



PRIDE OR PRICKY? THE ESPLANADE

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"A building or a space should make one feel that a thought is within it, that it is more than a shelter, as a good book is more than words put together, as music is more than an arrangement of notes."

Max Abranovitz
American Architect
"Contemporary Architects", 1980



If we agree with Max Abranovitz - and I will say categorically, Yes, I do - then the questions we ask ourselves are: Is the soon to be opened Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay inspirational? Is there a thought within it? Will it stand as an icon of Singapore's building and structural heritage?

When the 3-D impressions of the Esplanade were first unveiled to the public in 1994, the largest single criticism appeared to have been that the design was very "Western" rather than "Asian". This inevitably begs the questions: What defines a modern Asian building today in such a culturally diverse country as Singapore? Would the addition of Chinese pagodas, Islamic arches or traditional Malay roofs make it Asian? If architecture has historically reflected emerging social, political and cultural trends, why would such a building look to the past for its cultural reference? Good architecture should always be forward looking, and as a dynamic nation we should not be looking to history for inspiration.

Vikas Gore of DP Architects - the architects with then partner Michael Wilford & Partners (UK), who together are responsible for the project - also rejects this type of iconography, "My argument is that with changes in design occurring in response to events all over the world, why should we as Asians condemn ourselves to using something that was invented thousands of years ago? These traditional icons are completely out of place in the middle of our urban metropolis in the 21st century."

Interestingly, there were no pre-conceptions of what the project should look like or what the design vocabulary should be when the competition was first held. After the project has been awarded, one of the key decisions DP Architects and Michael Wilford & Partners made was to address the question as to whether the main entrance of the Esplanade should be directed towards the Civic District or the waterfront. They decided that, on one hand, it should become part of the Civic District and yet, on the other, it should take advantage of the waterfront views as well. If only Esplanade Drive had not been built, patrons would have been able to walk across the park to the Padang, creating, in effect, a much more impressive frontage for the development by making it part of the park and the Padang, a truly civic construction!

Apart from making planning decisions such as this, DP Architects was also responsible for the design of the monolithic interiors and project coordination with the numerous consultants appointed for the project. It was a gruelling task in the coordination of a project of this scale. Each of the consultants' input was critical to every stage of the design and construction process. One such instance was the appointment of the acoustic and theatre-planning consultants, who were appointed before anyone else and wrote doorstopper briefs on what was required - the sizes of theatres, support facilities etc. The venues comprise of a 1600-seat concert hall and a 2000-seat theatre in the style of traditional Italian opera houses featuring two full-sized stages, and two smaller studios with a seating capacity of 220 and 250 each.

ARCHITECT
DP ARCHITECTS (SINGAPORE)/MICHAEL WILFORD & PARTNERS (UK)

PROJECT MANAGER, C&S, M&E CONSULTANTS & Q.S
PWD CONSULTANTS PTE LTD (SINGAPORE)

ACOUSTIC CONSULTANT
ARTEC CONSULTANTS INC (USA)

THEATRE PLANNING & EQUIPMENT CONSULTANT
THEATRE PROJECTS CONSULTANTS (UK)

SUPERSTRUCTURE AND MAIN BASEMENT CONTRACTOR
PENTA-OCEAN CONSTRUCTION CO LTD (JAPAN)

BASEMENT CARPARK CONTRACTOR
SATO KOGYO CO LTD (JAPAN)

CLADDING CONSULTANT
ATELIER GROUP OF COMPANIES (GERMANY)

CLADDING CONTRACTOR
MERO RAUMSTRUKTUR GMBH & CO. (GERMANY)

LANDSCAPE DESIGNER
ASPINWALL CLOUSTON (HONG KONG)

LIGHTING CONSULTANT
BO STEIBER LIGHTING DESIGN

SIGNAGE CONSULTANT
WORDMAKER DESIGN PTE LTD



One of the acoustical issues faced was that because the MRT line runs under the Padang from City Hall to Raffles Place, the acoustics played a major part in the design. Mr Gore explains, "We were afraid that the noise would be carried through the ground and the foundations into the concrete structure and then into the auditoria. So the theatre and concert hall sit on rubber pads, which in turn sit on caps on top of the foundation. It's a building within a building with no structural continuity from the site building down to the ground." This strategy proved to be effective - the auditoria are in effect more than perfectly soundproof.

Beyond these technical requirements that a project of this nature had to address, I would say that between the high-tech cladding shells of the exterior and the organic, earthy materials of the interior, I think the interior falls short substantially. Budget cuts seem to have been paramount in the sacrifices that were made in the quality of the finishes. "I'm not ecstatic about the quality of the workmanship on the interiors. I've seen better," admits Vikas Gore. Although it was "a conscious effort to make the building feel as if it is rooted in this area," according to Vikas Gore, by giving it a more "natural" rather than a finished look using synthetic materials, there seems to be no cohesive or decisive design plan as to why granite, wood, sandstone and steel were all thrown together. Despite it all, it is just like so many other cultural centres around the world - soulless.

However, the one feature that I find aesthetically pleasing, however, is the wheelchair access ramp. The regular steps leading up to the foyer are criss-crossed with a sweeping ergonomic ramp reminiscent of Lubetkin's classic penguin pool at the London Zoo. Believe it or not, this access ramp was, in fact, highly controversial during its inception. Apparently, the Building Control Authority was worried that people would fall down the steps, as they would not be expecting a ramp to be in between them! Even now, it seems not everyone is pleased when form and function are so well married. While the foyer is all space and light, there are lots of angles and hidden corners. I love space for space's sake but it would be an added bonus to see these utilised as platforms for public art and local visual artists to exhibit in.

The problem facing anyone trying to build a cultural centre with public money is when there are so many different needs to be addressed. These are publicly funded buildings, built for "the people" and yet also having to conform to the needs of a world-class arts centre, i.e. good acoustics, good access and the ability to attract top class artists. One of the briefs from the steering committee stated that the Esplanade should not be seen as an elitist building. So the architects decided that "a high level of transparency between the inside and outside was a physical architectural interpretation of this kind of democratisation of the design."

This could, perhaps, be one of the reasons for the use of glass and steel cladding structures. In other parts of the world, such designs have caused problems. James Stirling's glass covered History

Library at the University of Cambridge is one such example - the interior environment is freezing in winter and boiling in summer.

As Singaporeans are not likely to venture into a non-air-conditioned building, the architects decided that some form of sun-shading is required. They believe that the final design should be something that is "both economically and socially responsible." Through numerous design developments that took place after the departure of Michael Wilford & Partners (UK) in 1995, DP Architects believe they have arrived with a design that resonates in natural forms: it is modern; it utilises the surrounding views; and the innovative use of steel sun shading cuts out the heat and the sun.

So, instead of a durian fruit, think a bird with its feathers fluffed up, a flower that changes from the centre to the outside - a repetitive but gradually changing geometry.

Out and about on the streets, one financial trader said "it looks outstanding - something unique in boring Singapore," although many people just wondered how they were going to clean all the windows!

So much for the exterior of the building itself, but what of the use of the surrounding space? To be a truly modern icon for Singapore, I would have liked to see concrete or steel structures - think Tadao Ando - around the promenade rather than the usual flora and fauna. In this way, the idiom of the building would have carried on beyond the physical envelope.

On an internet chat room, I came across a whole spate of observations regarding the Esplanade. There were comments ranging from - *It is causing bad feng shui in Singapore... It's ugly looking... I reckon that people who are into art are the very small minority, for the rest of us, bread and butter issues matter most... It is the inside that matters, hopefully it will have the acoustics of a great concert hall. Can't wait to hear it for myself, to, Whether this will be of significant benefit to Singaporeans financially, artistically, culturally remains to be seen.*

Though the present design may not be everyone's cup of tea - we have all heard it being referred to as a durian or a bug's eyes - one thing can be said is that it is definitely modern and makes use of the highest design technologies available for a first-class performing arts venue. People will ultimately get used to the image of the Esplanade but it will be the theatres that will have to prove their worth. After all, most people will be coming here to listen to and watch performances. It will be an added bonus if they like the building.

In answer to the questions - Is Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay inspirational and will it stand as an icon of Singapore's building and structural heritage? I, for one, am ambivalent; while many other Singaporeans I have spoken to are more concerned with its function rather than its form. "Let's wait and see if it delivers," they say. ■