ENEMY

Though some donors prefer to remain anonymous, most gifts are recognised – in a report, on a plaque, or by attaching a name to the thing being supported. That tends to be where problems can arise.

A first type of problem is where the donor is found to be toxic. In 2011, the London School of Economics (LSE) was severely criticised for accepting a £1.5 million (\$2.7 million) pledge from a foundation associated with Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The director of the LSE, Mr Howard Davies, resigned over the episode.

Second, the name itself may be deemed problematic. Though not tied to a gift, the proposal earlier this year to name a World War II exhibition the Syonan Gallery, recalling the Japanese name for occupied Singapore, sparked a public outcry that led to it being renamed.

In the US, there has been a spate of criticism over names associated with its history of racial injustice. After decades of disputes, Yale's Calhoun College – named for a white supremacist who defended slavery as a "positive good" – will next month be renamed Grace Hopper College. Similar efforts to change Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs and a residential college were unsuccessful, though the university has committed to being more transparent about Wilson's "failings and shortcomings". (Disclosure: I benefited from a Rhodes Scholarship, endowed by and named after a man who was an unapologetic imperialist and racist.)

A third type of question is whether someone who provides less than 100 per cent of the funding should nonetheless be able to dictate the name – if indeed the thing should be named at all.

Where a public space is largely paid for by taxpayers, it may be seen as inappropriate to attach another name, particularly if the motivation is commercial. In the case of the Singapore Sports Hub, for example, OCBC Bank secured a 15-year sponsorship deal on naming rights, but the Government excluded the nearby National Stadium and the Indoor Stadium from the deal.

The last species of controversy is the one we at NUS Law now strive to avoid: That the institution bearing the name might not live up to the lofty expectations set by the eponym.

When I first broached the possibility of naming the Centre with Mrs Barker, she was pleased that her husband was being recognised – but also adamant that it should be more than a mere token. The Centre had to be something that would really make a difference to Singapore and the region.

As I said on Monday night, above and beyond the generous donations, the Barker family has given NUS an extraordinary honour: Naming a centre after Singapore's longest-serving Minister for Law, a reluctant politician who nonetheless devoted his professional life to improving Singapore. We can only aspire to live up to such a legacy.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is Dean and Professor of the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law.