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# Transforming centres of excellence – the National Heritage Board experience

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## Abstract

Looks at the National Heritage Board (NHB) in Singapore and how it deals with the development of national museums and their archives. Examines the early years of the NHB and its attempts to attract new audiences; then looks at how the digital world is used in archives and museums. Concludes that the NHB aims to maintain standards in order to make heritage a part of every Singaporean's life.

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## Introduction

When I was first invited to speak at this conference, I thought that it would be more appropriate for the Director of the National Archives to present a paper, considering that this is basically a meeting point for archivists and librarians. As the CEO of a statutory board that has a diverse portfolio and responsibilities, it seemed a little beyond the scope of this conference to also talk of the other things that the National Heritage Board (NHB) does. However, on hindsight, I felt that it would be useful to share our experiences with you, especially, unlike many of your organisations, the National Archives is not together with the library. In Singapore, the library is a separate statutory board and the Archives is part of the National Heritage Board which also oversees the development and running of our national museums. The board therefore plays the role of custodian of Singapore's historical, cultural, artistic and built heritage in a holistic way. You may wonder if this arrangement where the archives is part of a heritage body works. It has been very effective so far because archives and museums are inter-linked in many respects. They are knowledge repositories or memory institutions in which the role of the professional is to preserve, organise and make available the collections to present and future generations. The museums and archives are now able to share a common vision; to disseminate and preserve the history and heritage of Singapore and to centralise some of their outreach activities, share resources, ideas and experiences. The total result is a stronger heritage body able aggressively to promote and generate greater awareness of Singapore's history and heritage.

## Scope of paper

The title of the conference "Reinventing information centres of excellence" and the title I have chosen, "Transforming centres of excellence" brings to mind one question. What does reinventing and transforming an organisation entail?

"Reinventing" is producing an idea that is based on something that existed in the past. "Transformation" means a complete change. In our case, we invented, not reinvented, our centres of excellence and when the time came

for a change, we transformed our operations, all within a space of eight years. It is this experience of how we constantly created new approaches to remain relevant that I would like to share with you today.

The first part of my presentation will therefore deal with the early years of NHB and how we tried innovative ways of attracting new audiences, providing more accessibility to our collections and changing the image of our museums and archives. The second part will deal with how we met and embraced the challenges of a digital world both within the archives and the museums and how we are gearing up for the future.

## The heritage scene in Singapore

Singapore's heritage scene is quite vibrant today. This, however, was not the case until recently. In the earlier years of our young nation, resources were devoted to building our economy and infrastructure. Thus, things like museums, arts programmes and activities were not top priority. However, when the economy improved by the late 1980s, efforts were made to educate our young to learn about their past and to understand and appreciate their roots. We realised that it was time to inculcate the finer things in life and to be a gracious society. The Government was then in a position to promote the arts and heritage. Part of the process was a Museum Precinct Master plan introduced in 1985 to establish museums in the Civic District within walking distance of each other.

## Establishing NHB

In 1993, a statutory board, the National Heritage Board, was established. It brought together under one authority, the National Museum, National Archives and the Oral History Department, which were government departments. This was to allow flexibility to the organisation to promote heritage. The board was tasked with the mission to explore and present the heritage and nationhood of the people of Singapore in the context of their ancestral cultures, their links with Southeast Asia, Asia and the world through the collection, preservation, interpretation and display of objects and records.

Today we have three national museums, the Singapore History Museum, the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum; and the National Archives, the Oral History Centre and the Heritage Conservation Centre which also serve as the central repository for museum collections. We also run a philatelic museum as a subsidiary. We mark historic sites, look after preservation of monuments and co-ordinate the whole museum and heritage scene. We design and mark heritage trails and organise mass heritage walks and organise travelling exhibitions.

## NHB's early years

### Phase I – inventing information centres of excellence

At the outset, we had several challenges to meet:

- *Public apathy and non-awareness.* The first was the lack of interest in our museums. The then National Museum, today's Singapore History Museum, was referred to as a place for dead things. Our archives were known to few, mainly serious researchers, and postgraduate students doing their theses.
- *Negative perception of history and heritage.* The second was a disinterest in matters related to history and heritage. History was not considered important and many pragmatic Singaporean parents persuaded their children to pursue an education in the hard sciences such as engineering. They also felt that there was no economic value in the arts and heritage field.
- *Lack of funds.* The third was a lack of funds and resources to promote heritage programmes. This included finding qualified staff to implement our programmes.

## Changing the image of our archives and museums

We changed the image of our museums and archives so that visitors would be attracted to visit them, either for educational purposes, entertainment or just to feel uplifted with the entire experience! Through our various programmes and activities, people now want

to be identified as being in the “hip” circle that visits museums, participates in the fringe activities and visits the archives to learn more about history and heritage.

This new trend, however, was not easy to achieve. Besides the usual practice of using publicity channels where we positioned our museums and archives as places where the “hip” and “trendy” would go to, we had to let the people know that our institutions were relevant to their lives and that they could also benefit from visiting them. We attracted and engaged the different age groups by organising activities that would be of interest to them.

We found things that people wanted to be associated with. Our museums and archives offer programmes such as travelling exhibitions, fashion launches, high-end brands launching (items from watches to perfumes) and even talks on geomancy, tango and folk dancing lessons or even street theatre. These attract a varied crowd of young and old, professional and academic to our museums.

### **Courting the media**

Since funding marketing and advertising is expensive, we worked with the media to publicise our programmes. Our target was to be constantly in the newspapers, magazines or television and radio so that we need not go into expensive advertising. We cultivated journalists covering heritage areas and fed them with information. It was mutually beneficial. We exploited every trick we could muster for good media coverage. Even the choice of our guest-of-honour is important. A well-known personality like a TV star commands media attention and we use these personalities to plug the heritage message. We also get them to ask teenagers and their fans to visit the museum. What we are doing is using the media to provide our museums with a modern images as a fun place; places that one should be seen in, to be in the “in” group. I must add that our local media have been very supportive.

### **Bringing in blockbuster exhibitions**

Over the years, we have used blockbusters to draw large crowds. Through extensive

publicity, people who never would have stepped into a museum have done so because of these exhibitions. More importantly, many confessed that they only realised the existence of the archives or museums after reading about and visiting the exhibitions.

### **Collaborating with like-minded partners**

We linked up with like-minded partners through whom we could help bring in new visitors and users. Our main partner is the Ministry of Education because our school market is our primary audience. Other partners include grassroots and other mass-based organisations such as trade unions, uniformed groups and large consumer groups. We need them not only because they can provide us with the numbers, but also because they can be good partners for joint events and often sponsors as well.

### **The Ministry of Education and schools programmes**

We have positioned ourselves as partners in education. We persuaded our colleagues in the Ministry of Education that all our institutions, especially the archives and museums, have a part to play in educating our young on the history and culture of Singapore as well as contributing towards building a gracious society and national bonding.

We therefore plan our educational and outreach programmes to complement what is being taught in the classroom. This means that the busy teacher no longer has to worry about planning for a museum visit or even a lesson using archival and museum resources. For example, we have collated relevant folders on certain topics of interest to schools. Our archives officers cull photographs and other primary sources from our collection that are relevant to schools and these subject folders are easily accessible from our archives reference room. Students and teachers can freely make copies of these documents and reproduce photographs for a nominal fee.

We also plan our programmes so that they dovetail into the teaching programme. For example, since 1996, there has been a major programme called National Education (NE) introduced in schools and the workforce.

This programme is not taught as a separate subject, but is incorporated into the curriculum.

Using this as a basis, we designed walking trails for all schools and illustrated how trails could also be used as effective teaching tools for children to better understand the history of Singapore. Each of the nine trails that we developed for the primary, lower and upper secondary students would start with a visit to any one of our museums. The Ministry of Education agreed and even funded the packages and helped arrange for training and briefing sessions for the teachers. Again, the Ministry's guidelines that each of the trails should be walked at least once in primary, lower and secondary school levels helped schools visit our museums and use archival resources to do their projects.

When the Ministry of Education introduced compulsory community involvement programmes for children, we worked out a programme where students could be trained to become volunteer guides in our archives and all our museums or to do simple research projects at our national archives. We achieved a win-win situation with the students helping us with our heritage work and for them to appreciate history more and participate in the documentation of history. They also learnt some life skills such as public speaking and research skills. These collaborations have helped get in new students who never would have come in through our doors. We have also managed to raise the awareness amongst students that the archives are for anyone interested in Singapore history and that they are user-friendly and useful in their school work and personal development as a Singaporean.

### **NHB school membership programme**

Another way we have managed to bring in new audiences is through our school membership programme. This programme allows pupils from member schools to enter any of our museums free of charge for the year of membership. This has been highly successful and has encouraged many students to come back on their own or with their families after a guided session or workshop at any of our museums.

### **Community collaboration**

Another collaboration we have made is with our community centres and grassroots organisations. In Singapore, we refer to them as the "heartlanders". These are the people who live in the suburban areas of Singapore, in high-rise apartments or HDB flats. These are people who are generally not interested in history and heritage and have little awareness of archives, museums and libraries. Since they would not venture out to visit us, we decided to go to them.

We have specially tailor-made tours for them to our museums. We also offer travelling exhibitions to reach them at community level. These are specially tailored to reach this group. At every exhibition we have several thousand visitors.

Our other target groups are the grassroots organisations such as senior citizens clubs, community centres, the Singapore Armed Forces Reservists Association, the National Trades Union Congress, which have mass-based membership. By placing feature articles in their magazines and newsletters and offering discounted admission fees and organising family days, we have managed to attract people who may not otherwise come. We also do regular promotions with large public sector companies and do familiarisation tours for taxi drivers, tour guides and concierges. The idea being that not only do we hope that these people will sell our venues, but they themselves will be enticed to visit again. For this reason, we also allow all licensed tour guides free entry to all our museums.

One thing is, however, clear to us. We have been successful in bringing in new audiences and converting their perceptions, not only through our programmes, but also because of the current climate in Singapore. We now have a big group of well-travelled Singaporeans who have been exposed to visiting museums and enjoying them, we also have a large base of foreign-trained or educated Singaporeans who would have had the same exposure. We also now have a big expatriate community based in Singapore and more importantly, our Government's new thrust towards the arts and heritage has also helped us in more ways than one.

Whilst these initiatives worked well for the first five to six years of our existence, we realise that we need to gear up for the

technological advances coming our way. We need to find a means to harness IT to speed up our documenting, acquisition and processing time as well as to help us disseminate information simultaneously throughout the world and at faster speeds than before. This thus began our second phase, which I would like to call transforming the organisation.

As a start towards transformation, we needed to think through current practices and see if they would still work in the the new economy of the twenty-first century, which is about continuous change. The new economy is based on the power of the intangibles – ideas, concepts, and knowledge. The new world is not about tested practices but about facing uncharted waters with a new mindset, one that is bold and risk taking. It is in this scenario that we need to discuss and deliberate what challenges the future will hold for our centres of excellence.

### Transformation

As a first step towards our transformation process, we did an organisational review exercise. We identified certain strategic thrusts that we needed to work on over the next five to ten years to remain relevant to the needs of Singaporeans and our visitors.

From a trend analysis, we came up with a set of strategic thrusts. These are:

- Bringing heritage to the people, and making it an enriching part of their lives.
- Strengthening our collections, exhibitions, display and education content.
- Leverage on technology.
- Build the NHB brand.
- Build scholarship and research capabilities of staff.
- Strengthen our relationships with local and international benefactors.

An indicator that our message of heritage being an enriching part of our lives has gained some impact is the increase in the number of requests for advice on conservation, information on Singapore history and culture, and even to mark their premises as historic sites or establish house museums or heritage corners in schools. The latest trend is to seek our assistance to design and mark heritage trails around the island.

NHB has transformed our organisational practices, the public's perception of our

institutions and developed new programmes and services. On the technological front, we have embarked on some initiatives.

#### *Providing faster information access to targeted audiences*

- *Information portals.* NAS as a major content provider of Singapore history has to make its collection widely accessible via the Internet. Since 1994, NAS has developed its dissemination infrastructure through a series of modular systems for each major category of archival holdings. Last year a gateway was built, linking these via a single query point known as “Archives and Artifacts On-line Singapore (a<sup>2</sup>O)”. The name a<sup>2</sup>O is used as an analogy to H<sub>2</sub>O – an essential element of life. As much as human beings need water to survive, heritage/culture is an essential part of our lives. Through a<sup>2</sup>O, Singaporeans will be able to access raw data on various aspects of social, economic, cultural and political developments of our nation. In essence, it is a link between our past and present as well as a bridge to the future.
- *Online exhibitions.* Since the 1980s, the National Archives has been holding static exhibitions covering a wide range of history and heritage-related subjects. The exhibitions are an integral part of the National Heritage Board's mission to explore and present Singapore's heritage to the public. They are also an important channel through which our vast archival collections are made accessible as packaged, thematic resources for national education and social studies in schools and institutions of higher learning. However, to keep pace with Singapore's move into the “new world” of the IT age and with the current emphasis on creative and continual learning through information technology, the National Archives is harnessing this new technology to deliver our exhibitions to a wider audience, particularly the Net-savvy population. Early last month, the National Archives and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), a leading educational institution on the cutting edge of technology, came together to collaborate on developing online exhibitions to promote Singapore's history and heritage through the Internet.

This on-line exhibition programme will enable NAS to actively package multimedia archival materials to tell many interesting stories of our past creatively and attractively, particularly to our young citizens. It will make full use of our large collection of photographs, which is also the most popularly consulted archival materials in NAS.

*Providing products and services over the net E-services.* E-services is fast becoming a larger part of Singapore's and the world's economy. It is critical that we become knowledgeable participants in e-services as it is likely to develop into an important vehicle that would allow us to be more self-sustaining and effective in advancing our corporate objectives. In general terms, e-services for the archives could mean creation of value from the knowledge and expertise we generate, in exchange for revenue and other trade offs, such as increased visibility. The a<sup>2</sup>O.com.sg provides such a platform for NAS/NHB to explore working with external commercial partners on making our unique collection widely accessible, and at the same time, recover a small part of our investment in content and infrastructure development.

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NAS has just completed the development of an e-commerce module under the portal Web site [www.a2o.com.sg](http://www.a2o.com.sg) for online purchase of photographs. By the beginning of next month, the public can search for photographs and also purchase selected collections from NAS at a small fee.

*SAM's art bank.* One of the products based on the principles of e-commerce is the art bank of the Singapore Art Museum. Government departments and statutory authorities can borrow art works through the net.

#### *Delivery of digital contents*

The archives, libraries and museums are exploring effective ways of providing more timely information. We must take into

consideration what the users actually want and this would have an impact on the way in which we digitise our materials and delivery mechanism – how can we get the digital content to users fast and cheaply. We may even have to “repackage” the content. This new requirement implies a process of innovation and an understanding of the flexible ways we can now make our collections come alive to new and very large audiences on demand. All of us will have to undergo big changes in the coming years if we are to remain relevant to our societies.

This possibility of change is at the heart of what we do and is very important for us to grasp. For if we do not deliver the services asked for, others will do so and we will lose our valued position and we will find ourselves in a more difficult position when applying for funds if others can do the job better.

The National Archives has actively and progressively digitised frequently consulted records for online access, as follows:

- 650,000 photographs;
- 27,000 building plans and maps (both titles and actual images);
- 646,000 microfilm images of file documents; and
- 56 hours of audiovisual and sound recordings.

#### *Preservation of digital contents*

The impact of digital convergence on libraries, archives, and museums reinforces the notion that a major societal transformation is underway in which the traditional distinctions between information objects, such as books, letters, audio recordings, maps, photographs and movies are being eroded. One facet of this transformation that has attracted considerable interest amongst archives and library professionals is the challenge of ensuring on-going access over time to digital or digitised material, given the limited life expectancy of digital storage media along with an inevitable obsolescence of hardware and software. I understand that archives and libraries in the European Union and North America have been very active in pooling resources and initiated several projects to address the challenge of digital longevity. This is an area archives and libraries in this region could work on.

*Forming partnerships with relevant authorities*

In today's interconnected world, it is impossible for one agency to do all things by itself. The demand for more efficiency, better service and productivity means that we must search for creative ways to collaborate with others in fulfilling our mission. We have increased our collaboration with overseas museums, research institutions, our local and overseas universities, libraries, professional associations and commercial entities to help us with our heritage work. We continue to partner the Ministry of Education and other agencies like Urban Redevelopment Authority, Land Transport Authority, National Parks and Singapore Tourism Board.

One other major partner is the National Library Board (NLB) with whom we have very close collaboration. We are currently synergising our energies, manpower and finances to do two exciting projects that will allow our similar collections to go on-line without having to duplicate our efforts.

The first is an on-line poster database expected to be completed in June this year. This project will create a one-stop database that will allow anyone to access all government campaign posters, cinema and commercial posters from NLB's and NAS's collections.

The second project entails developing an interactive CD ROM on old street names. Researchers can now access interactive media such as film footages, audio-video clips and sound bites from the comfort of their homes or offices.

Besides government agencies, we also work closely with the private sector to enrich our collection. For example, NAS has signed an MOU with Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), the largest newspaper publisher in Singapore, on the preservation of its photographs collection which consists of some ten million published and unpublished photographs covering a period of close to half a century and a wide spectrum of the social history of Singapore. Under the MOU, SPH will selectively transfer its newspaper photo negatives and digitised images to NAS for preservation and public access. By collaborating with SPH, not only will NHB expand its heritage collection, researchers both local and foreign will be able to access the materials from a single location.

*Engaging the schools*

We continue to engage the schools through our programmes. We now no longer organise programmes with a "one-size-fits all" approach. We now do niche programming for specific target groups. A recent example was an on-line competition whereby schools were asked to down-load relevant historical photographs from our PICAS and string a story based on part fiction and non-fiction. This was a hit with the schools and we are planning another similar activity in the future.

Another was a collaboration with MOE called Learn@Museums whereby both organisations worked together to marry the twin objectives of encouraging the use of IT in schools and creative learning of our history and heritage. Students armed with digital cameras and notebooks visited the exhibitions in our four museums to document exhibitions and materials. The end product was a Web-based presentation. The students loved the activity, with some 800 participating in the event.

We have also signed an MOU with a primary school to help them with certain heritage projects, amongst which we will be training them to set up their own heritage rooms and become guides. They will also help us maintain a children's e-zine.

## **Developing well-trained professional staff to meet the challenges of the future**

Because of the new economy and its new demands, it is necessary to ensure that we recruit, train and retrain dedicated staff who are nimble to change and adaptive to new technologies and thrusts. Moreover, the new techno-savvy young graduates may expect more flexible working environments, so that their creative inputs can flow and they want to be taken seriously, not to mention progress within the organisation at lightning speed. We also need to be prepared for these highly-mobile and creative individuals, otherwise we will lose them to the private sector.

These are some of the ways we have transformed our organisation. There is much more we can and want to do to achieve excellence status, not only in our content and service provision, but also to digitise and

automate manual procedures that are time-consuming. We also need to rethink our procedures and guidelines for acquisition of documents, assessment and cataloguing and classifying our objects and documents and records because of the new digital age. We need to train our staff continuously and must form networks amongst our fellow professionals locally, regionally and internationally. This not only provides a platform for the exchange of ideas, but also provides first-hand information on latest developments.

## Conclusion

We want to be on every Singaporean's mind whenever they think of who they are, where they came from and how they will continue to call Singapore their home. I believe that the time is not too far away when more Singaporeans will choose to work in the heritage industry, not by accident but because they believe in the work; not because it pays a good salary but because they feel that they are contributing to the continued well-being of a nation's history and heritage. We aim to make heritage an enriching part of everyone's life.