

NEW ATTRACTION ... A boat passing the construction of the Esplanade performing arts centre on Singapore's waterfront which is due to open in October next year. - AFP picture

## Singapore set to get striking new landmark

SINGAPORE, Sun. - A striking new landmark is rising fast on Singapore's fashionable waterfront, where hundreds of workers are toiling to complete an avant-garde, US\$330 million (RM1.25 billion) arts centre.

When it debuts in October 2002, the glittering twin-domed Esplanade will be Singapore's answer to the Sydney Opera House and the boldest declaration of its intent to become a truly cosmopolitan urban centre.

Like a self-made millionaire developing a taste for the finer things in life, Singapore is spending a fortune to shed its image as a cultural desert and transform itself into a "Renaissance City".

The jury is still out on whether a young republic of only four million people with strict censorship and little tolerance for dissent can become an oasis for artists which constantly challenges the status quo.

But the authorities are cautiously easing controls and believe that with the right mix of "hardware" like theaters and museums, plus "software" in the form of local and foreign talent, Singapore can make the grade.

And what a piece of hardware the Esplanade will be.

Spread out over six hectares of prime land and surrounded by luxury hotels and a convention centre, the complex features two glass-clad honeycombed domes which will glow after dark on the edge of the chic Marina Bay.

Providing a counterpoint to the high-rise banking district across the water, the domes will house four high-tech performing halls - a 1,600-seat concert hall, a 2,000-seat theater and two smaller studios.

These will be isolated by air gaps and rubber pads from extraneous noise and vibrations.

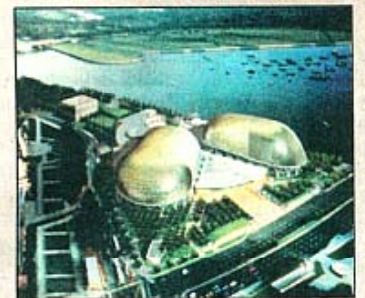
Inside, an intricate network of computers, wires, panels and lifts will meet every imaginable performance need.

The State-funded complex - which also includes galleries, outdoor performance facilities and, this being Singapore, an inevitable shopping mall - is part of a grand plan to promote culture in the compact island where "social engineering" and central planning have been turned into a fine art.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong dreams of creating a gentler and more well-rounded society after Singapore achieved developed-country living standards in just one generation since independence in 1965.

Esplanade officials describe the centre's programming philosophy as "Asian contemporary" - an elastic label which could apply to anything from Chinese opera to American jazz and European symphonies. - AFT

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