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It's a papaya, it's a durian, no, it's the Esplanade!^{*1}

VIKAS GORE, who worked on Esplanade -- Theatres on the Bay for eight years, is not at all offended by the durian label pinned on the project's design. "Durians are close to people's hearts," he says. **ARTHUR SIM** reports. [Full Story](#)

Do the Cuban mambo jam-bo

DIVINE inspiration may play a part in the foot-stomping music of Cubanismo! But good old perspiration is what keeps the band going, if bandleader Jesus Alemany's daily schedule is any indication. [Full Story](#)

Get a kick out of these

WHETHER you're soccer-crazy or you've got the hots for a cute striker, Celine has the right soccer-inspired fashion outfit .

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***1. This feature contains factual inaccuracies. Please see the accompanying notes. Yellow note numbers in the main text refer to numbers in the notes.**

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'I love the din of an argument. We Irish go insane if there is accord.'
- U2 singer Bono

'At first, I was like 'What are they talking about?' But now it's quite funny. It's like 'Whatever!' '
- Pop princess Britney Spears, on rumours that she had her breasts enlarged

'I call him Seanie. His father used to call him Seanie-poo.'
- Janice Combs, mother of the multiple-monikered rapper Sean Combs, aka Puff Daddy aka P Diddy

'I live a much simpler life than people imagine. No sex on leopard print bedsheets,

no handcuffs.'
- Actress Michelle Goh, who acted as Bunny the prostitute in Eric Khoo's movie Mee Pok Man, and who has since moved to Canada to act

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LIFE

It's a papaya, it's a durian, no, it's the Esplanade!^{*1}

He won't take all the credit as the overall project architect of The Esplanade, but Vikas Gore, who's been working on it for eight years, says he's ready for criticism

By [Arthur Sim](#)

CONSIDERING the huge responsibility resting on his shoulders, Vikas Gore looks unnervingly serene and almost smug.

And why not?

After working on the soon-to-be-completed Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay for eight years, and having weathered a maelstrom of public criticism, Gore, perhaps more than any other architect in Singapore, deserves the right to hold his head high.

'If you can't take criticism, this is not the kind of job to work on,' says the 49-year-old architect, who hails from India.

Gore is a director of DP Architects, one of Singapore's largest architectural firms.

Some of the better known projects the firm has done include Bugis Junction, Marina Square, Novena Square and Wisma Atria. He has been with it for 25 years.

It is unlikely that he will ever work on another building as important as the Esplanade. For that matter, it is unlikely that there will ever be another building in Singapore as important as the Esplanade.

But even as credit is being ladled on the man for his role in the construction of the Esplanade, Gore protests that he should not take all the credit.

'There were five to six people working on the sun-shading alone,' he points out.

The building, as most architects know, was designed by various committees, groups and teams.¹



'I THINK IT'S GREAT. ESPECIALLY IF THE DURIANS ARE CLOSE TO PEOPLE'S HEARTS' -- Architect Vikas Gore, on the 'durian' comments about the spiky domes of the Esplanade

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Gore, apart from being the overall project architect, was in charge of the design team that made the glass domes feasible.

The conceptual design for the Esplanade began in 1992, two years before he had joined the project team.

PUBLIC OUTCRY

THE building began life in Britain as a model made with the collaborative efforts of architecture firms DP Architects and James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates of Britain.²



While detractors may pick on the design quirks, the Esplanade does sparkle, especially at close range.

DP Architect's Chin Thoe Cheong represented the Singapore firm in the early stages of design.

No sooner did conception begin than the public outcry started.

Soon after it had been announced that the design of Esplanade would be the result of a closed competition among four international firms collaborating with four local firms, the architecture community, led by the Singapore Institute of Architects, protested that the competition should have been

opened to all architects, both Singaporean and international.

The suggestion went unheeded.

In a Straits Times report on Sept 25, 1992, then deputy director of development and management services at PWD, Mr Lee Kut Chueng, said the reason for the closed competition was that preparing concept plans was 'a very expensive exercise'.

He added: 'There's no point in taxing the resources of too many firms because in the end, we can only award one team.'

The award went to James Stirling Michael Wilford together with DP Architects.³

In its favour, the British firm was successfully completing another high-profile project in Singapore, the Temasek Polytechnic campus.

DP Architects had also been involved with Temasek Polytechnic as project architects.

At the time, James Stirling, then 76, was perceived as the big-name architect behind the Temasek Polytechnic and the Esplanade.⁴

In 1959, he had designed the seminal Leicester Engineering Building at Leicester University and instantly became the figurehead for the avant garde modern architecture group called the Brutalist.

Like the Leicester Engineering Building, Brutalist designs disregarded aesthetics in favour of the expression of a building's functional aspects. Hence, the buildings were sometimes thought ugly and 'brutal'.

Stirling died in 1992, but not before giving his blessing to the first Esplanade design.⁴

CHANGING HANDS

GORE, who also happened to be on the Temasek Polytechnic team, **5** remembers Stirling as a 'very hands-on' architect.

'He was very involved with Temasek Polytechnic,' he says. **5**

Although the design for the Esplanade was only a conceptual study, it did bear certain architectural characteristics that can be attributed to Stirling, especially in his later postmodern phase of the 1980s. **4, 6**

Typical is the formal axial organisation of forms and the poetic quality of space: The main spaces were supposed to look like the petals of a flower 'blossoming'.

After Stirling's death, his partner, Michael Wilford, took over and the Esplanade went through a dramatic makeover. One of the reasons for this was probably concerns that had been raised by the Singapore Institute of Architects, that three of the initial four shortlisted schemes, including the winning scheme, had 'striking similarities' to foreign projects. **4, 7**

By the time Gore came on board in 1994, almost everything had **7. 8** changed.

'The position of the two theatres stayed the same. The main entrance still faces the Padang, but that's about all,' he says. **7**

Two smaller theatres and a commercial block were also axed.

'At the time, the Government was not sure if Esplanade could fill all the theatres. They also thought it would be more feasible to let another developer do the commercial block,' explains Gore.

Wilford, 53 in 1992, had been more involved with the technical aspects of architecture and was used to leaving most of the designing to his 'design **9** guru', Stirling.

'The Esplanade was possibly the first building he designed from scratch,' **10** reflects Gore.

Because of the sensitivity of the project, the Government set up three advisory panels to offer feedback on the design development. They were the User's Advisory Group chaired by Professor Tommy Koh; the Design and Aesthetics Advisory Group chaired by architect Raymond Woo; and the Commercial Advisory Group chaired by then Singapore Arts Centre executive chairman Robert Iau.

Despite the many levels of checks put in place (some will continue to argue this was a problem in itself), the second stage of the Esplanade design, headed by Wilford, was not well received by the public when it was presented in mid-1994.

The most considered of criticisms was perhaps lodged by architect Richard Ho who, referring to what had by then been dubbed 'the papayas' but today is better known as 'the durians', wrote to The Business Times (Sept 10, 1994).

He said: 'One cannot help but conclude that the proposed design for the SAC (now Esplanade) has not exploited the opportunities and potential of such an important project and has not risen above merely fulfilling the

basic functional requirements.'

The design team comprised four architects each from both James Stirling Michael Wilford (subsequently renamed Michael Wilford & Partners) and DP Architects.

It was Wilford who continued to make monthly presentations to the various advisory panels. There was a fourth high-level steering committee which included then President Ong Teng Cheong, BG George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts, and Mr Wong Kan Seng, Minister of Home Affairs.

Within a year of the unveiling of the second design, in mid-1995, Michael Wilford & Partners (MWP) relinquished all involvement with the \$600- **11** million Esplanade project.

Speaking candidly, Gore says he does not know why MWP decided to throw in the towel. But he does say: 'There was some frustration with having to work with people on opposite sides of the world.'

The cost of setting up an MWP office for its four designers was given as a reason by an Esplanade spokesman.

Wilford could not be reached for comment. The Esplanade spokesman also says he has retired from Michael Wilford & Partners. **12**

Gore took over the project management of the building completely in mid-1995. This included making presentations to all the committees.

'When I first saw the committees, I thought that I had stepped into a puddle of mud,' he remembers with a smile.

After his first taste of committee meetings though, he began to find the sessions 'surprisingly bearable and a pleasant experience', something he attributed to the constructive comments of former President Ong, who himself was an architect.

IT'S FINAL: PAPAYAS STAY

MOST of the design development had by this time been finalised.

With the assurance that the design 'would grow on you', DP Architects proceeded with building the Esplanade. The 'papayas' would stay and public debate ended.

Today, after a delay of over a year, the hoardings have all come down. One reason for the delay is that it took a year just to appoint the building contract, Gore reveals.

The Esplanade, which has suffered so much criticism, is now in full view of the public.

No one can say if Stirling would have liked to put his name to it. **4**

It would be difficult to even say who had the strongest hand in the design of the Esplanade.

The acoustics specialist, Artec Consultants and the theatre consultants, Theatre Projects Consultants, probably have just as much claim to the design to the major spaces.

The numerous consultants and committees are probably also why the Esplanade seems to have so many design idiosyncrasies.

The two theatres, for instance, are essentially housed in two self-contained, concrete boxes clad in sandstone, a favourite choice of neo-classical architects.

'It is a building within a building,' explains Gore.

The boxes are in turn roofed over by the two detached glass domes held together by a high-tech steel space frame system.

And because direct sunlight is not a pleasant thing in the tropics, an elaborate system of sun-shading was required to cut down on heat absorption through the glass domes. The completed domes are estimated to have cost \$35 million.

There is also the simple matter of 'a sense of arrival'.

The main entrance to the Esplanade is on the central axis that separates the two magnificent domes.

The axis should be an important organisational element, but in the Esplanade, it starts by leading one through an innocuous entrance, past the domes, up stairs that have a precarious criss-crossing ramp built into it, then into an awkwardly shaped entrance hall, past a lift lobby and into the shopping arcade.

There are separate entrances to the theatres from the street level or through a connecting link-way from the entrance hall.

Detractors will no doubt pick up on these design quirks when the Esplanade is opened officially to the public in October.

AT CLOSE RANGE, IT SPARKLES

ON A superficial level, however, the Esplanade does sparkle - especially at close range from the staircases, where the delicate web of steel and glass that constitutes the domes is best appreciated.

The two theatres, which have been clad in silk and wood, are also appropriately opulent. As incongruous as they are with each other and the domes, they are well-appointed. The Esplanade's 1,600-seat Concert Hall boasts the biggest reverberation chambers in the world.

'Every seat also has a direct sight-line to the stage,' adds Gore.

The 2,000-seat Theatre next door has an adjustable proscenium arch and orchestra pit with two full-sized ancillary stages.

The Esplanade is such a visual feast that Gore does not even mind the 'durian' comments about the spiky domes conceived with the help of British engineers and German technology.

'I think it's great. Especially if the durians are close to people's hearts,' he says without a hint of offence.

Even when a colleague at DP Architects said the spikes were ugly when they first became visible this year, Gore was not bothered.

'Wait two weeks and then tell me if it's still terrible,' he replied.

The public will have a much longer time to decide if they like it after it opens around October. The Esplanade will be around for a long, long time.

Section Front

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Notes on inaccuracies in “It's a papaya, it's a durian, no, it's the Esplanade!”, Straits Times Life! Section, May 23, 2002

1. The building was designed by DP Architects Pte Ltd and Michael Wilford & Partners. Various committees constituted by the client played a consultative role while the Steering Committee played a consultative as well as approving role.
2. The building did not begin as a model nor did James Sterling have any involvement in the design.
3. The winning team was DP Architects Pte Ltd / Michael Wilford and Partners (*formerly Sterling Wilford & Associates*).
4. James Sterling had nothing to do with the Esplanade design. He passed away in June 1992 before the concept design began.
5. I, Vikas Gore, was not involved with the Tamasek Polytechnic team in any way. My perception of Sterling as a “hands-on architect is in fact based on a lecture I attended while a student in the mid 1970s. That was the extent of my familiarity with James Sterling!
6. While labelling of contemporary architectural styles can be highly subjective, I think most critics would agree that the decryption of “post-modern” does not fit the Esplanade.
7. Wilford led the MWP team from the outset and there was no dramatic change in the design.
8. I joined the project at the end of 1993.
9. Wilford led the design team from the outset and his role can in no way be reduced to the dealing with “technical aspects”.
10. I in fact said that this was probably the first building that Wilford had executed after Sterling passed away.
11. MWP's involvement ended on 1 May 1995.
12. Wilford has parted company with his previous partners rather than retired.