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Centre 42's Late-Night Texting theatrical extravaganza showcasing emerging independent artists and groups and exciting new works in a bite-sized formats drew 5,800 audience to 25 performances in August 2019.

Last month, the National Arts Council (NAC) announced that it will launch a third Arts Resource Hub (ARH) co-working space at 42 Waterloo Street for the wider arts community.

Centre 42, an arts development organisation which is the sole tenant of the bright blue bungalow now, will return the premises to NAC and become a co-tenant at the ARH.

NAC has said that it has been "in conversations" with Centre 42 since 2018 on its needs, and is confident that Centre 42 "can continue to play its intermediary role in the theatre scene" in the 42 Waterloo Street premises.

While the public may not pay much attention to such a development, it is actually one that underscores the challenges arts groups such as Centre 42 face in Singapore due to changing government policies.

Since its opening in 2014, Centre 42 has supported the incubation and development of over 200 new artistic works of different mediums and disciplines, as well as enabled more than 40,000 members of the public to witness the magic of local creativity.

More importantly, its custodianship of resources at 42 Waterloo Street, including the 80-seater Black Box theatre and Rehearsal Studio, has provided a conducive environment for art-making as well as incubation and experimentation by emerging and independent artists.

The recent news means that although Centre 42 will remain at 42 Waterloo Street, it will only occupy the office space, which is a small rectangle comprising possibly less than 20 per cent of the total gross floor area. NAC, through ARH, will manage the rest of the space as well as the resources.

This news has elicited surprise, dismay and disappointment among those in the arts community. However, perhaps we should not be astonished. After all, this shifting resource

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allocation and management is a manifestation of changing cultural policies and urban regeneration in Singapore.

The history of 42 Waterloo Street itself reflects the history of cultural policy in Singapore.

Started in 1985, the Arts Housing Scheme is a policy that aims to provide affordable workspaces for artists and arts groups.

By enabling artists to work in convenient locations like Chinatown and Little India, and providing a significant rental subsidy, this policy has enhanced the capacity of the arts housing tenants to practise and develop their craft without worrying about paying rents at market rates.

A key feature of the scheme is the short lease duration. Each lease contract typically lasts around one to three years. While leases may be renewed, this has meant that the policy does not encourage tenants to cultivate a permanent sense of stability, security and sustainability.

This is evident in how Centre 42 is not the first arts organisation to be based at 42 Waterloo Street. In 2013, after Action Theatre vacated the premises, NAC announced intentions to refurbish it and create a centre for the development of text-based works.

These intentions became part of NAC's 2014 Performing Arts Masterplan, which should be commended as a policy move that recognises the "extended creative process" of the arts requiring time and "supporting infrastructure" such as incubation spaces. Notably, these intentions enabled the birth of Centre 42.

The decision to ask Centre 42 to return the custodianship of 42 Waterloo Street to NAC can be traced to a shift in cultural policy. In 2018, NAC released our Sg Arts Plan, a five-year policy blueprint. A key focus is the need to support arts freelancers.

This has translated into the ARH initiative, which aims to enable arts freelancers to grow meaningful careers through the provision of support such as an online resource portal as well as co-working spaces at Stamford Arts Centre, Goodman Arts Centre, and soon, 42 Waterloo Street.

While it is encouraging to see the Government recognising freelancers as valuable cultural workers who require dedicated support, this should not come at the expense of an arts organisation which represents key objectives of a previous policy.

Depth is as significant as breadth, and policy should foster ground resilience and sustainability. The introduction of ARH inadvertently shifts the management of valuable resources from a people-initiated organisation back to the state.

This shift feels similar to how NAC set up Arts House Limited, which over the years has been managing more arts venues including Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall, Goodman Arts Centre, Aliwal Arts Centre and the Stamford Arts Centre.

This growing concentration of resources and power in the hands of the state brings to mind the series of questions posed by the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun in 1999, about the tremendous investment of state funding to the development of institutions such as the Esplanade, as opposed to supporting people-initiated projects such as The Substation:

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Is not the people's spontaneous involvement and active participation in the arts the ultimate objective of state promotions? Why is the state giving priority and overwhelmingly larger support to projects controlled by its own agencies instead of giving such resources to beef up people-initiated ones?

Why has it been necessary for the state to expand and strengthen its domination in the arts, instead of enabling the non-government enterprises to grow with state assistance?

Importantly, Centre 42 teaches us a lesson about the story of urban regeneration in Singapore.

In order to foster a sense of place and belonging amongst Singapore residents, there has been a recent whole-of-government effort to cultivate a more people-friendly and soulful cityscape through placemaking initiatives such as car-free days and the activation of public spaces for community-building events.

Arts spaces like Centre 42 are also encouraged to placemake and engage communities. However, community is as elusive a concept as a sense of place. There is a false assumption that community and sense of place can be simply and solely created through top-down policy.

A peopled place is not always a community. Spaces and people both require time to become embedded within a neighbourhood, nurture social bonds and interpersonal networks, and foster vernacular creativity.

While it is understandable that policy-makers aspire to make 42 Waterloo Street more accessible and inclusive to a wider diversity of arts practitioners, especially freelancers, we should be concerned about the attempt to rejuvenate the space through detaching and disassociating the premises from its current tenant.

The lack of place attachment, collective memories and the habit of transience mean that even well-meaning efforts at community building can lack substance and resonance, and fail.

The reactions to the news are testament to how Centre 42 has been organically placemaking 42 Waterloo Street into a critical node of creative exchange where people from all walks of life, capabilities and art forms have been able to connect, learn, create, share ideas and collaborate.

It is the social life of people-initiated places like Centre 42 that become the anchors energising the city as a generative and inclusive ecosystem of vibrant creativity, and more importantly a lovable and caring home.

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