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Singapore Offers an Architectural Symbol for the Arts

By WAYNE ARNOLD

SINGAPORE — Prominent cities have prominent edifices, instantly recognizable, that become symbols for their skylines. The Eiffel Tower for Paris, for instance. And now Singapore, the island-state nestled at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, has the Esplanade.

The Esplanade — Theaters on the Bay opened on Oct. 12, and government leaders hope their \$343 million performance complex will become instantly imprinted on the world's architectural and artistic consciousness. Along with an 2,000-seat theater, the Esplanade boasts what is perhaps one of the world's most acoustically meticulous concert halls. Besides, who could forget a building that is so, well, prickly?

The triangular aluminum sunshades that cover the Esplanade's glass shells have already inspired local residents to call the building "the durian," after the Southeast Asian fruit whose delectable flesh lies inside a spiky husk. The nickname is apt, for the Esplanade not only represents the government's hope that Singaporeans will develop their taste for the arts, but that the rest of the world will acquire a taste for Singapore.

Singapore has cast the Esplanade complex, which includes shops and restaurants, as part of a plan to regain its luster. Faced with increasing competition for foreign investment and a steady exodus of its own citizens after 37 years of authoritarian policies, Singapore is trying to summon its creative genie. Leaders hope that if they promote the arts, the country's entrepreneurial virtuosity will flourish, too.

"It has come at a tremendous time in the remaking of Singapore," said Benson Pua, chief executive of the Esplanade Company, which was set up to build and operate the center. "This provides the soul and pulse that this remaking can embrace."

The Esplanade and the government's attention to the arts are only part of a review of the policies that have shaped Singapore since independence in 1965, from zoning restrictions to censorship.

Such restrictions have had a stifling effect on the cultural scene, artists say. No Bohemia here: Singapore canes graffiti artists. Housing rules keep most Singaporeans at home with their parents until they get married. And censorship rules have silenced any would-be avant-garde. "Everybody plays it quite safe here," said Susie Lingham, a lecturer at Singapore's LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts.

Even without government strictures, skeptics say, most Singaporeans are too preoccupied with creature comforts to harbor artistic pretensions. Most of the ethnic Chinese who make up the country's majority are only a few generations removed from those who arrived here on sampans. "Singaporeans are all too aware of being from peasant stock," said Chua Beng Huat, a sociology professor at the National University of Singapore.

Now the party that has ruled Singapore for 37 years is urging citizens to speak out and express themselves. Artists say its promotions have created a hothouse atmosphere symbolized by the

Esplanade's glass domes.

To realize its vision for a world-class performance center, the government reclaimed a harbor-front property about the size of Lincoln Center.

"It was an extremely ambitious project," said Russell Johnson, the American acoustician whose company, Artec Consultants, was hired to help plan the theater and concert hall with Theater Projects Consultants of London. Mr. Johnson, 78, also designed acoustics for Prudential Hall at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia.

Like most ambitious projects, the Esplanade encountered inevitable obstacles. Original plans called for three additional performance halls, including a 700-seat theater and a 200-seat studio. But the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and 1998 forced government planners to scale back, instead turning two rehearsal studios adjacent to the theater and concert hall into smaller performance rooms.

Sinking pilings into the soft marine clay to build an underground parking lot raised construction costs. So did adding rubber padding around the two halls to protect them from vibrations from subway lines being built nearby. The result is that the halls are housed in a concrete structure completely separate from the building's outer structure, a box within a box, Mr. Puah said.

To reduce costs, the government renegotiated the construction contract and replaced the original architect, Michael Wilford of London, with a local firm, DP Architects.

The building's most distinctive feature, bristly aluminum cladding intended to resemble Asian paper lanterns, was added as a shield for the Esplanade's enormous domes of laminated glass.

For all the modern design and technology, the Esplanade's halls appear strikingly traditional. The 2,000-seat theater is modeled on Italian opera houses, with four balconies along the sides. The concert hall evokes a trans-Atlantic steamer, with a German-made 4,889-pipe Klais organ towering over the stage and thin wooden rails arcing from the top balcony to the ceiling like some sort of whalebone rigging.

The building's owners wanted the concert hall tailored for performances of both Western and Asian music, a demand that Mr. Johnson said was easy to accommodate. "The ceiling surfaces, the walls and the other reflecting surfaces don't know whether its Chinese music bouncing off the walls or Western music," Mr. Johnson said. "Excellent acoustics is excellent acoustics."

So far the Esplanade is having no trouble attracting world-famous talent. During the three-week festival marking its opening, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, Jessye Norman and Wynton Marsalis all performed.

Mr. Puah would not say how much attracting such talent cost, but he said the Esplanade would rely on government funds to supplement corporate sponsorships and rent for its retail spaces. Ticket prices are subsidized to keep them affordable, with the cheapest seats going for about \$23. "Instead of saying we're selling tickets, we say we're promoting the arts," Mr. Puah said.