Volume 1, issue 2

Mehra Prisha*

A city that moves, a memory that stays

Received May 2025; Reviewed July 2025; Accepted August 2025; Published September 2025

Abstract: As I walked on the polished floors of Orchard's famous Ngee Ann City, I could vividly see the reflections of people bustling in and out of shops. Their footsteps blended with the hum of escalators. No one stopped. The modern façade of this massive building offers no clues - no plaque, no memorial, not even a hint in the mall's sleek design - of the history buried beneath it: a history that once held the resting place of over 30,000 souls. But someone did stop. A man sat near the fountain, staring into space. At first, I thought he was just tired from shopping like everyone else. But soon I noticed his lips moving as if he was chanting a prayer with some fruits and flowers in his hands, and his unfocused eyes seemed to look beyond the polished floors, into something deeper, perhaps something or someone that no longer existed. Perhaps he was thinking about the cemetery stretched quietly beneath the open sky, the gravestones standing among the lush banyan trees, the air thick with the scent of incense, the whispering of prayers of the loved ones who came to honour the dead and its staggering contrast to the new building that has risen with its steel and glass having replaced the stone and soil.

Keywords: time, memory, past, present

***Corresponding author** (**Mehra Prisha**, PRISHA002@e.ntu.edu.sg)

As I walked on the polished floors of Orchard's famous Ngee Ann City, I could vividly see the reflections of people bustling in and out of shops. Their footsteps blended with the hum of escalators. No one stopped. The modern façade of this massive building offers no clues - no plaque, no memorial, not even a hint in the mall's sleek design - of the history buried beneath it: a history that once held the resting place of over 30,000 souls.

But someone did stop. A man sat near the fountain, staring into space. At first, I thought he was just tired from shopping like everyone else. But soon I noticed his lips moving as if he was chanting a prayer with some fruits and flowers in his hands, and his unfocused eyes seemed to look beyond the polished floors, into something deeper, perhaps something or someone that no longer existed. Perhaps he was thinking about the cemetery stretched quietly beneath the open sky, the gravestones standing among the lush banyan trees, the air thick with the scent of incense, the whispering of prayers of the loved ones who came to honour the dead and its staggering contrast to the new building that has risen with its steel and glass having replaced the stone and soil.

Watching him mourn reminded me of my grandmother. What if she, too, was buried here? Would I be stuck in the same turmoil as him? I realised that as she passed away, even I started to cling to the little things that remind me of her, as if her warmth still lingers in those small reminders.

Change is constant in a city like Singapore. There is little space, and redevelopment overshadows preservation —housing estates replace kampongs, highways cut through hills, and malls like Ngee Ann City rise from cemeteries. This transition to a retail destination has been so seamless that most people remain unaware of what once lay beneath their feet.

I wondered if the man remembered. Maybe, decades ago, he had stood here for a different reason. Maybe he had once walked these grounds as a son visiting his father's grave. Now the past had been paved over, his memories reduced to nothing more than ghosts in his mind. He never moved, and several shoppers passed him without a second glance. I, too, found myself walking past him, disappearing into the crowd.

The sombre reality of what was here contrasts sharply with the vibrant commercial activity surrounding me. How easily we move on, forgetting the past in pursuit of convenience and

consumption. This site, once filled with life and stories, now serves as a backdrop for shopping and entertainment, a testament to urban development often overshadowing historical significance.

In a place where land is limited and history is integrated with steel and glass, what happens if we, as a society, keep foregoing history in the name of modernity and progress? What if detachment becomes more palpable than a stronger link to the past?

In "Modernity is a Qualitative, not a Chronological Category", Peter Osborne (1992) argues that modernity cannot be thought of merely as a historical period but as a qualitative rupture from the past. For him, modernity does not simply follow from the past but reconfigures historical consciousness by continuously redefining itself through an ever-renewing present. He defines modernity as "not, as such, a project," but rather "a form of historical consciousness… which, in totalizing history from the standpoint of an ever-vanishing, ever-present present, embraces a conflicting plurality of projects" (Osborne, 1992, p. 80). Places once filled with history are reshaped into symbols of progress. What remains is not a connection to the past but a carefully curated narrative, one that selectively preserves elements that align with modern priorities while discarding the rest. The transformation of Orchard Road from a sacred burial ground into a world-renowned shopping district is not merely a chronological development or extension of space, but a rupture. The physical removal of the cemetery represents more than just the loss of land—it signifies a cultural and historical detachment. In Osborne's (1992) terms, this break with the past serves the present by prioritising economic progress and urban development over historical and emotional memory.

However, Osborne (1992) overlooks the emotional and cultural consequences of this transformation. His focus on the intellectual and philosophical aspects abstracts away from the real-world impact on communities that become severed from their historical ties. The removal of cemeteries for development, for instance, is not just a practical decision; it carries deep emotional weight. He treats the loss of history as a rational process but fails to acknowledge the emotional toll of historical amnesia. Prioritising progress over memory does not necessarily free or liberate people; it can leave them disconnected from their heritage and their sense of identity and belonging.

In "Global Modernisation: Rethinking the Project of Modernity", Martinelli (2005) expands the discussion by examining modernisation as an ongoing, multi-faceted global phenomenon rather than a fixed historical stage. He argues that modernity extends beyond technological and economic progress, that is, it represents a broader shift in societal structures, often at the cost of traditional ways of life. He introduces the concept of "global homogenization," where local cultures are either diminished or restructured to fit a universal model of modernity. He highlights the tangible consequences for societies forced to abandon their cultural roots. He argues that when history is repurposed to serve progress, what is lost is not merely a place, but an entire way of relating to the past, which challenges the assumption that modernity is beneficial universally to all.

But is it? My grandmother's memory lives on through the smallest of objects, reminding me that history is not always lost; it can be carried forward in those who choose to remember. I think of her stories, her cooking, her sari folded neatly in my drawer. Her nose ring, on my nose. She lives on, not in marble or monuments, but in the small rituals of my day. The man by the fountain, lost in mourning, too, proves that even in spaces designed to erase memory, history persists. He embodies the tension Martinelli (2005) describes (between the homogenization of space and the deeply personal act of remembering). What he underestimates is the resilience of remembrance. Modernisation may attempt to sever the past, but people find ways to hold onto it no matter what.

Martinelli's (2005) analysis is particularly useful in understanding how modernisation can lead to the erosion of historical identity. He emphasises its societal impact, particularly how advancements in technology and urbanisation often result in the destruction of historical sites for economic gain. The consequences of leaving history behind are that it underscores how modernisation compels societies to distance themselves from their past. He captures the struggle of communities forced to detach from their roots, yet he assumes that this process is inevitable.

While both Osborne (1992) and Martinelli (2005) provide valuable insights into modernity's effects on history, their perspectives can be expanded. Osborne sees history as being actively reshaped to fit modern needs, but he underestimates the emotional consequences of detachment. Martinelli, on the other hand, critiques modernisation's tendency to erase personal identities but does not explore potential ways to integrate historical preservation

into progress. If modernity's breach with history is not absolute, then cities like Singapore could find ways for modernity, history and memory to coexist, ensuring that progress does not come at the cost of complete historical erasure.

Perhaps, the true test of progress is not measured by how much we build but by how well we remember. If modernity continues to erase history without pause, what will remain of the collective stories that define a place? But if we find ways to weave memory into the fabric of urban life, then history does not have to be the cost of development—it can be its foundation. Maybe modernity doesn't have to erase memory. Maybe forgetting isn't as complete as it seems. The past lingers — in gestures, in objects, in rituals, in musings, in people who remember. Forgetting isn't neutral; it reveals what a society chooses to value. The question is not whether progress should move forward, but whether it can do so without leaving its past behind, especially if the act of remembering is not only individual, but a collective of consciousness, boldness and being courageous enough to refuse to forget.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Mehra Prisha is an undergraduate student at Nanyang Technological University Singapore, undertaking a degree in Economics.

References

Martinelli, A. (2005). *Global modernisation: Rethinking the project of modernity*. Sage Academic Books. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446216583.n6

Osborne, P. (1992). Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological category. *New Left Review, 1*(192), 65-84. https://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=1670