

Beyond a Founders' Memorial, build a monument to the people

Great leaders are important but are nothing without the many seen and unseen people and acts that support them

Arun Mahizhnan

For *The Straits Times*

I started drafting this article last week and was mulling over the poem *The Builder* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It reads:

All are architects of Fate,
Working in these walls of Time;
Some with massive deeds and great,
Some with ornaments of rhyme.

Nothing useless is, or low;
Each thing in its place is best;
And what seems but idle show
Strengthens and supports the rest.

In the elder days of Art,
Builders wrought with greatest care
Each minute and unseen part;
For the Gods see everywhere.

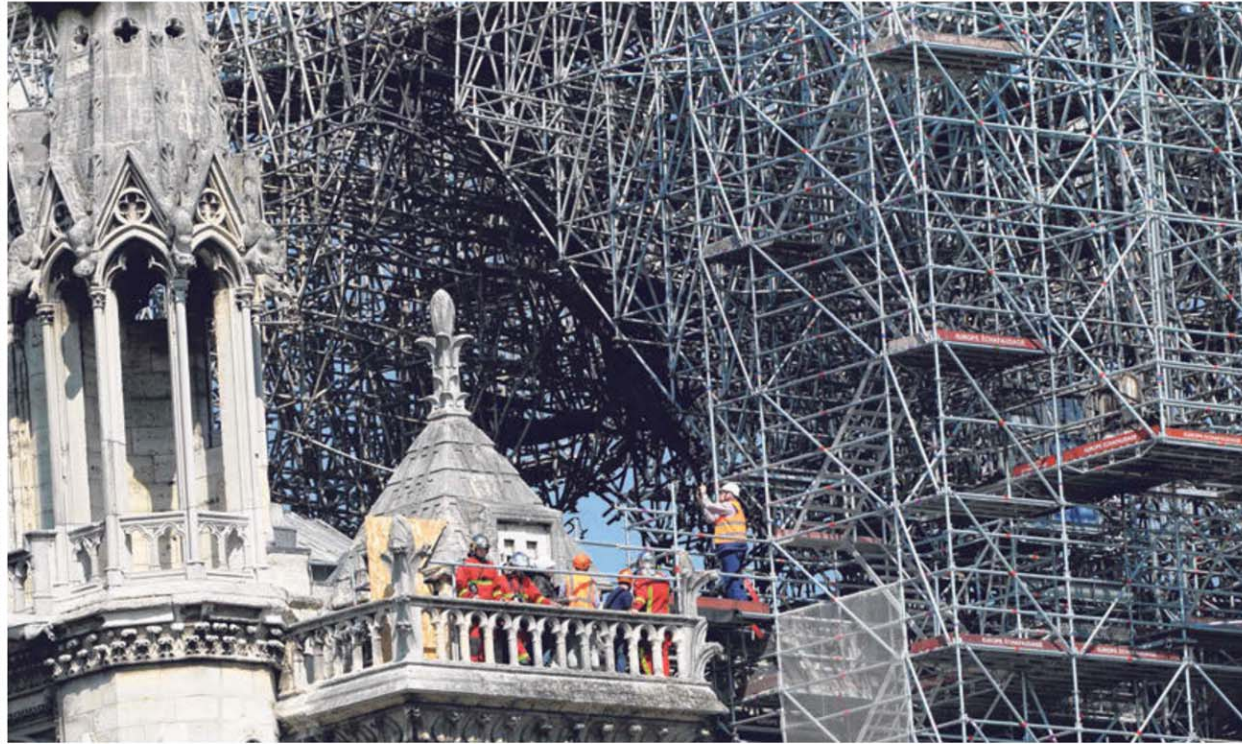
Let us do our work as well,
Both the unseen and the seen.

When I copied those lines into this article, the spire of Notre-Dame was still standing. Today, the 800-year-old cathedral is almost gutted. So much for history, monuments and memories. But my accidental choice of *The Builder* could not have been more poignant or relevant. Cathedrals and cathedral builders have much to teach us.

Singapore's own bicentennial is a good moment to reflect on its own cathedrals and their builders. The commemoration of the country's 200 years since the landing of the British and Sir Stamford Raffles in Singapore is a moment to reflect on the journey of our society and why we made great strides or stumbled along the way.

Tamils have a profound saying that might offer some insight: "As the king, so the subjects." Undeniably, leadership plays a critical role in the overall performance of a society.

As we look at the transformation of the Singapore landscape, we can



Firefighters working on a balcony of Paris' Notre-Dame cathedral last Friday, four days after a fire destroyed its spire and roof. France plans to rebuild the iconic cathedral in just five years, for it embodies not only the religious spirit of those who worship there, but also the spirit of a nation. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

see ample evidence of the role leaders play, the most oft-cited being the leadership of Mr Lee Kuan Yew as the first prime minister of Singapore. And where such outstanding leadership is absent or unavailable, the performance has often been lacklustre.

However, is it only leadership that makes the difference?

Historian Thomas Carlyle once said, "The history of the world is but the biography of great men", giving much credence to the Great Man theory. Really?

In the Olympic Games, we mostly remember the one who came first. But then, mostly, it is one person's effort. And it can be seen. Timed. Measured.

In building a cathedral, as Longfellow's builders did, no matter

how great the design, it is the ordinary builders, who "wrought with greatest care" and who made the structure stand the test of time. No one's work was too small or too low, as everything had its place and strengthened one another.

And gods saw everywhere, the seen and the unseen.

I wish we could see the work of the thousands of ordinary builders that built the cathedral of Singapore, see beyond the architects such as Raffles and Mr Lee.

The odd thing is that Mr Lee was "careful not to let (a) personality cult grow around him", as his son, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, said recently. Yet, Singapore seems enamoured mostly with numero uno. William Farquhar was No. 2 to Raffles but

some would argue that he did even more good for Singapore than Raffles. Yet, Farquhar hardly figures in the public consciousness of Singaporeans.

Why go that far in the past? Even Dr Goh Keng Swee, the co-builder of independent Singapore, was hardly mentioned, let alone celebrated, on the occasion of his 100th birthday last year, save for a memorial concert by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, which he founded. His birthday passed unnoticed by most Singaporeans who are the direct beneficiaries of his genius. If such is the fate of even No. 2s, what hope is there for very ordinary folks who built the cathedral?

Even in the case of Singapore's extraordinarily successful economy, it was not just the genius

of Dr Goh or even the Cabinet as a whole, but also the millions of sensible decisions made by thousands of ordinary business people on a daily basis that made that miracle economy possible. In our storied accounts of success, often, not enough credit is given to the extraordinary achievements of ordinary people.

From its very beginning as a trading post of the British East India Company in 1819 till today, Singapore has flourished mostly because it has had extraordinary people as well as extraordinary leaders.

Unfortunately, our historians did not teach us to record, document and archive the ordinary people's achievements. They took the path of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which

was an adherent of the Great Man theory, and immortalised leaders, very often very ordinary ones.

What we need is a Wikipedia of Singapore history whereby anyone can be placed on its pages and remembered. Perhaps revised and remembered again. It may not be as authoritative as the *Britannica* but so be it. Better than not being remembered at all. In any case, no history can be written in one draft or by one person.

Sociologist Herbert Spencer struck a blow for the ordinary people when he said: "You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him."

It would seem Mr Lee would not have been Mr Lee if not for the Singaporeans he shaped and those who had shaped him earlier.

The humanist African philosophy of *ubuntu* puts it succinctly: "I am because we are." Singapore would not have been Singapore if not for the multitude of Singaporeans.

While I readily accept that leadership is critical and I have often argued for such leadership, I do not want to discount the agency of the individual. Experience has shown that people on the ground can and do possess extraordinary abilities to make a veritable difference to the performance.

The bicentennial should not only be a time for celebrating the good things of the past, but, equally importantly, it is a time for reflection of what led us on the right path and what led us astray over the decades.

We should study not only the lofty achievements of the fabled leaders, but also the instructive stories of unsung heroes and ordinary people. To focus entirely on leaders and ignore valuable lessons from the ground would be akin to counting the trees and dismissing the forest.

Within a day after Notre-Dame came down in ruins, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that the icon would be rebuilt in just five years, for it embodies not only the religious spirit of those who worship there, but also the spirit of a nation.

I am wondering if we should build a monument for the ordinary Singaporeans who made Singapore extraordinary. A "cathedral" for those who built the unseen as well as the seen.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Arun Mahizhnan is a member of the advisory panel for The Singapore Bicentennial. He is also special research adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.