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in the
realm
of the
senses

SPEAKING VOLUMES: CRAFTING THE ESPLANADE

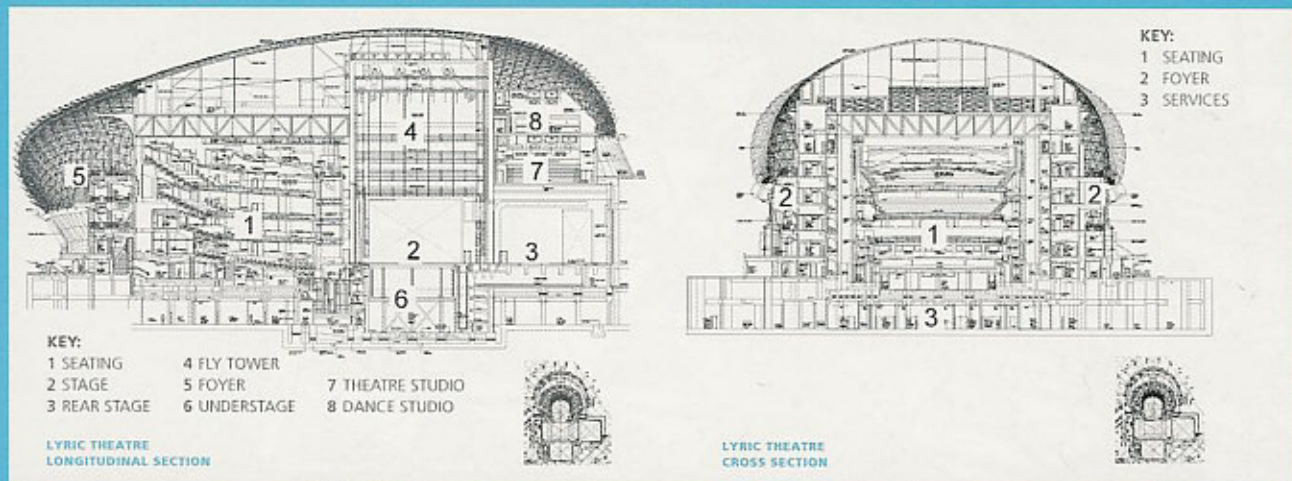
THEATRES ON THE BAY

BY DP ARCHITECTS/MICHAEL WILFORD & ASSOCIATES, UK

Like a musical instrument in the making, the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay is vested with expectations. Like a violin which has yet to have a bow drawn on its strings, the full timbre of its resonance within itself and with the audience before which it is played is unknown.

TEXT BY TAN HONG HERNG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALBERT LIM K. S.





What has been apparent - from its gestation and in the process of its making - has been the rumbling and then intense wondering-alouds over the cognizance of its aesthetic appearance; we are much concerned with the presentation of the instrument in its entirety as well as the parts of the instrument. We are fixated with its new and untested form and we ascribe allusions which attempt to give a value to the instrument before it has really played.

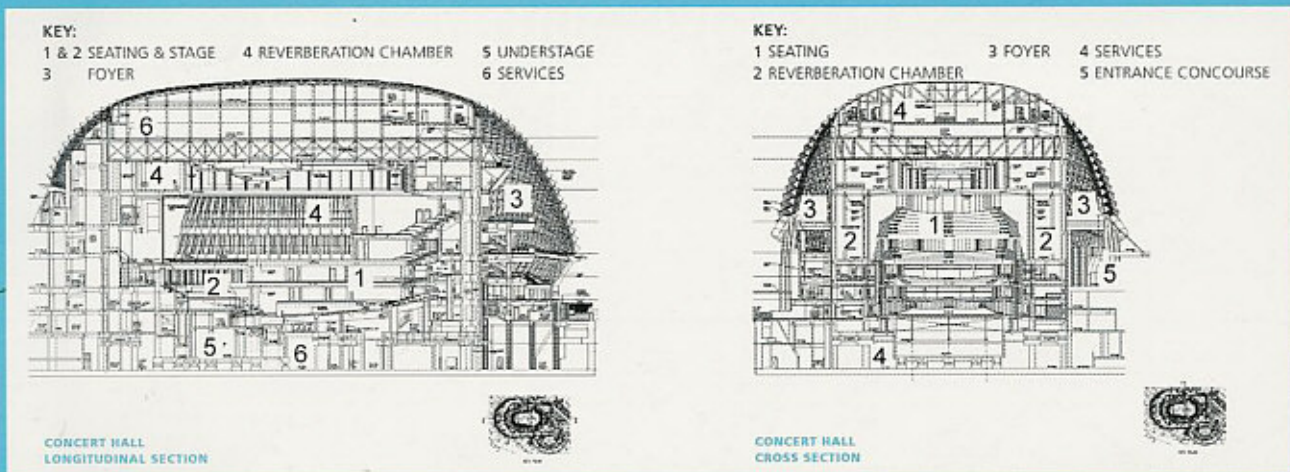
The cultural lenses with which we view the Esplanade - conceding that it is important as an arts centre for Singapore must inspire and rise above just an appropriate aesthetic response- must be coupled, if not preceded, by the assessment of whether it sates the senses: in the anticipation, the procession into and the partaking of its performances spaces. While we are invariably informed by sensibilities which stem from our cultural mores, let us also return to the enquiry of how spaces engage our senses: in a project like the Esplanade, there is every reason to do so.

>> INSTRUMENT

The instrument/project is still in the process of its crafting - its opening has been scheduled for October this year - but the general form is nearly complete: around its two main dominant shapes - the elongated shells - in which the 2000-seat Theatre and 1600-seat Concert Hall are housed, the concomitant spaces like the concourse, recital studio, and commercial block waft, joining the project into a cohesive whole.

On plan, the project adheres to a datum which runs in a north-western to south-eastern line - separating the two shells distanced at right-angles to each other, symmetrically dividing the concourse which is webbed between the shells, extending into the commercial mall, and culminating in a central courtyard. The courtyard acts as a pivotal space - and outdoor performance area - around which a three-storey commercial block is organised. As much as there is generous provision of open space in the project - a 300-metre long waterfront on its southern perimeter - the Esplanade project is also an introspective one.

The stage is first set: the setting before one enters into the project - the wide expanse of the forecourt preceding the building along Esplanade Drive - allows pause for anticipation of the spaces which one is about to enter. The two shells loom over the covered concourse space between them; the roof of the concourse slopes in the direction of the entrance. It is not a mirror reflection: the sun-shading fins which texture the shells are executed differently. A number of other elements, like the concrete beams lining the shells hemispherically - actually gutters of the shells - escalating diagonally around the shells on both sides of the concourse, the Y-shaped trussed columns which support the concrete beams, all contribute to the overture in their deliberate musculature and sweeping movement. The glazed façade of the concourse entrance is tilted - reflecting the forecourt area, intoning a degree of self-consciousness as one enters.



>> SHEER VOLUMES

Entering into the building, the triangular concourse area fans out towards you as you enter into it. The grandness of the space - lent by the sheer volume of its symmetrical space - will not escape one's notice. The panoramic space - it will not be comprehended in a single point of view - is flanked by walls which rise to a generous double-volume height. One is guided forward and up onto the mezzanine level of the concourse, paralleled by the undulating ceiling which is rhythmically punctuated by longitudinal slats, allowing subdued daylight in. The experience is both solemn - grounded by the sandstone hue of the floor and the walls - and surrealistically ethereal - it is a space bordering on gargantuan proportions.

On the sides are the escalator areas which lead into the foyer spaces on the upper levels. At these fissure areas - they adjoin the concourse and the volumes of the concert hall and the lyric theatre - the space is accentuated by the filtered sunlight let in by both the skylight and part of the glazing of the shells. The light let in flits between - mosaic patterns cast by the glazing of the shells and triangular patterns created by the skylight - effectively breaking down the scale of the long walls on which they are cast.

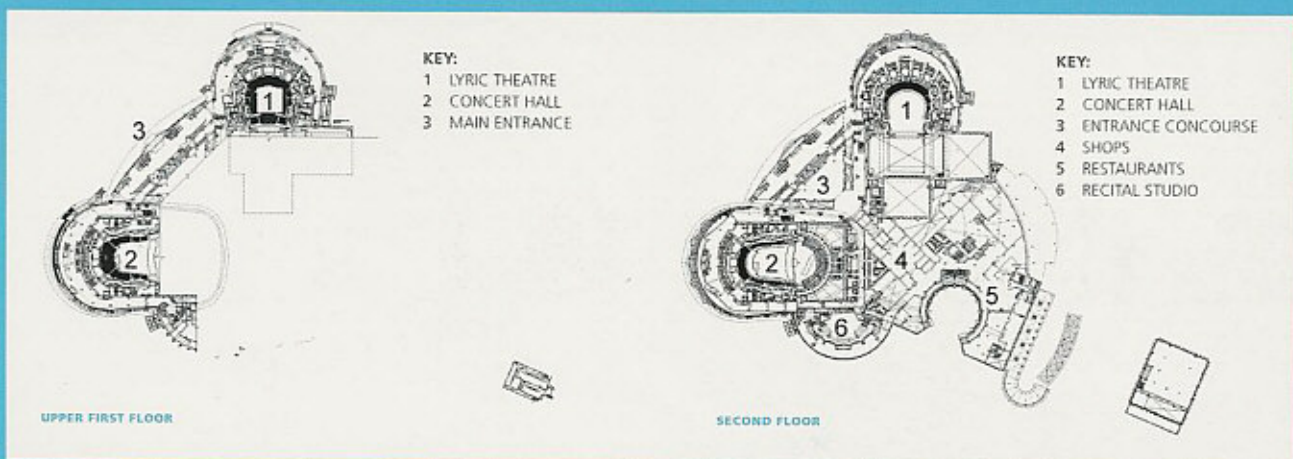
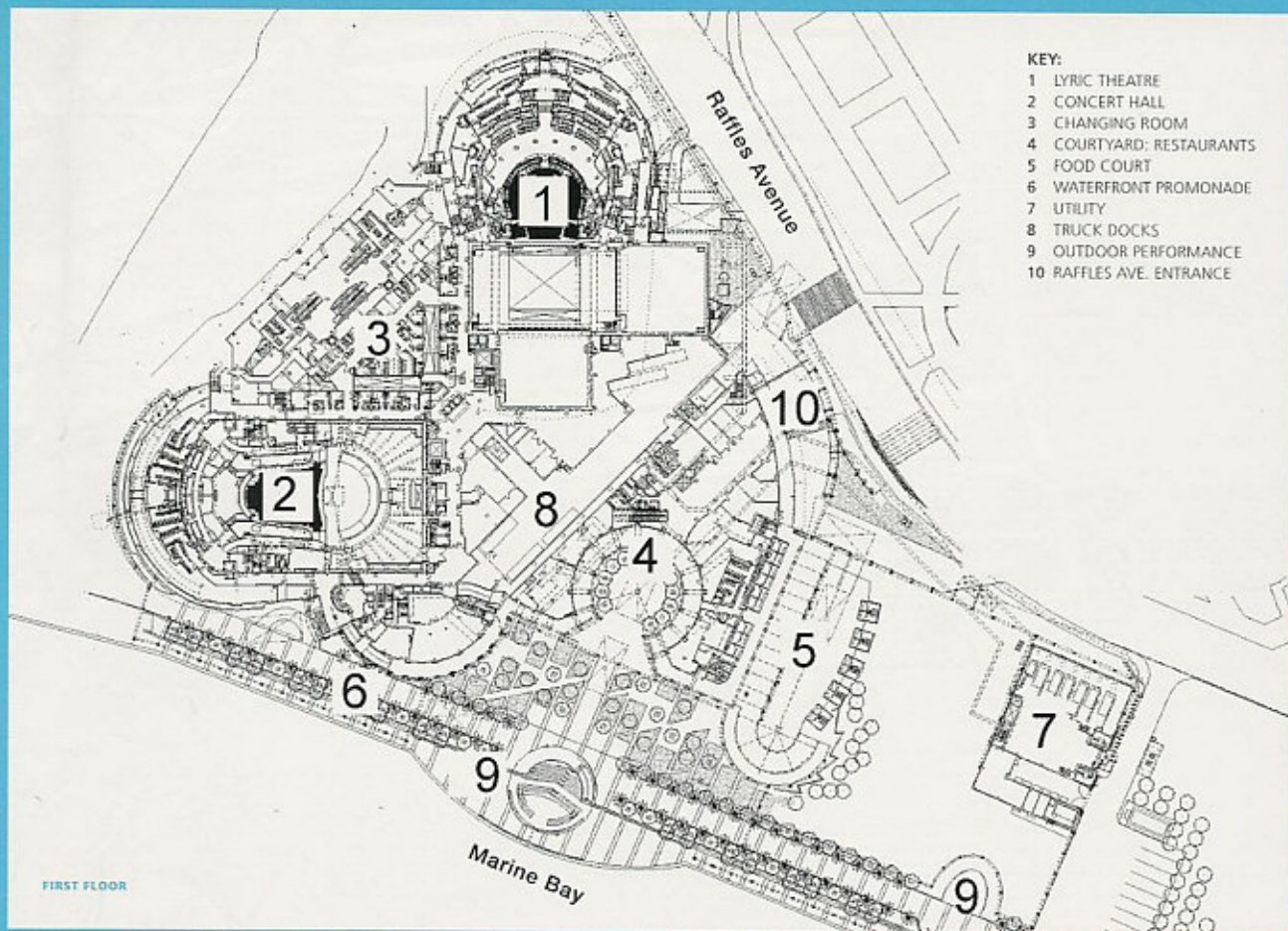
The foyer spaces - articulated as corridors which circumambulate around the concert halls - are placed on the upper levels, allowing access to the various tiers of seating. On the periphery of the foyer spaces are spun the truss work which makes up the dome. The lines of the curved space-

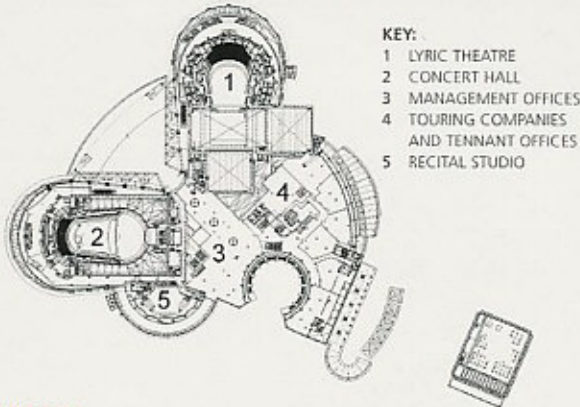
frame - a simplistic solution for enveloping the irregular shapes of the shells once the solution was decided - is visually intriguing as it becomes the backdrop through which views to the outside are filtered. In reality, the mathematics of the frame is simple: the basic module is that of a rectangle, which morphs to rhomboid variations when the situation calls for it; there are sectors on the shells which require greater severity in the stretching of its frame-fabric.

>> PATCHWORK ARMOUR

Draped upon the frame externally are the myriad sun-shading fins, which are isometric triangles folded symmetrically from its apex line. From the outside, the fins are angled at various degrees: at times they are hung half-open to the glazing beneath them, yet at other places, they are hung so closely to the shell of the shells that they seem to form a patchwork armour. The angles - which determine the degree of effectiveness of the sun-shading fins - are carefully executed to maximize the views to the surrounding buildings and the sea as well as to shield against the sunlight in the east-west orientation. The result is occurrences of interesting gradual transitions of the sun-shading fins - from half-open to near-fully closed - which takes place at a flowing pace along the dome's shell, drawing additional attention to its already arresting shape. The sun-shading fins' colours vary from tones of

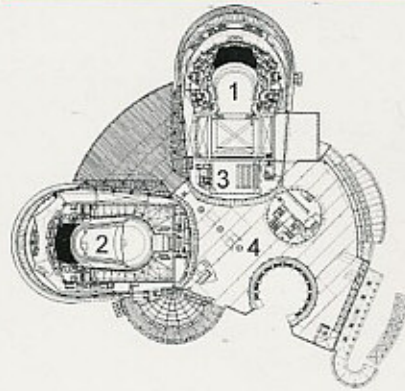






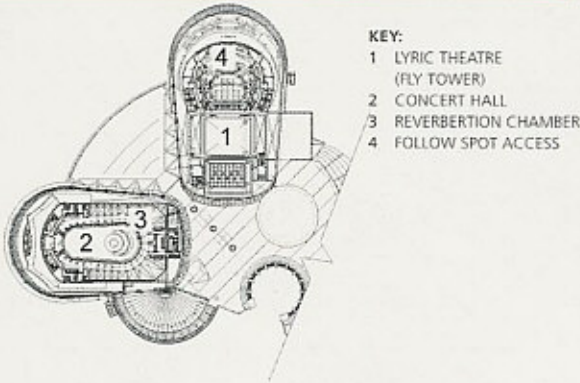
- KEY:**
- 1 LYRIC THEATRE
 - 2 CONCERT HALL
 - 3 MANAGEMENT OFFICES
 - 4 TOURING COMPANIES AND TENNANT OFFICES
 - 5 RECITAL STUDIO

THIRD FLOOR



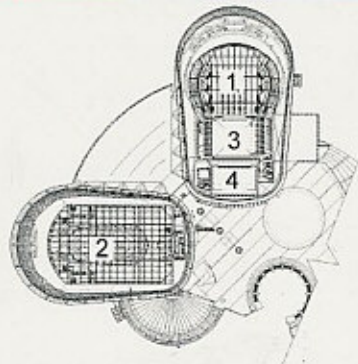
- KEY:**
- 1 LYRIC THEATRE
 - 2 CONCERT HALL
 - 3 THEATRE STUDIO
 - 4 ROOF DECK

FOURTH FLOOR



- KEY:**
- 1 LYRIC THEATRE (FLY TOWER)
 - 2 CONCERT HALL
 - 3 REVERBERTION CHAMBER
 - 4 FOLLOW SPOT ACCESS

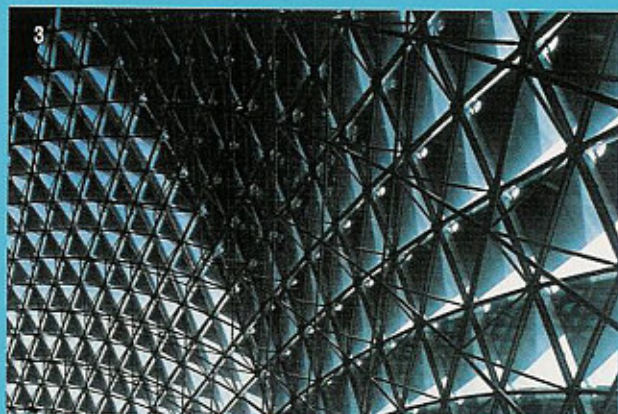
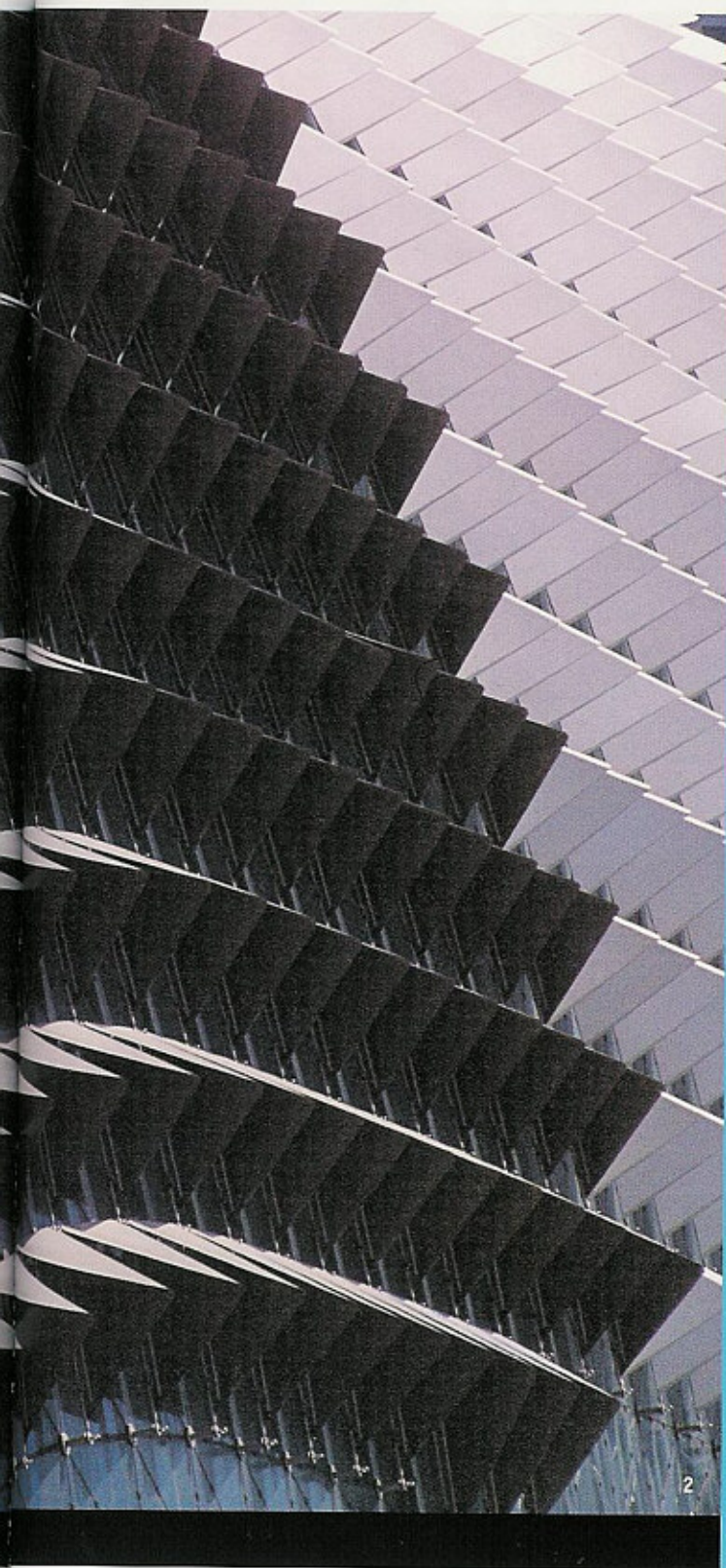
FIFTH FLOOR



- KEY:**
- 1 LYRIC THEATRE
 - 2 CONCERT HALL
 - 3 LYRIC THEATRE (FLY TOWER)
 - 4 DANCE STUDIO

SIXTH FLOOR





grayish-white to champagne-gold hues, depending on the angle at which sunlight is reflected off them.

>> LEITMOTIF

On the interior, the truss work rises dizzyingly, enveloping the interior and the foyer spaces, providing a mesmerizing spectacle around the foyer and along the ambling curved stairways. Light - the leitmotif in the foyer spaces - filters through the varying sunshading fins, plays on whatever surfaces it can find in its interior spaces: the floors, the walls, and the circumambulating staircases during the day. There are varying staccatos of light - as the direction of the sunlight changes - which are dartingly displayed: from an array of slits to rhombus-shaped patterns which shrapnel across the floors and on the walls. The surface of the wall wrapping the concert hall interiors resonates in like angular movement: instead of a curved surface, chunks of wooden slabs rise and fall in tidal fashion.

>> VESSEL

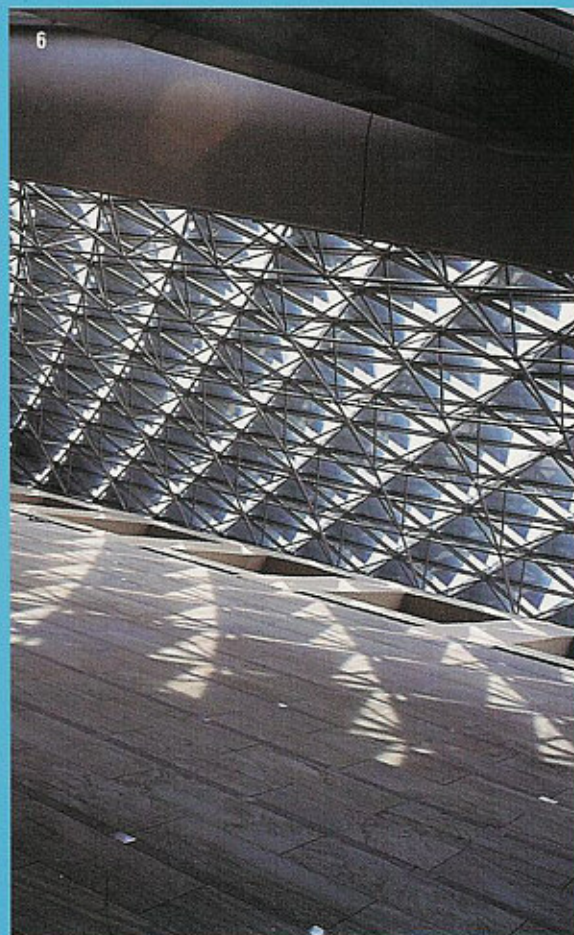
In the end, it is hasty to ascertain how successful the Esplanade would be in its offering of an overall experience that is befitting of an arts centre, as it is still not in its completed state. For now, the Esplanade holds up promisingly, seemingly intriguing in its potential, as a vessel of experiences that are both measured and spectacular in their appeal to the natural senses. It would take a longer period of time, from the time of its completion, to assess its cultural importance; this is necessary as it is, after all, supposed to be the performing arts centre for the people. ■

056 architecture





- 4 Triangular skylights break down the scale of the spaces
- 5 The sunshading fins are composed of isometric triangles folded symmetrically from the apex
- 6 Light - the leitmotif of the foyer spaces - alters space through dynamic shadow casting



Architect: DP Architects Pte Ltd/
Michael Wilford and Associates* 1

Client: Arts Centre Development
Division of the PWD, acting
for Ministry of the
Information and the Arts.

Main Contractor: Penta Ocean Construction
Co Ltd

Structural/Civil/Mechanical Engineers: PWD Corporation Pte Ltd
Specialist Sub-contractors: Mero Systeme GmbH & Co
c/o Mero Asia Pacific Pte Ltd (Cladding System)

Interior Design: DP Architects Pte Ltd
and DP Design Pte Ltd

Landscape design: ACLA Pte Ltd

Total Project Cost: S\$600 million

Projected Date of Opening: 12 October 2002

Project floor area: 111,000 sq. m

* The formal contract was originally signed with this joint entity, though MWP are no longer part of the project since May 1995

DP Architects Pte was founded with a deep concern for the built environment and the need for a conscious effort towards creating an architecture of excellence where the enrichment of the human experience and the human spirit are reflected in both its planning and architectural work. DPA aspires to make a contribution to the region in general, and Singapore as a City of Excellence in the 21st century in particular. The firm has won many design competitions and awards, and is currently handling many major projects both locally and regionally, providing full professional service in all aspects of architecture, urban planning, interior design, graphics and signage.



Mr Vikas Gore, a Director of DPA, is the project director for the Esplanade project. He is keenly interested in good design and subscribes to the view that quality detailing and excellence in execution is fundamental to the realisation of good design.