Dear Director,

I am Jevan Goh from the National University of Singapore and I have recently visited the Singapore City Gallery as it highlights the development of Singapore which has always intrigued me. What is Singapore’s past? What is its future? The transformation and evolution of Singapore is instrumental to me as a local resident due to the direct impacts. Despite disappointments in the gallery’s content, it was an insightful and spectacular experience that has enlightened me in Singapore’s evolution. It has spurred some thoughts in me and I am writing to share with you about my experience.

Firstly, the thematic design of the museum felt unique and deliberate. Going up the floors, I noticed the area becomes increasingly more congested and “bustling” in addition to the increasing number of interactive displays, bringing Singapore’s evolution to life. The gradual increase in coloration and saturation as I proceed up the floors and the subtle introduction of audio effects on the top floor such as the chirping of the birds also contributed to the effect. They provide a captivating and surreal experience of Singapore’s evolution; I felt as if I was walking through Singapore as it evolves and transforms, distinguishing the Singapore City Gallery from other museums and galleries and leaving me with a stronger impression of it.

The first floor of the gallery was spacious with minimal exhibitions in contrast to the second floor which is filled with much information and displays. I appreciate the overwhelming numbers of maps that greeted me on the second floor which seems to be its theme - maps. The chronological placement of the maps throughout the floor allows me to observe Singapore’s transformation and evolution from a bird’s-eye view. The coloration of the maps fits their respective chronological period which allows me to step into Singapore’s past and walk through Singapore’s transformation as the maps gradually change from dull and tattered looking to being bright and vibrant.

The small circular theatre section at the end of the second floor with interactive displays hinted at the modern and evolved state of Singapore and drew my attention. It tells the intricate planning of Singapore, and the interactive displays provide an opportunity to personally experience planning Singapore. While I commend most of the content displayed in this section, I detest a portion of the content where comparison was drawn with other countries to accentuate Singapore’s performance. I am disgusted by the comparison with other countries as a mean to portray Singapore’s development even though I agree with the involvement of other countries in the narrative of Singapore’s evolution because their development inevitably affects Singapore’s directly. It was out of place and felt almost desperate as it serves no purpose except to place Urban Development Authority (URA) in the limelight. Rather than emphasising the well development of Singapore, it boasted the arrogance of URA and provides no insight to Singapore’s evolution.

I was also dissatisfied with the gallery’s narrative of the immigrants. Outside of the City Gallery, I noticed statues of Samsui women, who are Chinese immigrants that have contributed much to Singapore’s development in the 1900s. However, I was disappointed and puzzled that there were no mentions of them inside the museum despite the acknowledgement of their significance in Singapore’s evolution which is evident in the effort to put up their statues outside the City Gallery. Moreover, it was more disappointing that there were little to no appreciation of immigrants’ contribution to Singapore’s development. Although there were mentions of immigrants, the tone lacks gratitude when narrating their stories and the impacts of their works were described plainly which is noticeably different when explaining URA works, which was more descriptive and positive. It highlights the arrogance of URA as it suggested that the URA are of more significance and have contributed more to Singapore’s development than the immigrants.

This brings me to my next disappointment which is the biasness in the gallery’s content in general. As it is managed by the URA, it is of no surprise that the positive works of URA are highlighted. However, every content seems to be singing the praises of URA, which shifted the target audience to URA itself which is of great irony as one of the themes in the gallery is “involving *you*” (Exact words found on the third floor). While it is undeniable that the works of URA are indeed commendable, the additional emphasis on URA’s work such as the comparison with the other countries as mentioned earlier and the lack of content with contrasting tone introduces biasness in the gallery, painting an incomplete picture of Singapore’s evolution. For example, the first statutory master plan of Singapore in 1958 was mentioned, but I was disappointed that there was no description of its failure. In fact, the tone was so positive that I would have thought it was successful have I not read about it.

Nonetheless, I thank URA for the insightful and unique experience; Singapore’s evolution and transformation is packaged in the experience of the gallery’s comprehensive design which manifested URA’s expertise in planning. Despite my evident discontentment in the gallery’s content, it did provide some useful insights about Singapore’s evolution. Moreover, I hope that URA can put more effort towards the content; in striking a balanced and unbiased view. Complete historical accuracy and unbiasedness might be impossible to achieve due to the subjectivity of each individual and the topic of Singapore’s evolution, but the topic should be respected by putting in effort to paint the complete picture. Similarly, even though my questions might never be completely answered, I will continue to question what is Singapore’s past and what is its future?

Yours sincerely,

Jevan Goh