

Can Singapore Continue to Justify the Construction of Costly National Symbols Today?

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Nestled between miles of runway tarmac is the crown jewel of Singapore's aviation hub, the aptly named Jewel Changi. Glass and steel make up the entirety of Jewel's façade, and all of it converges at a single point, where water falls seven stories through a gaping hole in the roof. Given the current COVID-19 situation, I was expecting Jewel to be largely devoid of the crowds that graced it during its heyday, but I could not have been more wrong. Nearing the grand atrium, I began to feel the rhythm of the masses deep within my bones. Indecipherable conversations besieged my ears, blending together like some alien dogma far beyond my understanding. Perhaps I could have decoded at least one, had I not bumbled straight into a group of alarmed teenagers. Having apologised for my careless transgression, I pushed my way through the crowd, searching for an optimal shooting angle. Having found my spot, I steadied my camera, only to be overwhelmed by the sight before me. Water, pulled by the invisible hands of gravity, came down in torrents, the sheer force of impact generating a mist that enveloped the entire area. The mist wafted lazily in the air, blessing all nearby with its cheeky, cooling touch. Laser beams breathed life into the otherwise colourless waterfall, bathing Jewel with an ethereal glow. The atrium is lined with walls of flora, and while the juxtaposition of plant life and cold, industrial materials may seem jarring at first, extended viewing leaves a calming effect that is difficult to describe. Perhaps the "bespoke fragrance" that is extensively (and expensively) piped into Jewel contributes to this effect. Admittedly, I lack the training required to detect the nuances of this scent, but it is certainly pleasant – an alluring, almost magnetic scent that is both familiar yet full of mystery.

Five years – that's how long it took to construct Jewel. Five years may seem insignificant when compared to the decades it took to construct some of the world's architectural masterpieces, yet Jewel, in the eyes of many, is the *pièce de résistance* of the many megastructures that have marked Singapore's economic progress. It speaks volumes about Singapore's commitment to being at the forefront of innovation and technology, and its need to remain at the bleeding edge. Jewel is an unashamed display of these qualities, which, according to our government, make up the ideal, future-proof Singaporean. Yet, given the current economic climate – one of imminent decline – such forceful displays of excess leave a different taste in one's mouth. Stringent travel restrictions meant that the vast majority of those present at Jewel during my visit were locals. Despite looking outwardly thrilled, I could not help but catch a few stray conversations that sang a different tune. "Huh, Jewel seems dimmer today leh. Off light to save electricity ah" and "Wah. The waterfall is still on, not scared bleed money ah" are just some of the many quizzical quips that caught my ear. Singaporeans, it seems, are not blind to the current state of affairs, one that demands financial prudence and restraint. It begs the question then, are such opulent displays of financial and technological capability really necessary in an unpredictable, ever-changing world? Can Singapore continue to justify the construction of costly national symbols today?

The idea of sustainability is central to any economic decision, and Chandran Nair discusses various ideas on how countries can achieve sustainable development in his book,

“The sustainable state: The future of government, economy, and society.” Sustainability, in his eyes, “should include a conscious and all-encompassing discussion of our long-term use of economic resources” (Nair, 2018). Too often, however, companies and governments prioritise financial gains, resulting in an inability to employ truly sustainable practices. Rather than commit to sustainable ideals, they tend to green-wash and make use of “feel-good” slogans that do little in reality – serving only to placate public opinion. In Chapter 8, “Redefining Freedom, Rights, and Prosperity,” Nair argues that the perception of prosperity changes as countries develop economically. His experience growing up and working in developing countries, where citizens are content with fulfilling their basic needs, contrasts sharply with that of first world countries – countries that are driven by consumerism and the fervent desire to accumulate wealth. It is not enough, then, for countries to attain prosperity in a fiscal sense – they feel the need to demonstrate this prosperity - costly national symbols are one of the more obvious manifestations of this desire to impress.

Singapore can be said to follow the Western economic model, and in it, as Nair defines, “prosperity is equivalent to consumption, the more one consumes and owns, the more prosperous one is.” Furthermore, Nair noted that “this is true even if the consumption does not serve any real personal or social purpose or if people could achieve the same standard of living with less consumption or fewer resources.” This philosophy of owning more than you need in pursuit of status also stretches to the construction of national symbols, as “governments too strive for a version of prosperity focused on symbolism and status,” wanting “the tallest buildings, the most glamorous cities, the flashiest movies, and the largest companies.” While the construction of prominent national symbols generates good press and contributes to national pride, Nair is dismayed by the lack of societal benefits these projects bring to the average citizen. Moreover, one can question whether such statement pieces even represent good value, given that their PR (public relations) benefits are fleeting. In Nair’s words, “the tallest skyscraper is rarely the tallest for very long; yet remains a blot on the landscape.” Governments could do better by allocating these resources to more pressing issues, like improving the welfare for the underprivileged. For a start, however, one could change their perception of what it means for a country to be prosperous; and question the need for such ostentatious displays of wealth.

Jewel, like many of Singapore’s mega-projects, is no doubt a statement piece. Jewel boasts the world’s tallest indoor waterfall, while Marina Bay Sands, another mega-project, boasts the world’s highest swimming pool, a vertigo-inducing infinity pool that melts into the horizon. While one cannot question the economic benefits of such structures – revenue is measured in cents rather than sense – there are certainly more frugal ways to achieve this. Nair’s point on the fleeting nature of such achievements is important in recognising how the chase for supremacy in such structures is both endless and increasingly expensive – and how wasteful it is for champions of the past to be cast aside for the latest, shiny project. However, Nair’s stance on the need for such national symbols is rather hard-line, and one needs to consider the inherent benefits of having such symbols. Of course, poorer countries strapped for resources would be foolish to embark on such costly projects, but Singapore is in a unique position of excess. Our government has vast reserves and revenue surpluses – a billion-dollar structure is well within our financial capability. Putting aside the revenue generated by the structures themselves, such displays of wealth also boost citizen morale and investor confidence. It is only in more recent times, given the

unpredictable economy marked by international strife and wrecked by COVID-19, that financial security is less assured.

Citizen morale and investor confidence are just two of the many psychological benefits that national symbols can bring to a country. More importantly, they connect individuals to something bigger than themselves. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2016) discusses this in her opinion piece titled “The emotional attachment of national symbols.” According to Miller-Idriss, national symbols “evoke emotional attachment to the nation, crystallize identity and help people feel connected to something outside of their own immediate family and community.” National symbols aren’t limited to the mega-structures I have discussed, of course, the humble dollar coin is as much of a national symbol as the Merlion is, for example. These symbols are everywhere, deeply entrenched in our everyday lives. School children recite the national pledge on a daily basis, and plenty still flock to Botanic Gardens to catch sight of an Orchid, Singapore’s national flower. In Miller-Idriss’ words, national symbols “offer a focal point for diverse societies to express and navigate what it is that unites and represents them.” The top one percent (financially) in society may seem to exist in an entirely different reality from the bottom one percent, but national symbols can bridge that gap. Every time an individual interacts with a national symbol, it raises the question - what does it mean to be Singaporean? Both the privileged and the underprivileged can see an orchid flower and understand what it represents. National symbols are not exclusive to any race or religion; and being of a higher social class does not grant any unique access to them either. Nair is not wrong when he said, “the tallest skyscraper is rarely the tallest for very long, yet remains a blot on the landscape,” but perhaps therein lies the beauty of national symbols. They are a static representation of society that, should they be preserved, offer a window into history that unites all.

Beyond these domestic benefits, there is an international dimension to national symbols too, especially when it comes to “costly” ones. Nair may seek for a reimagining of what it means to be prosperous, but our world is still very much motivated by appearance. Having record-breaking structures puts countries on the world map, opening doors and providing levels of exposure that are difficult to obtain via other means. Timothy Johnson, Chairman of the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat in Chicago, puts it eloquently - “Who are we to say it’s good or bad. People want to push higher and higher. That’s just human nature isn’t it?” (Bloomberg, 2012). Singapore does not have significant amounts of natural resources nor a large land mass, so our achievements are limited to that of our own creation. Costly national symbols ensure Singapore remains relevant in the global arena. When asked where he thinks the next record-breaking building might be built, Johnson had this to say – “Maybe the one-mile building will be in Africa, a place that needs to somehow say, ‘look, we are also here’” (Bloomberg, 2012). Even developing countries which lack Singapore’s financial muscle find the need to partake in this chase for greatness. It would be foolish, then, for Singapore to back down while ahead.

The argument here is not whether national symbols are necessary – every country needs national symbols, that is beyond doubt. National symbols unite an otherwise divided populace, reminding all of the existence of a common identity, and strengthening this bond by virtue of their omnipresence. They are also a way for countries to showcase their superiority over one another. There has to be other ways to demonstrate this superiority, however, and Singapore’s attempts to be the first to create a vaccine for COVID-19 is a

prime example of this. The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a stark reminder not to take economic stability for granted – as financially mighty as Singapore is, there might come a day where it no longer has the bulging pockets necessary to tide it past such crises.

Although costly national symbol put more strain on Singapore's coffers than other more "symbolic" alternatives, as long as the world's perception of what it means for a country to be prosperous does not change, such "vanity projects" may very well remain in vogue – if one were to put aside the possibility of future health pandemics. If Singapore can continue to afford such mega-structures, there's no reason to stop building them, at least for the foreseeable future. However, this is a big "if" – after all, if the well runs dry, idols and totems are not going to quench anyone's thirst. And if the metaphorical well really does run dry, Jewel may be the last of its kind, harkening in a new era of economic conservatism; at least until the money comes in again.

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