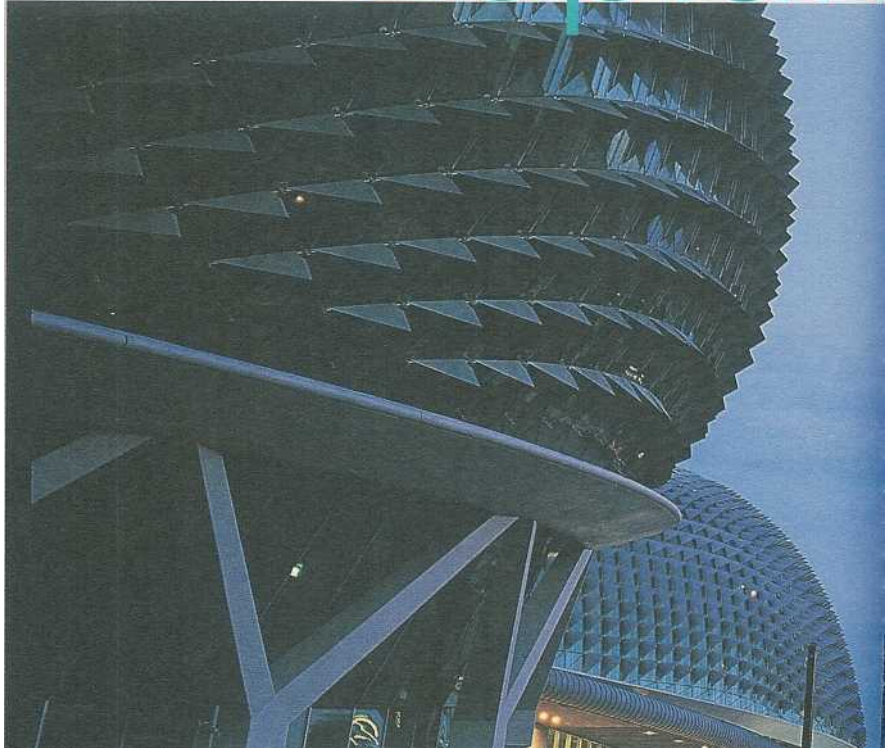


The Art of Esplanade

It was the first time that an arts centre of such a scale was to be built in Singapore. The project was the largest since the National Theatre in 1963 and the conversion of Kallang Cinema into Kallang Theatre in 1986. Expectations ran high. It was envisioned to have world-class facilities and poised to be an iconic structure on the island republic's waterfront. Said Brig-Gen (NS) George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts, in 1992: "Our objective is to build a centre on the Pacific Rim which will prefigure and help usher in the new age of East Asia. The design of our arts centre must reflect this aspiration, and it must be of enduring quality."

Indeed, it was a challenging task for the design team. UK-based theatre planner Theatre Projects Consultants (TPC) was first appointed. They prepared the brief for the selection of the architects and later developed the functional brief for the design of the building. World-renowned Russell Johnson of American firm Artec Consultants was appointed as the acoustician.

The search for an architectural team took one year. A pre-qualification exercise was held which saw an initial shortlist of 48 firms. The selection criteria ensured that Singapore firms would be involved in the project while foreign firms could only take part if they partnered Singapore firms. The shortlist was narrowed to 15, and finally to four. The team of Singapore's DP Architects (DPA) and UK's Michael Wilford and Partners (MWP) was selected at the end of 1992 by a panel of assessors headed by the late Ong Teng Cheong, then Deputy Prime Minister.



Vikas Gore, project director and a director of DP Architects which took on sole responsibility for the architecture after Michael Wilford and Partners ended their involvement in 1995 at the end of the schematic design stage, describes

Esplanade as a contemporary building that is culturally and climatically rooted in a local context:

"We set out to create a very local icon that is unique to this part of the world. But we didn't want it to hark back in a very literal way to some kind of tradition and in Singapore, this would in any case have been problematic because it's a multi-cultural country. I think it has turned out to be what we set out to do - we've got a very contemporary building, but it's closely rooted in the local context, in terms of the Southeast Asian and Asian culture, of the climate and of its urban context.

ade's Architecture



The last thing we wanted to do was to use these sterile Asian motifs and just apply it on like a bit of an applique kitsch. We consciously avoided doing this. We wanted to create a feeling that this building belonged to this part of the world without resorting to this. Remember too that this building type of an enclosed auditorium does not have a precedent in traditional Asian architecture.

People associate modern architecture with Western architecture but there needs be nothing intrinsically Western about modern architecture. It doesn't look like a Romanesque building or Gothic building. When you consider buildings that are seen as traditional today, what people did was to use the technology and materials available at the time, and especially for buildings of special significance, stretch it to the limits that their knowledge would allow. The fact that the resulting features have become traditional icons is a development over time.

They were not trying to create a cultural motif; they were trying to build a building the best way they knew how or to find solutions to problems. We should continue to push the envelope the way our ancestors have always done and that's the philosophy we have tried to work with.

We are living in a thriving Asian metropolis in the 21st century. Why pretend we are living a hundred years ago? I don't see why Asians should condemn themselves to living in some kind of iconic museum world of their culture and not let it evolve. For example, in the Concert Hall, the timber ribs echo the timber frames of traditional houses but that was not the main motivation in designing it. It was simply to create a greater sense of enclosure and intimacy in what is in fact quite a large room. People should feel these architectural features belong to this cultural milieu without having to say it's an Islamic arch or Minangkabau roof... "

When the conceptual plans of the four short-listed architects were presented at a public exhibition, it was the first time that Singapore had a visual idea of what the arts centre might look like. The plans drew mixed reactions. Since then, and later when the actual schematic design was unveiled in 1994, right up till it was completed, Esplanade could not help but draw comments about its architecture.

Debate raged over the original schematic design. It was deemed "ugly", "un-Asian" and "uninspiring" by some. While it was acknowledged as well-planned, there was a concern that functional needs took priority over form. Whereas others felt that it was "a genuine attempt to discover new forms", the two elongated domes were considered too dominant and monolithic, and as such, relegated the outdoor needs of Asian arts to the sidelines. Yet another view likened the domes favourably to "papayas" and saw them as the only feature that felt Asian. They were also thought of as "concrete blobs". This was in fact a misconception, as the model then had not taken into account the materials and textures for its exterior.



Still,

when the domes eventually came to be covered by the cladding, the old nicknames gave way to new ones: "bug eyes", "pineapples" and the currently popular "durians". Perhaps it is only apt that this building for the arts has provoked such passionate response from the public.

Taking centrestage in the design are the two domes clad in glass and metallic sunshades mounted on a steel truss frame. Gore elaborates on the building's design and construction:

"Two of the things that we knew would be a big feature of the project, however we designed it, would be these two cladding shells over the two main venues. Together with British design engineering firms Atelier One and Ten, who were instrumental in the design of these elements, we explored various options and one of them was the framing structural system we finally adopted. The

geometric scheme is a square grid, like a mesh spread over a surface. The analogy I often cite is a kitchen sieve. Where the mesh bunches up at four points and stays square at other points along the edge, there's a gradual shift from a very narrow shape to a square shape and back to a narrow shape. And when this is draped over a more undefined shape than a hemisphere, you get quite a complex and organic look and feel to it.



Precedents ranging from 'jail' screens in medieval South Asian architecture to the woven mat walls in traditional Southeast Asian building forms have inspired the external sunshade screen. When you look at some types of Indonesian housing, they use what is essentially a very large mat woven of reeds or palm leaves, put over the slightly curved shape of a traditional house. Also there is a lot of geometry present in nature that is used in Asian crafts and art forms - very repetitive geometry that changes gradually such as fish scales or feathers on a bird. This was an opportunity to express something that is ingrained in local craft and local architecture in a very contemporary way.



And we used the frame to put sunshades that could gradually change over the surface and be adjusted to keep the views in and the sun out in a more subtly textured way.

Although the external skins do function as enclosures to the auditoria within, they are not exclusively driven by the functional requirements of these halls. They are intentionally shaped into their present softer form as an effort to make them gentler and 'less aggressive'. The curves of each of the shells offset the harder texture of the external aluminium sunshade layer. The shapes also help lend the building a sense of tranquility and repose that is characteristic of much traditional Asian architecture from India to Southeast Asia, China and Japan. These external forms with their gentle curves and the ambiguity of their shapes are philosophically close to Asian attitudes and thought.

Many aspects of the building design were determined by the very specific context of the site. We wanted the entrance of the building to face the Civic District. While this site is on the waterfront, it is also in the Civic District-with the City Hall, Supreme Court and Padang in its midst, where all these grand functions and parades have traditionally happened. We felt that this was important and should be recognised, while also taking advantage of the view of the bay and the other views all around.

Another early decision was that we wanted to give each of the major performing venues a clear identity and you could stand outside and say that's the theatre, that's the concert hall. For some large

theatre complexes, the body of the theatre itself gets lost inside the attendant spaces. The building appears like a mass of concrete and you wonder: "Somewhere in there is a theatre but where is it?"

The building has a consistent personality in all the public areas but like a chameleon, changes once you go into the two performing venues. Although the concert hall and theatre are similar in some of their details, we knew from the start that the shape and the volume of the concert hall and theatre are so different that they are going to be completely different venues altogether.

For the Theatre, which is associated with opera, we were keen that it should feel very lush and rich, which is why we have red and gold. In the Concert Hall, we wanted things to be calmer, with more restrained colours, with its bluish-green hues. The lighting levels in the Concert Hall also tend to allow you to see the space most times, so we wanted a lot of visual interest that would create an atmosphere and a feeling of containment. As the stage is a part of the same volume as the audience chamber, the space feels larger. We therefore decided to create these timber ribs to give the feeling of a more intimate space.

We wanted these two halls to have unique personalities because we wanted people to go back from those venues with a very strong memory of the architectural space they were in."

