

The Triple Bottom Line Framework of Sustainable Urban Development of Heritage Districts: The Case of Ermita-Malate, Manila and Tiong Bahru, Singapore

Cruz, Geoffrey Rhoel C.¹

¹*Department of Liberal Arts, School of Foundational Studies and Education, Mapua University*

*Corresponding Author: grccruz@mapua.edu.ph

Citation: C, C. G. R. (2025). The Triple Bottom Line Framework of Sustainable Urban Development of Heritage Districts: The Case of Ermita-Malate, Manila and Tiong Bahru, Singapore. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 671–677. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.2923>

Published: December 06, 2025

ABSTRACT

Urban redevelopment has emerged as a key strategy for economic recovery in the post-pandemic era, particularly in cities with rich historical backgrounds. However, the rapid commercialization of cultural heritage sites has led to challenges such as overtourism, commodification, and the deterioration of historical landmarks. This study examines the urban redevelopment of two heritage districts—Ermita-Malate in Manila, Philippines, and Tiong Bahru Estate in Singapore—through the lens of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, which balances social, economic, and environmental sustainability. By analyzing historical records, government policies, and site observations, this research highlights the contrasting trajectories of these districts. While Tiong Bahru has successfully integrated heritage conservation with modern urban planning, Ermita-Malate struggles with unchecked commercial expansion and the loss of cultural identity. The findings underscore the need for a sustainable urban planning approach that prioritizes not only economic gains but also social and environmental considerations. This study contributes to the discourse on sustainable urban development of heritage districts by proposing an integrated framework that fosters long-term preservation and responsible urban growth.

Keywords: Sustainable Urban Development, Triple Bottom Line Framework, Heritage District, Heritage Conservation, Ermita-Malate, Tiong Bahru.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development became one of the favorite topic discussions in the world of politics and academe over the last three decades, which each country giving their best to contribute to this worldwide endeavor of 179 detailed targets and 17 goals aiming to make the world a better place to live with by 2030. Such has comprised the infamous Sustainable Development Goals anchored on its three pillars of social (people), economic (profit) and environment (planet).

As the deadline for achieving the SDGs rapidly approaches, performance evaluations have predominantly emphasized economic and environmental dimensions, often overlooking the social implications. This oversight is particularly evident in the assessment of SDG 11, which aspires to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Specifically, Target 11.4 seeks to enhance efforts to protect and preserve the world's cultural and natural heritage.

The aftermath of the pandemic paved way for urban development of heritage districts with many relying on its capacity to jumpstart a sluggish economy greatly limited by the unexpected restrictions. With the primary aim of improving economic stability, such has resulted to unprecedented and mostly irreversible damages to cultural heritage (Cruz 2024: 30). Among which is the issue of commodification of the past and seeing cultural heritage for

its commercial value (Kim et al, 2019; MacKenzie and Gannon, 2019). Zerrudo (2021) likewise argued that overtourism of heritage districts resulted to hyper commercialization and commodification of culture (in Cruz 2024: 25). Similarly, Bec et. al (2021) emphasized that the deterioration of heritage districts is one of the critical concerns of over tourism (in Cranmer 2022: 1). Cranmer et al. added that if not mitigated, such concerns can lead to the closure of cultural heritage districts resulting to economic, cultural, and social loss (2022: 1)

Numerous studies like Ebbe (2009) and Henderson (2012) already cautioned about the serious environmental and social implications of urban development, while Bramwell et al (2017) and Nocca (2017) pointed that trade-offs take place between the three sustainable development pillars of social, economic, and environment. This has been evident in the heritage districts of Ermita-Malate in Manila, Philippines, and the Tiong Bahru Estate in Singapore, both of which continue to navigate the challenges of urban development. While both countries are situated in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has generally lagged behind Singapore in most key areas of development. Nevertheless, a shared thread unites the two nations: a rich colonial history and a common struggle for self-governance.

The Philippines has endured colonial administration for 425 years beginning in 1521 from Spain, America, and Japan. It finally ended when America gave the Philippines its long-sought for independence and self-governance in 1946. The rich colonial history of the Philippines is the prime contributory to its rich cultural heritage, resembling an amalgamation of myriad cultures and heritage. However, most of the tangible built-heritage structures of the Philippines were heavily damaged and destroyed during the World War II. A fate suffered as well by Singapore. In contrast to the Philippines, Singapore has a rich 139 years of colonial experience originating from the British in 1824, followed by the short-lived Japanese occupation from 1942-1945, with the return of the British until 1963 when Singapore became a state of Malaysia before gaining independence in 1965. Much like the Philippines, Singapore's built heritage structures were seriously damaged during the World War II.

The long colonial history of both nations in addition to its struggle for self-governance and independence has defined their respective cultural heritage. As more countries continue to capitalize on cultural heritage tourism as a post Covid-19 recovery strategy (Brouder 2020, 6; Cruz, 2022; 107), both Philippines and Singapore continue to redevelop the existing urban landscape thus providing detrimental impacts to its cultural heritage.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

By looking into the urban development landscape that took place in the case of the Ermita-Malate district in Manila, Philippines and the Tiong Bahru Estate in Singapore, this study seeks to address this central question: **“How can urban planning and design contribute to the sustainable urban development of heritage districts?”**.

Framework of the Study

The success of sustainable development anchors on its three pillars of people, profit, and planet following the principle of no one is left behind. More often, it is the profit pillar that is given much recognition hence leaving the two other pillars with minimal consideration. But like a three-legged stool, one pillar cannot support the weight of the entire structure, hence affecting its sustainability.

As such, this study adapts the triple bottom line (TBL) framework to sustainable urban development of heritage districts. TBL is a management tool popularized by Elkington (1998) commonly utilized by organization for their sustainability strategies and plan of actions following the three pillars of sustainable development. The TBL as applied to urban development seeks a balance between the sustainable development pillars of people, profit, and planet, that facilitates a more sustainable growth for all stakeholders involved as illustrated under Figure 2.1.

The framework suggests that working on one pillar will not result to the improvement of the overall sustainability of any cultural heritage tourism program. Commonly, the direct improvement on the profit pillar can readily be observed as the positive contribution of cultural heritage tourism to economic growth has long-been recognized by numerous studies (Banderin et al., 2011; Bowitz and Ibenholt, 2009; Graham et al., 2000; Han et al, 2018; Henderson, 2012; Ebbe, 2009; Russo and Van der Borg, 2006). But such economic improvement can be deemed temporary if symmetry to the two other pillars will not be established. Once the economic benefits are no longer substantial as interest of people and visitors decline, the community will lose interest as well, hence compromising its overall sustainability. Furthermore, as the profitability of the heritage district declines, the same goes for the community's interest to its conservation. Thus, a sustainable urban development framework should take into account not just the immediate but as well as the long-term economic, social, and environmental aspects of all stakeholders.

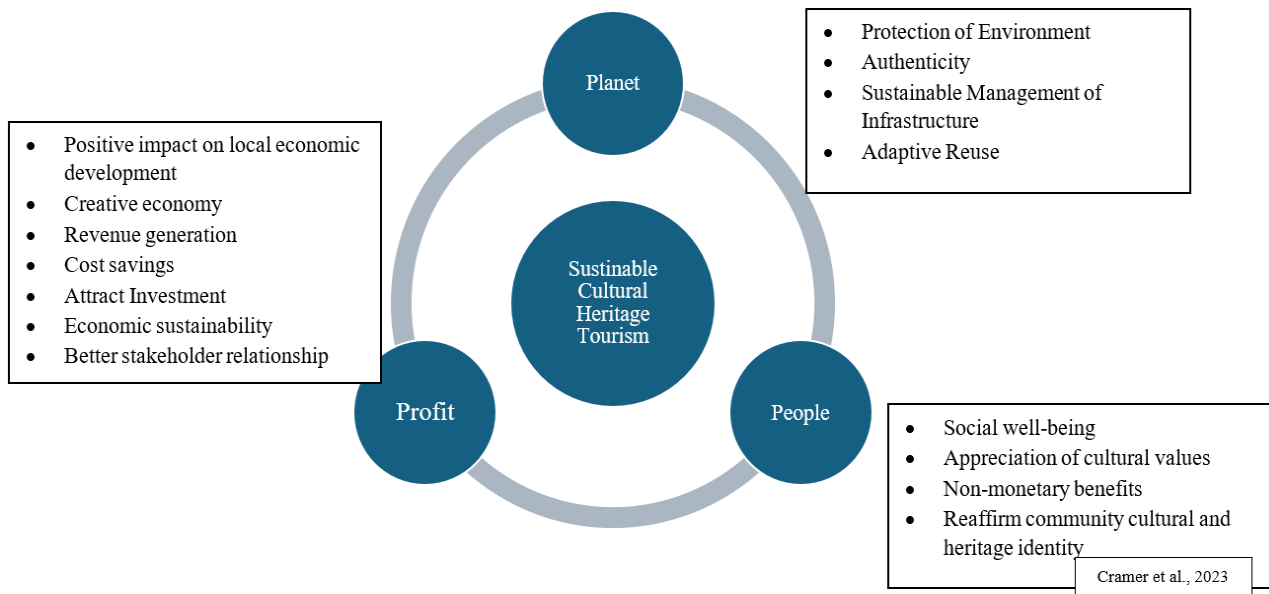


Figure 1.1. The Triple Bottom Line Framework to Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism.

Methodology

The central purpose of the study is to present a case analysis of the Ermita-Malate in Manila, Philippines and the Tiong Bahru Estate in Singapore to demonstrate how the triple bottom line framework can contribute towards the development of a sustainable cultural heritage management. During the data collection, archival research of relevant secondary data was applied which includes news reports, journal articles, tourist blogs, documentaries, and government publications. Additionally, participant observation was performed to observe the contemporary appearance, setting, and functionalities of the heritage site.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Han et al. (2018) emphasize that heritage districts, along with living cultural traditions, have become among the most significant sources of income in the post-pandemic period. Furthermore, the rich colonial histories of both the Philippines and Singapore have profoundly shaped their respective cultural heritage, making it a vital component of their national development programs.

For the Philippines, tourism continues to be among the prime contributor to its post-pandemic economic development spurt with 2024 setting as the all-time high after recording 13.1 billion USD in revenues (Department of Tourism, 2025). Similarly, Singapore reported 16.4 billion USD in tourism revenues for the same year (Singapore Tourism Board, 2025).

The Case of Ermita-Malate Historical District

Ermita is among the popular districts in the city of Manila today, mainly because it has been dubbed as the new entertainment district of the city. Who cannot notice the busy life in the streets of Ermita whether daytime or nighttime? One cannot surely miss the congested traffic in the area in the morning as city dwellers flock to the area as job seekers hop on from one recruitment agency to another hoping to look for better job opportunities overseas. Aside from being an overseas employment recruitment hub, many commercial centers sprouted like mushrooms in the area that adds more to the heavy people traffic. But as the sun sets in the afternoon, Malate starts to evolve to a party district for nightcrawlers as bars and clubs start to operate.

The word “Ermita” came from a Spanish word *La Hermita* derived from the Hermitage House of Nuestra Señora de Guia (today known as the Ermita Church), which used to refer to a small chapel place or the place of retreat by the locals (Anchanzar-Labor, 2017). Moreover, the word “Malate” came from the Filipino word “*maalal*” (salty) as the district used to be a seawater swampland making it a fishing village (Ira and Medina, 2019).

Ermita became a prominent place during the American occupation as the Americans decided to further develop the city as a civic center. According to the plan, government buildings will rise in the district to include the city hall for the city government, the offices of the three branches of government, a judicial hall. In addition, a state-run educational facility (University of the Philippines) and a hospital (Philippine General Hospital) were among the plans. Accordingly, the plan was for Ermita to be the new core of the emerging nation-state to be

established by the Americans in their new colony (Achanzar-Labor, 2017 in Zialcita and Akpedonu, 2021). To complement the design, entertainment activities were established as well in the area such as parks and public plazas such as the Rizal Park or Luneta to top off the list.

Similarly, due to its proximity to the business district of Binondo, and the political center of Intramuros, Manila, Malate was transformed by the Americans to an exclusive residential area composed of high rise apartments and bungalows (Ira and Medina, 2019).

But the aftermath of World War II disrupted the grandiose plans for the district in the so-called “Rape of Manila” or “Manila Massacre”. Even with the conservation and renovation efforts instigated by the Americans to reestablish the area, one by one family started to move to the suburbs as the area starts to become unlivable due to poor street lighting, unregulated street vendor, and proliferation of pickpockets and thieves thus what used to be Manila’s high-class gradually acceded to low-class commercialization. Today, Ermita-Malate is often categorized as a “red light” district as bars and clubs shine every night known for prostituting men and women of all ages mostly to foreigners.

Despite being far away from the ideal civic center conceptualized by the Americans, numerous structures constructed during the American were able to withstand the ravages of war however threats are far from over as development continues to exert pressure on these surviving heritages. It started with the demolition of the famed Jai Alai building in 2000 that presently stands as a vacant lot beside the controversial Torre de Manila which became the tipping point for a Philippine heritage law to be enacted. Moreover, the Angela Apartments was demolished in 2009 after the owner run out of funds for its conservation plan thus decided to demolish the property rather than incur further losses for maintaining an unprofitable property. The same fate loomed over the pre-war structure of the Admiral Hotel and Michel Apartments, which were demolished in 2014, as well as the case of the Philam Life Building which was demolished in 2020 after property developer, SMDC, bought the property with the plans of converting the heritage edifice to another high-rise structure. Nevertheless, the Army-Navy Club was given a new life after it was restored and rehabilitated as the Rizal Park Hotel following the principle of adaptive re-use, as well as the Luneta Hotel adapting the conservation principle of old-and-new.

Still, Malate houses several prominent heritage structures in Manila that includes the Rizal Monument in Rizal Park, the Malate Church, the National Museum, the Quirino Grandstand, the newly renovated and preserved national heritage structure Metropolitan Theater, the Manila Hotel, and the Masonic Temple of Ermita to cite a few.

Much as the same, Malate’s twin sister, Ermita was once an integral part of Manila’s grand civic center based on the 1905 Burham Plan of Manila of the Americans with most of the residential properties were exclusive to Americans and their families. The two districts were where the wealthiest families of Manila used to live and were considered as the first Forbes Park. However, the Ermita district suffered the same fate as its twin sister during the wartime. Hence, with some American families deciding to return to their properties, some decided to permanently leave the area leaving many establishments unattended which was taken over by vagrant people. But after the local government commenced cleaning the two districts, business establishments like restaurants, bars, clubs, and hotels gradually sprouted in the area which facilitated its transformation to a commercial district with a portion of Malate becoming a “red light district”.

Notwithstanding, Malate is the site of some heritage landmarks such as the De La Salle University, the newly preserved and renovated Rizal Memorial Sports Complex, and the *Tanghalan Pambansa* (National Theater) inside the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

The Case of the Tiong Bahru Estate

Amidst the flourishing skyscrapers and bustling commercial complexes that characterized urban development in the tiger nation of Singapore lies an enclave of a well-preserved built-cultural heritage, the Tiong Bahru Estate. It was once known as a Chinese burial ground hence obtaining its name from the combination of the Hokkien word “*Tiong*” and the Malay word “*Babru*” which literary means new cemetery as part of the expansion cemetery made by the government in 1828. The new cemetery can be best described as situated in a swampy and hilly terrains that is overcrowded by informal settlers which makes it inaccessible, mangy and hazardous that earned it the description of “evil-smelling swamp” by an editorial in *The Strait Times* (1930). Moreover, the overcrowded houses constructed by informal settlers were primarily made of wood, turning the entire area into a significant fire hazard. The dire conditions prompted the colonial government in 1925 to devise a plan to clear the area, build roads, and improve infrastructure to reduce health risks and revitalize the community.

In the 1930s, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), tasked with managing the rapid expansion of slum areas, initiated efforts to clear squatter settlements and construct public housing and flats to accommodate the growing population. The SIT declared that it is the right time to redevelop the area into a more livable community by reclaiming the swamps and prepare the land for residential development, especially since the country's

unexpected population surge has led to slum-like conditions. These conditions increased the risk of epidemic diseases and higher mortality rates, which could hinder economic growth and business prosperity.

The original plan aimed to draw in property investors to develop the area. However, the severe downturn caused by the 1931-1935 recession heavily impacted the industry, forcing the SIT to take on the 72-acre housing project itself. By December 1936, the SIT completed the first wave of housing flats comprised of 28 units and four shop houses, accommodating 11 families with monthly rents ranging from \$18 to \$25. But with such expensive rate, most of the tenants were middle class, government employees, and business owners, which did little resolve the country's housing scarce (Hui Min, 2015).

Despite this, the construction of houses and flats persisted from 1936 to 1941, with approximately 784 flats, 54 tenements, and 33 shop houses completed by then with 6,000 occupants. However, the development of the Tiong Bahru Estate came to a halt between 1942 and 1945 due to the Japanese occupation, which caused damage to some structures in the area. After the war, construction persisted to meet the growing demand for quality housing. By 1954, a total of 1,258 housing flats had been built, accommodating approximately 17,000 residents from diverse backgrounds, including female entertainers employed at nearby pubs and cabarets (Hui Min, 2015).

The Tiong Bahru Estate is considered as the first-generation public housing in Singapore, composed of the pre-war "Streamline Moderne" design and post-war "International Style" (To et al., 2014). It has been the home of art deco architecture and low rise structures with portholes and curved staircases. This became the prime heritage component of The Tiong Bahru Estate. In 2003, the government led by the Urban Redevelopment Board (URB) announced the conservation of 20 blocks of pre-war flats and 36 shophouses around Tiong Bahru (in To et al., 2014). Today, Tiong Bahru Estate is recognized as a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity. Since 2000, businesses have flourished on the ground floors of these historic buildings, adhering to the heritage conservation principle of adaptive reuse. This sparked urban renewal in the area, drawing young professionals and expatriates, which further fueled the growth of local businesses. As explained by To et al., these urban regeneration has revitalized the old estate of Tiong Bahru transforming it to one of the sought after location for residences and businesses (2014: 58).

CONCLUSION

The Ermita-Malate Historical District can draw valuable lessons from the remarkable transformation of the Tiong Bahru Estate, which has risen from near obscurity to become a highly photogenic and desirable community. Now a favored residential and business hub for young expatriate professionals, Tiong Bahru's successful revitalization has led to soaring property values, with resale prices reaching \$1 million (Hui Min, 2015). Its distinctive community architecture and design have also attracted international media attention, earning it a spot on Vogue.com's list of the world's coolest neighborhoods in 2014 (Remsen, 2014).

In the case of the Ermita-Malate district, the successive waves of colonial administration have significantly influenced the preservation and disappearance of built heritage structures in the area. Originally a Spanish-era swampland, the district was later transformed into an exclusive residential enclave under American rule. Over time, as the district continually evolved and adapted to a shifting urban landscape, much of its distinctive heritage and architectural identity was gradually erased. Today, Ermita-Malate is known primarily as a hub for overseas recruitment by day and as a red-light entertainment zone by night. Such earned Ermita-Malte the moniker of a district that never sleeps. Its former architectural elegance and historical character have largely been lost.

The decline of the Ermita-Malate Historical District can be attributed to the absence of an effective cultural heritage framework. This inadequacy led to an imbalance among stakeholders, resulting in the dominance of certain interests over others. Initially, the district sought to address the immediate needs of the population by serving as a residential area to accommodate the growing number of inhabitants. However, as neighboring districts developed more desirable neighborhoods, Ermita-Malate experienced gentrification and a gradual loss of cultural and historical relevance. This shift ultimately paved the way for its transformation into a predominantly commercial area, operating nearly around the clock to generate as much profits as possible. This transition led to the relentless destruction of heritage structures in order to accommodate the growing demand for commercial properties and business establishments; hence sacrificing the sustainability pillar of planet (Cruz, 2024). The heritage destruction was massive such that in the last decade, it has recorded as having the least number of heritage casualties since most heritage structures were destroyed already during the Battle of Manila Bay in 1945 (Akpodonu 2016:13).

The case of the Ermita-Malate Historical District stands in stark contrast to that of the Tiong Bahru Estate. Under the guidance of Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Board, Tiong Bahru successfully achieved a balance among the three pillars of sustainability without allowing one to undermine the others. The government employed the heritage conservation principle of adaptive reuse, preserving historic buildings and structures by retrofitting them to serve as shophouses and commercial centers. Rather than resorting to demolition, these structures were

revitalized to meet the evolving needs of the community, seamlessly integrating tradition with modernity. By maintaining environmental integrity while enhancing social and economic value, the Tiong Bahru Estate exemplifies how all three pillars of sustainability can be harmoniously integrated.

REFERENCES

- Akpedonu, E. (2016). "Architectural Heritage of Manila" in Manila" Selected Papers of the 25th Annual Manila Studies Conference, August 30-31 2016. National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Intramuros, Manila, 2017.
- Anchanzar-Labor, H. (2017). Calle Faura: Cultural Heritage Amidst Conflict in Ermita. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331639183_Cultural_Heritage_Amidst_Conflict_in_Ermita
- Bandarin, F., Hosaghar, J. and Albernaz, F. (2011). Why Development needs Culture. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 1 Number 1, pp. 15-25.
- Bec, A., Moyle, B., Schaffer, V., & Timms, K. (2021). Virtual reality and mixed reality for second chance tourism. *Tourism Management*, 83(2021), Article 104256.
- Bramwell, B., Higham, J., Lane, B., & Miller, G. (2017). Twenty-five years of sustainable tourism and the Journal of Sustainable Tourism: Looking back and moving forward. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 25(1), 1–9.
- Brouder, P. (2020). Reset redux: Possible evolutionary pathways towards the transformation of tourism in a COVID-19 world. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 1–7.
- Bowitz, Einar and Ibenholt, Karin (2009). Economic Impacts of Cultural Heritage – Research and Perspective. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 10 (2009), 1-8.
- Cruz, G. R. C. (2022). "Intramuros, Manila Heritage Tourism: A Culture-Oriented Economic Development Paradigm for Post-Covid19 Economic Recovery" in *Southeast Asia Under Stress: COVID-19, Geopolitics and Domestic Challenges*. Edited by Wen Pin Lin, Khai Leong Ho, and Samuel C.Y. Ku, Wenzao Ursuline University Press, 2022, 107-128.
- Cruz, G. R. C. (2024). The Heritage Destruction of Manila: Cultivating a Heritage-Driven Economy for the City of Manila. *IntechOpen*. doi: 10.5772/intechopen.1006947
- Department of Tourism (2024). PHL Hits Record High Tourism Revenue in 2024. 5 January 2025. Retrieved from https://beta.tourism.gov.ph/news_and_updates/phl-hits-record-high-tourism-revenue-in-2024/
- Ebbe, Katrinka (2009), "Infrastructure and Heritage Conservation: Opportunities for Urban Revitalization and Economic Development", *Directions in Urban Development*, February 2009.
- Elkington, J. (1998). Partnerships from cannibals with forks: The triple bottom line of 21st-century business. *Environmental Quality Management*, 8(1), 37–51. doi:10.1002/tqem.3310080106
- Graham, B., Ashworth, G., & Tunbridge, J. (2000). *A Geography of Heritage* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315824895>
- Han, D. I., tom Dieck, M. C., & Jung, T. (2018). User experience model for augmented reality applications in urban heritage tourism. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 13(1), 46–61.
- Henderson, Joan C. (2012). "Conserving Heritage in South East Asia: Cases from Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines". *Tourism Recreation Research* Vol. 37(1), 2012: 47-55.
- Hui Min, C. (2015). Tiong Bahru SIT Flats. Singapore Slider: Then & Now. 22 Jan 2015.
- Ira, L. and Medina, I. (2019). Malate: 'Manila's Crown Jewel'. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 16 March 2019. Retrieved from <https://business.inquirer.net/266809/malate-manilas-crown-jewel>.
- Kim, S., Whitford, M., & Arcodia, C. (2019). Development of intangible cultural heritage as a sustainable tourism resource: The intangible cultural heritage practitioners' _perspectives. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 14(5–6), 422–435.
- MacKenzie, N., & Gannon, M. J. (2019). Exploring the antecedents of sustainable tourism development. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(6), 2411–2427.
- Remsen, N. (2014). Global Street Style Report: Mapping Out the 15 Coolest Neighborhoods in the World. September 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/fifteen-coolest-street-style-neighborhoods>.
- Russo, P. and Van der Borg, J. (2006). New Culture-Oriented Economic Development Trajectories: The Case Study of Four Dutch Cities (June 2006). University Ca' Foscari of Venice, Dept. of Economics Research Paper Series No. 35/06.
- Singapore Tourism Board (2025). Singapore Achieves Historical High in Tourism Receipts in 2024. 4 February 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.stb.gov.sg/about-stb/media-publications/media-centre/singapore-achieves-historical-high-in-tourism-receipts-in-2024/>

The Straits Times (1930). Overcrowding in Chinatown. 26 June 1930, page 15.

Zialcita, F. and Akpedonu, E. (2021). *Endangered Splendor*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.