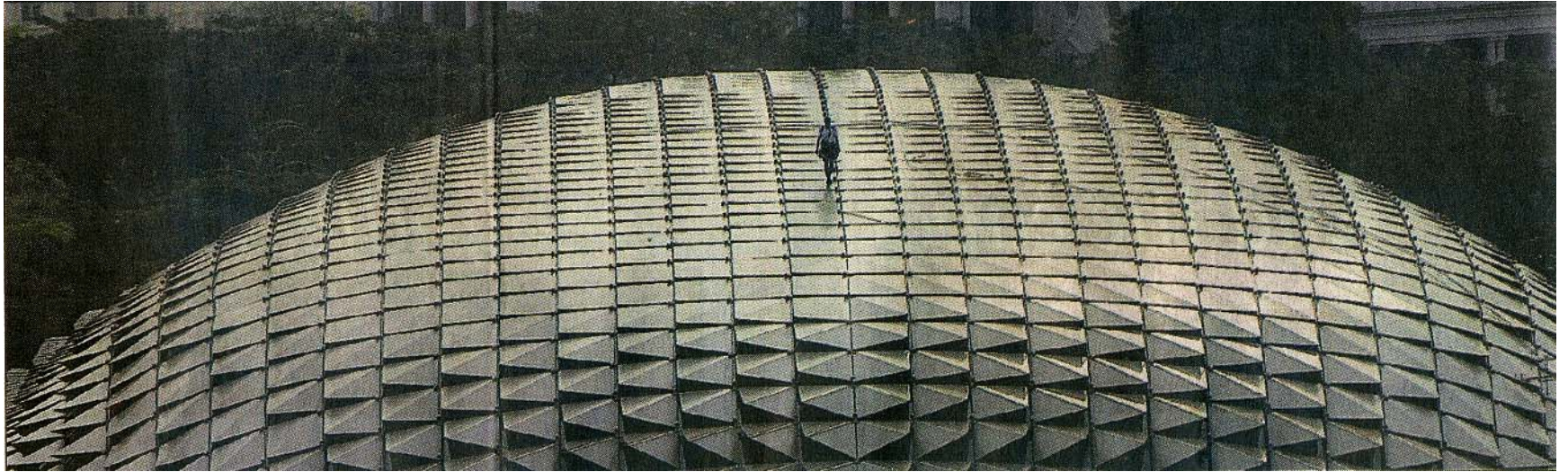


LONG-TERM INVESTMENT: Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lee Hsien Loong revealed that the cost factor for the Esplanade's opening ceremony was discussed carefully with Mita to avoid being "extravagant". But the general opinion was that the Esplanade was a long-term investment and should open with a big bang to impress an international audience.



DESMOND WEE

\$13m bill for Esplanade opening questioned

THE \$13 million price tag of the Esplanade's opening ceremony festivities came under scrutiny in Parliament yesterday.

Mr Tan Soo Khoon (East Coast GRC) pointed out that this sum of money, "blown away" in 23 days during such bad times, leads people to wonder if the Government was prudent in its spending.

On the other hand, hospital charges were increased to raise "more money from the sick to the tune of \$12 million a year", he added.

"Have we got our priorities correct?," he asked, adding that balancing a budget is not just about raising taxes but reining in spending as well.

Making this point during the Goods and Services Tax

hike debate, Mr Tan asked for "concrete steps" to ensure Government spending is controlled. In response, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lee Hsien Loong agreed that civil servants need to be careful with money.

"We are going to have a very tight budget next year and the ministries are going to have to cut back, both on

substantive programmes as well as on frills," he said.

For instance, schools may have to update their computers every three years instead of every two years.

Providing an insight into why money was spent on the Esplanade's opening ceremony, Mr Lee said that the cost factor was discussed carefully with the Ministry of Informa-

tion, Communications and the Arts.

"You do not want to be extravagant because you can't afford the money and anyway it's a wrong signal to send to people," he said.

But the consensus was that the Esplanade is a long-term investment and should open with a big bang to make itself known to a global audience.

Yes, the spectacular fireworks display for the opening ceremony cost money and he would have preferred "far fewer fireworks".

But that was not the most expensive thing, he said. Referring to Monday's sold out concert by world famous tenor Jose Carreras, he said: "If you want to have Jose Carreras here, that costs money."