

Eastern promise

Bilbao did it with Gehry's Guggenheim, says JAY MERRICK. But can staid Singapore rebrand itself as a cultural capital with its Esplanade arts centre?

Can cities reinvent themselves culturally via showcase architecture for the arts? In Britain, the jury's still out. In Singapore, there is no jury. Lee Kuan Yew's three-decades-old socio-economic transformation is miraculous, but this island – which is no bigger than Menorca, and crammed with more than 3.5 million people – possesses a lightweight arts culture. The artistic expressions of the country's mix of Chinese, Indians, Malays, Tamils and half a million expats, is often seen by outsiders as an exotic but ignominious wallpaper. In the glitzy lobby of the Conrad Centennial

hotel, or looking across the river from Bar Opium towards the corporate high-rises looming like bar charts over Harry's, where Nick Leeson and other financial raptors drank and compared bonuses, Singapore spells money.

But Singapore wants to rewrite that bleakly reductive script and the city has just played its first card in a rebranding exercise – a wild card called Esplanade, whose radical architectural imprimatur may do for Singapore what Jorn Utzon's fabulous opera house did for Sydney: add a dash of creative sophistication; make it the postcard image of choice.

This new "theatres on the bay" performing arts center which

opened last month, won't *create* culture and artistic endeavour, because they already exist. But it will, in the orderly way of this pristine kingdom, make them officially considerable and begin to give a decent profile to an arts scene being assiduously pumped up by Choo Whatt Bin of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, who admits: "We need to have our own unique culture, but we haven't translated it to the arts world."

Some organisations, such as the Tyler Print Institute, are already trying. This superbly equipped gallery and printmaking resource, in a renovated "go-down" warehouse, opened its doors a few weeks

ago with a major Frank Stella retrospective. Local and international artists are already sharing Esplanade's state-of-the-art concert hall and theatre. Leontyne Price, opera's diva assoluta, is coming – but only, my dears, because the halls' acoustics have been tuned by the American sonic deity, Russell Johnson. The tenor, Jose Carreras, also be along shortly. World City Singapore is ready to rumble, and its government-run lottery and tote organisations coughed up the equivalent of £25m to make it happen.

"We have to create space, create opportunities, challenge boundaries," says Esplanade's chief executive, Benson Pua. "We don't *have* to do that. We

don't have to take risks. We can be multi-faceted, but credible. We chose to be so, not because it's a great marketing opportunity, but because it lets us move forward. I felt this centre could make a material difference to Singapore, be a cultural dynamo to our arts development. Culture is an organism."

So, too, is Esplanade. It sits between Marina Bay and the government padang and Singapore Cricket Club's pitch like something newly arrived from Alpha Centauri, an object from a space and time unfamiliar to most Singaporeans. The two asymmetrical domes that cover the complex make no reference to Far Eastern iconography. The only possible connection to the locale is fruity: the raised and angled aluminium scales that form the sunshades over the glass domes give Esplanade's most photogenic feature the momentary look of durian husks.

Esplanade was originally designed and masterplanned by the British architects James Stirling and Michael Wilford, who gave Salford the geometric train-smash known as the Lowry Centre in Salford Quays, and the award-winning British Embassy in Berlin. The refinement of their architectural embryo in

Singapore was left to local collaborators, DP Architects, and the engineers Atelier 1. And they've delivered a landmark building whose obvious visual potency is, in places, weakened by one or two less obvious flaws.

Esplanade will succeed as a landmark. Regardless of Benson Puah's wariness about "marketing opportunities", that's exactly what Esplanade must exploit. His mission statement contains an aim that might have been written, witheringly, by the future-shock novelist JG Ballard—the desire to "entertain those who want to consume an arts product or have a lifestyle experience".

The architecture certainly entertains. Two boxes inside two glittering, Faberge-like shells doesn't sound much; but a combination of bold form and mostly delightful structural detail gives Esplanade a highly engaging physique. And from the first and second floor concourses, its dome structure is entirely beautiful. Less grace

are the connections between the angled canopies and the base of the building. The stone facings and massing on the marina side of the complex are also unfortunate — far too corporate looking.

But those canopies remain a dazzling engineering triumph. Atelier is input ensured that the domes and sun-screens are elegantly lightweight in appearance. The idea for the layered glass, steel and aluminium composite shells came to DP Architects Vikas Gore by chance. "One day in the kitchen, I realised an anomaly about kitchen sieves," he says. "If you bend it, the mesh becomes a very narrow rhomboid. The mesh becomes squished. So, with the domes, we deformed the hemispheres into elongated shapes. We saw that this would be very rich, visually."

And far too rich, initially, for the public. When the architects displayed a Perspex model of Esplanade — a clumsy error — "they saw it as a glass building," says Gore. "We got a lot of flak and they said there was no Asian-ness in the design." This response was not a critical issue: Singapore's late deputy Prime Minister and urban renaissance man, Ong Teng Cheong, wanted Esplanade at

any price, and relished the strangeness of its form.

If Esplanade does kick-start a vibrant culture scene in Singapore, the island may begin to be seen in a different light — not only by travellers and expats, but also by local people. Singapore, whose vibe sometimes invokes visions of sanitised, finally deadly, pleasure domes, would then become something richer than merely rich.

The skyscrapers are the wallpaper, after all, and Harry's Bar nothing more than a predictable place in which to sink a post-ironic pink gin while professing knowledge of both Somerset Maugham's sultry Malayan vignettes and currency swaps. Against that worldweary scenario, Esplanade remains, for the time being, a beautifully contrived architectural vignette. Benson Puah and Choo Whatt Bin can only hope that it becomes the first chapter in a gripping cultural and artistic narrative.

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The eye-catching Esplanade (main picture) contrasts with Singapore's Marina Bay; inside the complex's theatre (above)