

I ♥ SG

We've ticked off economic competitiveness and desirable urban living. Now, the URA asks Singaporeans to imagine an endearing city as well. What will help us feel the love?

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For *The Straits Times*

How can Singapore make itself more endearing to its citizens and, in the process, develop a stronger

sense of identity and belonging among Singaporeans?

This question rears its head as the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is engaging the public as part of its review every decade of Singapore's urban development and land use policies over the next 50 years.

It has identified four key pillars that define Singapore's desired

traits for the future: to be inclusive; adaptable and resilient; sustainable; and distinctive and endearing.

Singapore has consistently ranked among the most competitive economies and most liveable cities in the world. However, a city that is liveable may not necessarily be one that is endearing or distinctive as well.

These aspects involve "softer" issues of identity, a sense of belonging, and even pride.

Yet, they are almost impossible to measure. There are no formal indexes or rankings for endearing cities. The fact is, such intangible characteristics of a city are not always quantifiable and measurable.

For its part, the URA said that land use plans need to "strengthen Singapore's position as a distinctive destination and endearing home to ensure Singapore remains attractive to businesses and tourists while maintaining a strong sense of identity and familiarity among residents".

Looking at research, one key aspect stands out: A person's commitment and loyalty to a city are not so much defined by its economic prospects as they are by the deeper socio-cultural meanings that the city affords its citizens.

So, a city is more than its urban infrastructure or economic opportunities; it is also made of the vital networks of relations and kinship that bind its residents together and drive them towards a common goal of having a flourishing city.

CAN SINGAPORE BE ENDEARING?

How, then, can Singapore make itself more endearing to its citizens and in the process develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging among Singaporeans?

Research by the United States Department of Agriculture's

Forest Service has found that urban green spaces can contribute to citizens' attachment to a place and their social resilience by providing areas for recreation and community interaction.

Urban green and "blue" (water) spaces are also known to provide visual and mental relief and possess aesthetic value for urban dwellers.

The presence of nature in public neighbourhoods is linked to a higher sense of community which, in turn, ties in with a reduction in psychological distress, according to public health and environmental studies.

This point was emphasised by the former executive director of the Centre for Liveable Cities, Professor Khoo Teng Chye, who pointed out during an interview the heightened demand for green spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic.

What about social resilience? How can the urban environment encourage and strengthen this?

In his book, *For The Love Of Cities: The Love Affair Between People And Their Places*, urban thinker and writer Peter Kageyama identifies the sense of belonging and meaning that citizens attach to their cities as a key driving force for urban vibrancy and creativity.

Importantly, Kageyama has found that people who love their city are often willing to put in extraordinary effort to build up local communities and co-create urban solutions. They are also less likely to leave during times of crisis and hardship.

Aside from green and blue spaces, Singapore's urban and cultural heritage can help to foster a greater sense of belonging.

This city's urban and cultural heritage includes eco-heritage sites such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens and intangible heritage like local arts and trades, as well as hawker culture, which has been

added to Unesco's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Heritage, both the tangible landmarks and intangible cultures, is a reminder not just of Singaporeans' childhoods but the broader arc and anchorage of Singapore's nation-building process as well.

Indeed, what we choose to retain reveals a lot about the narratives and legacy we intend to leave for our future generations. With these, we can pave a deeper vision and direction for our future over time.

FROM LIVEABILITY TO LOVABILITY

The operative term of an endearing city is therefore "love" – in which a person develops an affection and an affinity for their city.

Most importantly, it is therefore ultimately up to Singaporeans to define what makes Singapore an endearing city and how they might set about achieving this.

What is the collective narrative that will drive our imagination for, and loyalty to, our city?

The search for this meaning requires much introspection that inclines a society towards its core values of identity, culture and, fundamentally, history and heritage.

From an urban planning perspective, this could involve greater citizen participation in crafting Singapore's urban vision. This can encourage a greater sense of inclusion and ownership among citizens, who are now given the chance to articulate their aspirations for their city.

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