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[▶ Pacific](#)
[▶ Europe](#)
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## FROM THE MAGAZINE

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Letter from Singapore

## Cultural Capital?

Singapore's government has decided that citizens must be creative—at all costs

BY HWEE HWEE TAN



Rarely have the cultural aspirations of a city been as neatly represented by one edifice as Singapore's are with Esplanade, the new arts coliseum the city-state hopes will become the local version of New York's Lincoln Center, London's Barbican or, considering its harbor-side perch, the Sydney Opera House. Never mind the debate over what these animalized structures most resemble—hedgehog or scarab? Porcupine or mollusk?—the real issue is whether Singapore can remake itself as the "Renaissance City" the government hopes will flower on the banks of the Malacca Straits.

The ambitious plan, including the buildings that have become the boldest manifestations of that vision, has plenty of critics. The \$338 million structures themselves, arguably over-designed and potentially underutilized, have about them the whiff of an architect trying too hard to be clever and a government straining to reinvigorate a slumping economy. The walls of the Vikas M. Gore-led project are lined with silk and hung with tapestries made from human hair, our guide explained, before helpfully adding that a Concorde jetliner could fit in Esplanade's 2,000 seat theater. All this is an eager government's way of saying it cares about art. But the best and brightest who manage Singapore have run that appreciation through a spreadsheet and come up with an economic justification for their patronage. "For every dollar spent on cultural activities, another \$1.80 is spent on related activities such as food and hospitality," notes the Ministry of Information, Communications and The Arts (MITA) in a paper promoting the "new paradigm" of art as cultural capital. After years of favoring maths and sciences over cultural

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education, it seems the only way the government can view the arts is through that same quantitative prism: in Singapore, art apparently sounds like a cash register's ka-ching. "Singapore views culture as having economic value," says MITA's permanent secretary, Tan Chin Nam.

MITA's paper reads like a prospectus intent on wooing tech investors. It details how earlier plans to make Singapore a Renaissance City have been upgraded; the new plan is called "Renaissance City 2.0", and apparently a "SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) Analysis" shows that "cultural capital" working in "creative clusters" will turn Singapore into a "creative economy". In May, the government actually revealed a mathematical formula for creating cultural capital:

$$A+B+T = CC$$

(Translation: Art + Business + Technology = Creative + Connected Singapore)

The government is poised to pour money into making that formula work, with MITA's paper touting ambitious proposals like the construction of a new Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art modeled after the Bilbao Guggenheim. After years of being financially neglected by the government, however, artists are skeptical. The National Arts Council only spent \$840,000 on artist training grants last year. "The government spends a lot of money on hardware and very little on software," says actor Glen Goei.

But is it possible for creativity to be cultivated in a country not known for its freedom of expression? A few months ago, theatre group Spell#7 was told performers wouldn't be allowed to interact with bystanders in public spaces. More recently, a bar named after the Hollywood film *Coyote Ugly* opened up. The movie featured supermodel Tyra Banks dancing on top of a bar; when some local girls tried emulating Tyra Banks they were told to knock it off. In Singapore, it's illegal to dance on bars. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said the government might consider allowing people to dance on bar tops. It might, he suggested, encourage creativity.

With the government this eager to generate cultural capital, it

seems there's never been a better time to be an artist in Singapore. Maybe I'm young and naive. I love the idea of more money coming to artists like myself. People might stop looking at me like some Enron stock and treat me like a blue chip investment. That thought makes me really happy. I think I'll go dance on a bar top.

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