SUMMARY OF 45 ARMENIAN STREET FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

This summary captures highlights of discussions and ideas raised in the areas of programming, infrastructure and operating model from sessions held between end-August to December 2021.

Programming

Against the current backdrop of established institutions and small independent spaces, most expressed the need for experimental and developmental spaces where the artistic "process" is well-supported; and ideas are tested, nurtured, and practiced without worry of "failure".

45 Armenian Street could be incubatory as a sandbox, or a start-up space for artists to develop further emergent practices. Young artists can gather to connect, innovate, and experiment in a flexible environment with options to tap on well-resourced and structured professional mentorship. This would be different from having studio spaces that could reinforce isolation and hinder collaboration. For outcomes, research and the creative process could be prioritised, allowing individuals to rehearse or develop ideas with some guidance and mentorship from experienced and respected arts leaders, technical experts, and academic professionals. It was noted by several that while the space should be inclusive, it should primarily support aspiring, young artists across a diverse range of art forms. There should also be a connection to the character of the arts and heritage precinct where other cultural and educational institutions are situated.

There were suggestions that residency programmes could be offered to build the capabilities of artists and arts professionals in areas like audience development, business development and entrepreneurship, over and above the development of one's craft. Given its proximity to the Singapore Management University (SMU), it was observed that there was a possibility of tapping on their networks and expertise in business and law to grow these much-needed skillsets. As a knowledge hub, 45 Armenian Street could serve as a think-tank or a community-sourced consultancy that provides design solutions.

Beyond artistic creation, a number observed that 45 Armenian Street should not lose sight of developing local and international audiences, and to attract collaborators and partners which would appeal to diverse and steady audience streams. While regular programming ought to remain, some cautioned against "over-programming" or duplicating efforts by cultural institutions and other art spaces. Others saw collaborations with vicinity stakeholders like the Peranakan Museum, NParks, SMU and The Philatelic Museum, as an opportunity for placemaking and streamlined programming that would include the intentional activation of the pedestrianised street. Further to this, 45 Armenian Street could explore satellite models where projects are showcased beyond the precinct.

On design of programmes, many felt that 45 Armenian Street could take a more bold, inclusive approach where ideas are contributed via an open platform or open call, and programmes are collectively designed. Further suggestions included inviting guest programmers and curators to activate the space for short periods or accepting spontaneous proposals from other artists and creatives within a fixed programme calendar. These would reflect the spirit of openness and dynamism at 45 Armenian Street. To determine a suitable

and successful programming model, 45 Armenian Street could explore running a two-year test bed for a model that would resonate with the diverse artists, communities, and audiences it serves.

Another observation was the scarcity of arts spaces that would present minority voices, subculture, and challenging practices. Some felt that 45 Armenian Street should play a bridging role that does not shy away from difficult conversations or presentations, but actively connect artists and their publics to cultivate an understanding of challenging or non-mainstream works through experienced and constructive facilitation processes.

Some saw potential in 45 Armenian Street to be a pioneering, forward-thinking space that engages with and leverages on the latest technology in both artwork creation and audience development, considering how digital transformation has and will continue to change the arts landscape.

Infrastructure

All sessions concurred that greater connectivity between spaces was needed to encourage interaction between artists and audiences. Some called for the backwalls of 45 Armenian Street to be removed, for porosity in and around the building. Aligned with the programme suggestions above, many indicated that there should be a division of spaces between public-facing and non-public facing. As a space for audiences, the design of the building should facilitate audience engagement with the more developmental and experimental aspects of 45 Armenian Street so that programming or works-in-progress would be more accessible.[1]

As a space for artists, the building would need to house specialised facilities and shared resources that could range from an arts library to a recording studio, to support research, incubation, and interdisciplinary collaborations. These would be in addition to the presentation spaces for finished work. For 45 Armenian Street to be communal, the architecture would need to orchestrate casual meeting points for both artists and audiences, such as co-working spaces, affordable F&B (i.e., a *kopitiam* or coffeeshop) and a garden.

There was consensus that the upgraded design should accommodate open, flexible spaces to suit different needs, presentations or artforms. It could become a rehearsal or jamming space, a workshop or an exhibition space, and the very usage could determine the programme for 45 Armenian Street at any point in time. It could also be a 24-hour co-sharing space for artists enabled by technology, allowing flexibility for off-peak hour programmes and rehearsals, and higher utilisation of spaces. To facilitate virtual collaborations, 45 Armenian Street could be equipped with projectors, speakers, and video facilities to allow artists to conduct exchanges. To encourage accessibility, considerations could be made for disabled-friendly navigation.

Suggestions were made to preserve existing spaces to instil a deeper sense of place. These include the gallery, black box, and dance studios. Many felt that there was no need for

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[1] For example, when LUSH FM was broadcasting live at Cineleisure, the studio was behind glass panels and people could see the presenters and artists at work.

the building to be overly purpose-built or engineered. Some suggested that improvements be made incrementally over time. Some suggested the provision of basic and minimal facilities to keep maintenance costs low and spaces adaptable. Given its physical limitations, 45 Armenian Street could expand its footprint with temporary structures to house more studios, or extending programmes, talks and exhibitions outside the building, or hosting short-term outdoor commissions and projects that would add vibrancy to the space. 45 Armenian Street could also accommodate some affordable studio spaces to support the development of young artists and creatives.

Others agreed that the space could be a smart, future-ready building that would support new modes of artistic production (i.e., digitalisation) with technology. However, this should not compromise on the affordability of rent in the space or exclude practitioners who may not want to leverage on those technologies while being there.

Operating Model

A variety of possible operating models were suggested; most agreed that the operating model that best serves 45 Armenian Street can only be developed after a decision is made on what 45 Armenian Street will be. Others opined that the operating model should be transformative and a departure from previous or existing models.

Many spoke of collective co-ownership and the commons, i.e., where a mix of tenant profiles ranging from individual artists to collectives has shared responsibility in the management of the space. The financial and operational burden of maintaining the shared facility would be a collective one to engender a sense of ownership. Besides the collective/commons, multiple tenants can reside there. If done well, this model could nurture a healthier ecosystem that supports livelihoods and promotes a sense of community among artists.

Relatedly, some were in favour of artistic or programme co-directorship that sees individuals or project teams on either a short-term or rotational tenure.[2] A diverse panel or committee comprising 8 to 10 individuals would curate, mentor and connect communities for a period of time.[3] Additionally, arts groups and practitioners could apply to propose ideas of how they would like to use the space, and the pitch could take place annually such that residents of the space would be continually renewed.

On leadership, many stressed the importance of possessing marketing know-how, broad networks, and the ability to connect communities locally and internationally for partnership opportunities, given the current lack of cross-border collaborations. Many asked that the leadership be renewed periodically, i.e., between 3-5 years. Such an approach would offer sustainability and stability in artistic direction, whilst allowing for a renewal of fresh ideas.

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[2] Reference to biennales where management teams run a two-year term. Other examples include Next Wave at Brunswick Mechanics, which is led by an Artistic Directorate consisting of 8 people from different practices. The Artistic Directorate is appointed every two years to curate, mentor and connect artists across the Australian continent, as well as offering local perspectives on practice and communities.
[3] The sessions did not oppose having a non-arts entity as part of the mix.

In general, the sessions recognised that the space would need to be supported by a commercial enterprise. With the limitations on commercial GFA, a suggestion was to collapse the boundary between spaces demarcated for commercial and arts use. It would be ideal for the commercial enterprise to be rooted in the arts or have a very close relationship with the arts community (e.g., a coffee shop run by artists) so there is no disjunct between the arts residents and commercial tenants.

There were mixed views as to whether the building should be managed by a Facilities Manager; however, it was agreed that the artists and artistic/programme directors should not be involved in the day-to-day operations and maintenance. There was a suggestion for producers or curators with the experience of running a space to assume this role for better synergies between those who run and maintain the building, and those who programme it. It is hoped that the people who run the space are artist-centred, having close affinities with the arts community and able to understand the use of the space well.

Some felt that 45 Armenian Street should be managed by a for-profit organisation or charity. Most recognised the need to strike a balance between state and independently raised funding, commercial and artistic needs to ensure commercial viability. While the state covers utilities and overheads, it was proposed that the project team or artists be responsible for fundraising to pursue greater autonomy. An alternative would be to turn 45 Armenian Street into an entirely commercial venture that generates funds for self-sustaining artistic pursuits.