

# 5 Choreographing Singapore's Utopia by the Bay

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## Introduction

Shortly after Lee Hsien Loong took office as prime minister in August 2004, his government began to make moves to consider the building of casinos in Singapore. In April 2005, the government announced its decision to develop two casinos, one on the theme park island, Sentosa, and the other in the new commercial district, Marina Bay. It was a momentous reversal in policy that sparked strong public opposition. In response, the government stressed that the casino was only a part in the larger whole of the 'integrated resort', as the two developments were billed. The casino was to be a side attraction to the convention centers, hotels, restaurants, museums, shopping centers, theaters, and theme parks aimed at drawing tourists and MICE (meetings, incentives, conferencing, and exhibitions) visitors as well as providing jobs and leisure activities for citizens. For Marina Bay Sands specifically, the vision sold to the public was a national icon that would anchor the cosmopolitan utopia of living, working, and playing in Marina Bay. Officially opened in 2010 to great fanfare, the authorities celebrated the Marina Bay Sands as the crown jewel announcing Singapore's arrival as a global city.

This chapter analyzes the spatial production of the Marina Bay 'tourist utopia' as an instance of the Asian developmental state's attempt to transform and consolidate Singapore's nodal position in the networks of capital and talent in the Pacific Rim region. Instead of merely mapping the new Asian urbanism and echoing the organizing concepts of the utopian planners and architects, my approach combines the insights of Bauman (2000) and Lefebvre (1991) to show that the urban form is being reconfigured to facilitate, direct, manage, and *choreograph* the flow of capital freed up by globalization. I argue Marina Bay exemplifies an emergent form of state-driven liquid urbanism that we are seeing in Asian cities, which in its very utopian character invites contradictions that may or may not open up spaces of hope.

I first show that, through a series of economic crises, the state transformed the Urban Redevelopment Authority from a zoning and planning

instrument into a corporate marketing unit responsible for branding and selling Singapore *in its very spatiality*. I then look at three aspects of this utopian spatiality. The first involves the staging of liquidity organized symbolically and materially in and around the dammed waters of the right-sized bay. The second aspect is the interweaving of arts and science ornaments through the utopian space to conjure the Asian renaissance by symbolic association. The third expresses spectacular consumption of the hyperbolic commodity to create intimate memories and thus cosmopolitan subjects for the global city. I conclude by reflecting on this urban choreography and its discontents.

### From Urban Renewal to City Marketing

In 1959, Singapore attained autonomous self-rule with the People's Action Party forming the first government elected by universal suffrage. In 1963, the city-state attained independence from the British and joined the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, full independence as a sovereign nation-state was attained after an acrimonious separation from the federation. Through these years, nation building was very much coterminous with the redevelopment of the city center through the clearance of slum quarters, resettlement of residents into new public housing, and the building of a modern commercial district. The Urban Renewal Unit, which was quickly restructured into a full department called the Urban Renewal Department, was formed as part of the Housing Development Board to take on this task.

In 1971, the inaugural Concept Plan was drawn up with the help of the United Nations. The plan envisioned a ring of satellite towns and industrial estates, buffered by green spaces and connected by public transportation and expressways, fanning out from the city center in the south of the island, thus freeing up the center for commercial redevelopment. The Urban Renewal Department was upgraded to the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in 1974 to accelerate resettlement and city center redevelopment.

Land reclamation to expand the city center also began in this period. Importantly, instead of expanding the shoreline, as land reclamation did in Hong Kong and narrowing the Victoria Harbor, land reclamation to expand Singapore's city center wrapped around the old Port of Singapore at the mouth of the Singapore River and the Kallang Basin at the mouth of the Kallang River to the east. By the end of the 1980s, land reclamation created three land parcels named Marina South, Marina Centre, and Marina East. The three landmasses created the Marina Bay fronting the city center, and

enclosed the Kallang Basin, the waters of both flowing through the Marina Channel to form a Y-shaped water body at the heart of the city.

While the bay area took form, the Singapore economy saw a major recession in 1985, its first since it began industrialization and urban renewal. A committee was immediately convened to review the economic progress, determine the causes of the recession and recommend new directions for growth. The committee determined that the period of easy growth was over and that the recession was caused by the loss of competitiveness due to high wage costs, a slump in the construction industry in an economy driven by it, and oversaving in a slowing economy. More generally, the committee thought that the recession made apparent the rigidities in the economy and the inflexibility of the system in adapting to changing circumstances (Economic Committee 1986: 2-3).

A number of important trends were highlighted. The committee observed that Singapore was no longer just competing with the other Asian newly industrializing countries but also Western cities for investment by multinational corporations. World trade in merchandise goods was slowing, in part due to increasing protectionism, but the trade in financial, professional, and tourist services was booming (Economic Committee 1986: 5-6). The recommendation was to aim for a developed economy 'with an edge', by transforming Singapore into an 'international total business centre' and a major exporter of services, while pushing local enterprises to globalize so that the GNP would become more important (Economic Committee 1986: 6-7).

Though it could not foresee the demolition of protectionist walls and the boom in world trade after the end of the Cold War, the committee report was prescient in prefiguring the trends and opportunities of post-industrial globalization. Its most significant contribution was not in the specifics of diagnosis and prescription, but the paradigm of *liquidity* that it promulgated to solve the problem of rigidity in Singapore's economy. The committee (1986: 8) called for centralized economic planning to be decentered into a flexible governance framework to tap on the flows of enterprise ideas, labor skills, and capital looking for better rates of return. The reforms toward the total international business center and service and knowledge economy were to be redoubled modernization, or as Bauman (2000: 6) puts it, borrowing from Marx's metaphor, a 'liquid modernity' that involves redistribution and reallocation of modernity's melting powers. These would melt away the rigidities of the fixed-wage industrial economy dependent on heavy infrastructural development and the welfare state.

However, Bauman's (2000: 9) dichotomy of time and space, in which time acts as mobile, dynamic weapon in the conquest of defensive, solid space, is

overstated. For Bauman (2000: 11), power 'has become truly *extraterritorial*, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space'. But this underestimates the need for extraterritorial global powers to pass through *network hubs* where different fluid powers can meet and recombine to redirect and accelerate their flow in the search for profits. There is still a need for a spatial fix, or rather, for such space to be produced. For Lefebvre (1991), the production of space cannot escape the historicity of society and capital depends on that historicity for commodity fetishism. In contrast, time in Bauman's liquid modernity is the carrier of history turning space into inert passages of time. The network hub must be produced with both logics in tension, filled with the historicity of its host society and yet with the historicity ready to be vacated and carried off by the flows of capital, such that society is transformed in the process.

Marina Bay, a *carte blanche* site abutting the historic central business and civic district of Singapore, seemed like a perfect location for the production of the network hub of liquid capitalism. It took a while for the URA to finalize and implement the staging of liquidity, which will be the subject of analysis in the next section. In 1989, a draft Master Plan for the Urban Waterfronts at Marina Bay and Kallang Basin was developed with the help of acclaimed architects Kenzo Tange, the 1987 Pritzker laureate, and I.M. Pei, the 1983 laureate (Cheong 2013: 8). In 1990, the URA presented a massive model of the Marina Bay waterfront framed by three distinctive landmark buildings at the Singapore 2000 – Global Technopolis Exhibition (*Straits Times* 1990) to give the public a preview of the new business district of the year 2000 and beyond, which was officially announced in the 1991 Concept Plan. But it was only in 1996 that the government announced a new waterfront around Marina Bay deserving of a 'great metropolis' would be built in ten years' time (Lim 1996). In 2006, the URA announced a blueprint for plans for sports, river taxis, and new pedestrian bridges to bring life to the Marina Bay water body to complement the Singapore Flyer Ferris wheel, Marina Bay Sands integrated resort, Marina Bay Financial Centre and the Sail luxury condominium developments to be completed by 2010.

It took 21 years from the publication of the draft Master Plan to the development of the waterfront core. The problem was that at the beginning of the new century, Singapore's prospects dimmed. Still feeling the effects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the economy reeled from another major recession in 2001 and the SARS epidemic in 2003. The URA had to transform itself into a 'city marketing' (Chong 2006) agency tasked to brand, manage, and sell Singapore as a place to investors and developers to rescue Marina Bay, the planning idea for which was a 'hard sell' that threatened to turn

the barren reclaimed land into an 'urban wasteland' (Wong 2010). It was officially appointed as Marina Bay's development, promotion, and place management agency in March 2004. Two months later, the URA put the large 3.55 hectare site for the business financial center up for sale, touting it as a 'natural extension' of the existing financial district at Raffles Place well connected by rail, an underground pedestrian network, and the waterfront promenade (URA 2004: 57). Officials on an overseas marketing blitz also touted the site for its proximity to the heritage and cultural life of the civic district (Wong 2010).

The historicity of Singapore as a grand dame of mercantilist hubs and hybrid colonial port city was not good enough. In April 2005, after a year of exploration and solicitation of the interest of potential investors, the government decided to proceed with the development of the massive integrated resort and convention center on the waterfront next to the business financial center. This would be Singapore's prime passageway for the global flow of capital's knowledge, networks, leisure, and celebrities. Soon after, in July 2005, the business financial center was sold to a consortium of Hong Kong and Singapore developers.

## Staging Utopia

Utopias are overdetermined imaginations, part reality and part fantasy. In the case of Marina Bay, land reclamation produced both a land mass and a water body, two very real blank slates inviting the fantastical projections of urban possibilities. Initially, the bay was driven by the nation-building discourse predominant in the 1970s and 1980s. By the mid-1980s, Singapore's urban waterways, including the Singapore River, had been 'permanently' purged of 'flotsam and jetsam', 'filth and stench'. This occasioned the drafting of the Master Plan for the Urban Waterfronts at Marina Bay and Kallang Basin, aimed at optimizing the newly found 'physical assets' to provide 'tranquil contrast and visual relief' to the city (URA 1989: 5).

The utopia envisioned was for Marina Bay to become 'the Bay for Events and National Celebrations, ideally set against the majestic backdrop of the city' (URA 1989: 3). Together with the Singapore River as 'River for History and Entertainment' and the Kallang Basin as 'Basin for Fun and Recreation' (URA 1989: 20), it was to be a recreational utopia for Singaporeans to picnic, jog, swim, fish, shop, eat, and celebrate. It was to be the culmination of all the hard work in building the modern nation, with the panoramic view of the skyline evoking 'a sense of grandeur and achievement' (URA 1989: 9) as the citizens

play and celebrate. In the long term, the extension of the business district would be built into this predominantly national space of fun and leisure.

The guest architects made comparisons to Baltimore, Sydney, and San Francisco. Two essential physical principles were established to guide development. First, the water body should be complemented by public open spaces. Second, the waterfront developments should be low-rise and should emphasize pedestrian movement (URA 1989: 17). But a more fundamental principle was introduced in the Master Plan. Arrowed lines indicating restricted pedestrian access to Marina South and good vista views of the cityscape filled the analytical diagram for Marina Bay. At the center was a doubled-arrowed line captioned, 'Bay is too wide (780 m across)' (URA 1989: 8). The architects advised the bay was too large, 'resulting in loss of scale and spatial definition' (URA 1989: 10). The government quickly took action, committing to the reclamation of another 38 hectares of land to reduce the bay to 48 hectares that would also create a waterfront promenade all around the bay to fulfill the two advised principles (Chan 1989).

Looking back in 2010, the URA chief executive officer Cheong Koon Hean used the metaphor of a chef cooking a Chinese herbal soup – 'Cities are like a stew, to be brewed slowly and double-boiled' – to describe the right-sizing and development of the Bay (Wong 2010). I prefer to describe the fundamental principle introduced by the architects in their advice to right size the Bay as *choreographing* the production of space. The Master Plan process was not simply an exercise in top-down technocratic planning and implementation, in cooking to recipe, but one that designed sequences of movements to be performed so as to achieve the intended visual impact and effervescent emotional outcome. In this sense, Marina Bay is an urban theater choreographed by the URA for the staging of liquidity, performing Singapore's reengagement with global capital.

The URA did not adopt the choreographer role from the beginning, but grew into the role after the 1989 Master Plan. In 1992, the Development Guide Plan for the Downtown Core and Portview – encompassing the old business district, the new business area around the bay, and the area south of it facing the Port of Singapore – was published and an exhibition launched to elicit public discussion. The plan was already described in terms of sequences of motion and form: 'The development will begin near the Marina Bay MRT [Mass Rapid Transit] station, fan out to wrap round Marina Bay, then move towards Portview.' As development moved toward Portview, which would feature mixed business-residential-recreational developments, the pace of urban life would slow down to one emphasizing arts and culture (Dhaliwal 1992).

The published plan was itself a departure from the usual planning document filled with technical jargon and diagrams. A particular section titled 'A Day in the Life of the Downtown' and filled with sketches of urban scenes, narrated the meeting of two friends, Gopal, who lives in Portview, and Kim Seng, who lives in a satellite public housing town, at the MRT station to go to work in the new downtown. They meet to witness the city waking up: 'Witnessing the spectacle of one of the world's commercial centres coming to life is something Gopal and Kim Seng never tire of' (URA 1992: 14). They rest at the foot of one of the landmark twin office skyscrapers, the tallest in Singapore, to watch the waters. They work at one of the skyscrapers 'with spell-binding views of Marina Bay' (URA 1992: 15) and watch the world buzz with activity down below. Gopal meets his girlfriend, May Ling, for lunch, at the galleria overlooking the City Mall, avoiding the midday sun by taking the underground and covered walkways. Later, they walk outdoors in the cool of the evening and meet friends for dinner under a canopy of trees off the City Mall. 'People have been attracted from all parts of the island – and the world – to be part of the action' (URA 1992: 16). They watch a play after dinner at the art house. After bidding May Ling goodnight, Gopal meets Ahmad, his neighbor and cycling friend, to walk home to Portview.

As clichéd as the story appears today, the staging of 'A Day in the Life' shows that the choreography of the city was already taking hold in 1992. The plot of the urban play was still very much anchored in the national imagination. Kim Seng, Gopal, and Ahmad represented the Chinese, Indian and Malay figures of the corporatist multiracialism of the nation-state. However, they were prefigured not as racial subjects, but as incidental ethnics now interacting in a cosmopolitan utopia. The interracial dating between Gopal and May Ling was deliberately introduced to color the urban scenes with the air of worlding romance. Yet, the vantage point remained anchored by the central positions of the landmark twin skyscrapers and the City Mall. Gopal and Kim Seng saw the city only when they stood still at these locations.

The Development Guide Plan was confirmed in the 1997 Planning Report with no significant changes, except for the renaming of Portview to Straits View to further emphasize the use of water bodies as visual focus (URA 1997). However, in the crisis years of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which stalled development of the area, the choreographers appeared to countenance rethinking the design of the bay. In 1998, the Harvard Graduate School of Design collaborated with the URA to organize a studio to generate creative design ideas for the future downtown core. The experimental studio of Harvard students traveling halfway round the world to distill the essence



of Singapore and design its extension into the world brought out intense, pure images that, in the words of studio professor Rodolfo Machado (1999: 9), 'infiltrate, whisper, seduce and convince, they question reality as known to be, make 'other' realities perhaps easier to conceive of, easier to design.'

In most of the proposals, the landmark towers were gone. In one proposal, the promontory protruding into the bay on which the landmark towers were sited became an island that was a giant shell, like 'a fossil uncovered in the land-reclamation process' (Bancalari and Storm 1999: 11), of an amphitheater for performances. The shell island would be linked to the mainland by pedestrian bridges of different character constructed organically over time to cater to different needs.

Another proposal staggered buildings of different heights seemingly jumping into the bay 'in a celebratory gesture', thus engaging in 'a dialogue between the new and existing skylines'. The same proposal superimposes 'urban information layers' to connect a pedestrian with the city 'at different levels and through different devices, allowing him to experience and consume the city in different ways' (Allard and Mesa 1999: 19).

A proposal for an 'urban biome' had 'plant buildings' embedded in 'heavily planted ground' growing and dancing around the waterfront (Belik-Firebaugh 1999: 27). Made of glass to allow unobstructed views through to the bay, the organically shaped plant buildings had self-shading leaf planes that would turn the waterfront promenade into a see-through forested arcade.

These imaginations decentered the URA's original choreography. Soon, a rethink saw the choreography come closer to the principles laid out by the architects in the 1989 Master Plan: to design the sequences of movement of *audiences* themselves, the pedestrians, such that the city skyline and the bay would be moving and dancing in their visual field.

Plans for the landmark twin skyscrapers reaching 80 stories to frame the bay were scrapped. Instead, the URA planned to step up building heights gradually from the waterfront, 'much like how seats are arranged in a theater' (Tan 2009). The framing no longer took a static central position on the waterfront at the landmark towers on the promontory. The waterfront promenade ringing the bay, like the edge of a stage, was now the defining frame. The bay itself was no longer the sole visual focus, like a stage in a Broadway theater, but a stage in an amphitheater that collects and throws the gaze of the audience round for everyone to look at each other.

The other major rethink was the plans for the Bayfront site. Up to 2004, at least on paper, the site remained zoned for lower density office buildings mixed with low-rise lifestyle and recreation developments emphasizing arts



and culture (URA 2004: 39). The original choreography staged the slowing down of urban rhythm. As one moves along the waterfront promenade anti-clockwise around the bay, the intense wheeling and dealing of the commercial districts would gradually and seamlessly give way to the leisurely life of cultured consumption. Temporally, the day began at the old downtown waterfront facing the sunrise, peaked at the central promontory at midday, and ended at the Bayfront promenade watching the sunset.

After 2004, with the development of the integrated resort decided, a massive singular iconic complex replaced the gentle ending of soft notes. The new choreography echoed one of the Harvard student proposals, creating a dialogue between the new and old city skylines across the bay. Harmonically interdependent, but independent in contour, rhythm and accent, a contrapuntal performance between the Marina Bay Sands and the skyscrapers of the downtown skyline was staged. There was to be no slowing down of urban rhythm, only the perpetuation of baroque effervescence (Ong 2006: 180).

### Urban Fugue, Renaissance Singapore

Amid the public furor over the decision to build the casinos, the government reaffirmed the vision that the integrated resort was a component of a larger plan to build Marina Bay as a 'waterfront city in a garden' and transform Singapore into a 'vibrant global city'. The URA was to spearhead the building of a 'truly distinctive waterfront city'. Because the waterfronts would be 'Singapore's face to the world', the URA would encourage landscaping and skyrise greenery, hold more activities and 'mega festivities' to create 'sense of place' and ensure excellent architecture and urban design (*Straits Times* 2005). It was not a ruse to distract and assuage public opinion. The government stressed to the casino developers bidding for the integrated resort project that it did not want a resort building to imitate Las Vegas but one to represent 'the spirit of Singapore' (Safdie 2013: 28). The original design of the winning developer, Las Vegas Sands Corporation, according to architect Moshe Safdie (2013: 26) intimated the spirit of Vegas: 'a themed facility with a single large tower in the center, somewhat introverted in character'. Sheldon Adelson hired Safdie to change the design to meet the expectations of the Singapore government, telling him to design 'an iconic museum' rather than an iconic hotel (Pedersen 2013: 18).

An iconic hotel would not be adequate for the urban fugue being staged around the bay. Directly across from Marina Bay Sands, at the junction of

the Singapore River and the bay, an iconic hotel already stood. The Fullerton Hotel was a stately colonial building built in 1928 on the site of a fort as the General Post Office and Exchange Building. It was named after the first governor of the Straits Settlements. In the urban renewal of the downtown core, it was sold to Hong Kong property developers to be conserved and converted into a luxury hotel of Old World elegance in the 'classic, classy' league of Hong Kong's Peninsula and New York's Waldorf Astoria (Yeo 1996). The hotel opened in 2000 and had yet to displace Raffles Hotel as the premier heritage hotel of Singapore (Goh 2010). However, it was a crucial centerpiece of the urban jigsaw situated at the junctions of the Singapore River and Marina Bay districts and commercial district on the right bank and the cultural district on the left bank, articulating the past and the future, and the economic and the cultural.

It was not that Marina Bay Sands should represent a fantastical future. The urban fugue demanded Marina Bay Sands become an iconic museum that would take the history of mercantilist capitalism and the heritage of colonial high culture across the bay to project the Singaporean-Asian renaissance to the world. The golden age of Singapore's new urbanism was imagined explicitly in terms of the fusion of science and art in architecture and design. Safdie's architectural principles for building Marina Bay Sands expressed the Asian renaissance art-science theme in three ways: humanizing the mega-scale, axial town planning, and the Gothic integration of art.

Humanizing the mega-scale has been Safdie's commitment in contemporary architecture. His aim was to make large-scale buildings 'legible, self-orienting, clear', 'to give people the capacity to know where they are and understand the parts so they can easily move about, use, and inhabit' (Safdie 2013: 31). His methodology was to maximize 'penetration of daylight, contact with nature, and openness to views', and avoid 'a sense of crowding to make people feel more comfortable and less overwhelmed' (Safdie 2013: 33). Faced with a site that was a tabula rasa, Safdie could have easily projected this commitment with a fantasy building purely of his imagination. But, with his sensibilities honed by residential projects he had worked on in Singapore, Safdie sought to incorporate specific characteristics of tropical architecture, especially the historical architecture of European colonists in accommodating nature – generous use of shades and overhangs for protection from the sun, opened up spaces for ventilation, copious integration of plant life in the architecture.

Over 50,000 vines, palms, and trees were landscaped to 'knit Marina Bay Sands back into the existing city fabric', integrating the Sands with Garden

City Singapore (Walker and Greenspan 2013: 55). But the key expression in the accommodation of nature was the curving of the straight waterfront, which Safdie (2013: 36) thought was 'impressive in its length but oppressive in its relentlessness'. Safdie sought to render a gentle curve reminiscent of a natural bay, to give the pedestrians walking on the promenades the experience of 'the magic that occurs when a sweeping bend foreshortens perspective' (Safdie 2013: 36). The URA quickly consented to the audacious request to reshape the bay itself. The Grand Arcade retail area of the Marina Bay Sands followed the curve. Its glass façade opened up along its length to the promenade, allowing easy access to pedestrians as well as giving shoppers the sense of wide spaciousness. The three retail levels were split and terraced to create an airy central atrium running through the curved length. Protection from the sun was provided by louvered canopy and shading sails.

The central atrium was envisioned as the principal spine of Marina Bay Sands with two perpendicular corridors connecting it to the three towers and the MRT station. Sands, Safdie (2013: 35) realized as the design process advanced, was a town and a good town, for him, was one with main spine of activity that gave the town its 'sense of orientation and location' and 'clarity through hierarchy'. Safdie cited the classical Roman cities organized by the *cardo maximus* (or main, north-south street) and other examples, such as Byzantine Jerusalem, Edinburgh, and Philadelphia. With the Grand Arcade opened up to the promenade, Safdie (2013: 35) saw the two as forming an integrated 'single, grand indoor-outdoor urban space of unprecedented scale, partially air-conditioned, partially open to the sky'. Placing the spine at the edge right up to the waterfront oriented the Sands and its visitors to the bay and the downtown across it. The Sands therefore played its part in the urban fugue. Furthermore, the extroverted space stood in contrast to the introverted space of the large casino, which the government wanted hidden from sight and tucked away from public concourses, and also 'the introverted malls that proliferate in Asian as well as Western cities' (Safdie 2013: 46).

The third Asian renaissance attribute was the seamless integration of art and architecture as a single experience. Safdie cited the Gothic cathedral as an example, in contrast to the more applied approach of painting frescoes and placing sculptures in the buildings. Safdie (2013: 45) sought 'Gothic-style integration' in the Sands. Ned Kahn's *Wind Arbor* was cited as the prime example. Built into the window wall of the hotel atrium, it provides shading from the sun while its aluminum flaps respond to the wind to create a pleasing visual effect. Antony Gormley's *Drift* was another. The seven-story,

three-dimensional stainless steel sculpture was made up of rods and nodes forming a 'packed polyhedral that follow bubble matrix geometry' (Hodge 2013: 248). It intimated a cloud filling up the large atrium of the main lobby of the hotel and was intended by Gormley to represent 'an emergence of form from chaos that is both cosmological and biological' (Hodge 2013: 251). Commentators have described the architecture itself as a move orchestrated by Safdie from Euclidean to curved Riemannian forms underpinned by 'a distinctly organic-mathematical approach' (Rowe 2011: 110).

Completing the renaissance choreography, Safdie placed a flowerlike building of ten fingers rising skyward in different heights at the promontory where the bay meets the channel shared with the Kallang Basin. It was proposed to be the ArtScience Museum, the first of its kind exploring 'the quest of knowledge and the passion for innovation that form the shared foundation of art and science' (Safdie 2013: 45). The dishlike roof collects water to create a beautiful indoor fountain and pond as well as to recycle it for use in the museum. The tips of the petals are crowned by windows letting in skylight to illuminate the galleries and save on lighting. This was Safdie's Gothic cathedral of the Singaporean renaissance. It has become a popular symbol inviting interpretations – a friendly hand welcoming the world to Singapore for supporters, the outstretched hand collecting money for those opposing the casinos, a lucky lotus rising from the bay for believers in feng shui geomancy. The pedestrian Helix Bridge, its structure bending and curving like a double helix, linked the museum and the Sands to Marina Centre, thus completing the walking loop around the waterfront in a gestural nod to the genomic enlightenment ahead.

The Gardens by the Bay complemented the Sands monument to the Singaporean renaissance. Built by the National Parks Board and located immediately east of the Sands, the Gardens enveloped the monumental Sands back into the Garden City. It was no ordinary park. The design was sourced through an international competition in 2006 to ensure its world-class status and it won the World Building of the Year award at the prestigious World Architectural Festival in 2012. The waterfront gardens also housed conservatories with cool-moist and cool-dry biomes and concrete 50-meter-tall 'supertrees' supporting vertical greenery to provide shade. It was the botanic gardens of the future.

Its colonial counterpart, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, is located directly in a northwesterly line perpendicular to the Sands waterfront of the bay, passing through the Fullerton Hotel, running parallel along the main commercial section of the Singapore River dividing the business and

cultural districts, and through to the other side on the edge of the downtown area. Application was made to UNESCO to list the Botanic Gardens as a World Heritage Site, which if successful would be Singapore's first. Its claim to fame was its horticultural and agricultural research, which led to the successful cultivation of commercial rubber in Southeast Asia. Together, the two gardens embraced the whole downtown district, dancing on an axis perpendicular to the main Marina Bay axis formed by the Flyer, the Helix Bridge, and the Sands itself, in the urban fugue of cultural-commercial heritage and art-science renaissance (see Figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1** The choreography of utopia by the bay



*From left to right, the Flyer, the Helix Bridge, and the Sands form the main axis of the new Marina Bay developments. The curved biomes of the Gardens by the Bay can be seen rising beyond the axis. The grand hotels and the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay of older global city vintage are in the foreground*

Yudhishtira Nathan, used by permission

## Hyperbolic Commodities, Spectacular Consumption

Between the colonial heritage and the Asian renaissance produced into the space of the old downtown and Marina Bay, the historical material thread that ties them together spatially, symbolically, and ideologically is the circulation of commodities.

The inaugural exhibition that opened the ArtScience Museum in 2011 was *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. A consortium organized the exhibition. The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution provided the curatorial expertise. The Asian Civilisations Museum of Singapore's National Heritage Board provided support and would eventually house the Chinese artifacts salvaged from a shipwrecked ninth-century Arabian dhow in Indonesian waters near the island of Belitung south of Singapore. The Singapore government, through Sentosa Leisure Management, a wholly owned subsidiary of its statutory board, Sentosa Development Corporation, in charge of developing and managing attractions on the theme park island of Sentosa, bought the artifacts from a private salvager based in New Zealand. They were then loaned to the Singapore Tourism Board. The artifacts were essentially purchased state treasures, but used in a way not to boost the imagination of Singapore as a nation, but to promote Singapore as a global city.

It was a blockbuster exhibition intended to be an archaeological coup that would place the ArtScience Museum and Marina Bay on the international museum and culture map and thus Singapore on the global city map. But what has an Arabian dhow loaded with Chinese goods sunk a thousand years ago got to do with modern-day Singapore, the origins of which official history had adamantly traced to the founding of the settlement by Stamford Raffles in 1819? The chief executive of the Tourism Board waxed (Aw 2010: x),

Cities represent the diversity of lives within shared spaces. They are special because they contain the collective experiences of many communities over centuries. Since ancient times, cities have been the site where talent congregates and creation takes place. They have inspired great inventions, from scientific discoveries to innovation in pottery, art, and craftsmanship. We understand this because Singapore, a city-state on an island in Southeast Asia, is one such place. [...] By presenting the collection first in Singapore and subsequently to a global audience through a world tour, we hope to give audiences a different and deeper perspective of our island-nation. We believe the artifacts will help draw the link between the city-state that exists today and the rich historical narrative of the past.



The exhibition was to place Singapore in the *longue durée* of successive waves of globalization led by trade that gave rise to empires, nations, and, most importantly, great cities. Julian Raby (2010: xii), director of the Sackler Gallery, saw the 'genealogical and geographical link' between the ninth-century dhow and present-day Singapore quite clearly in the Marina Bay developments. He noted that the Belitung wreck was part of the global shipping trade route through Southeast Asia that gave rise to the Srivijaya Empire, a prince of which later founded the ancient kingdom of Singapura (from which the name of Singapore was derived) in the early fourteenth century. He also noted that the Srivijayans were the builders of great temple complexes, 'just as Singapore is now expressing itself in major architectural projects' (Raby 2010: xii).

But it was the sunken trade goods displayed in the exhibition that carried the symbolic overload. There were tens of thousands of artifacts: coins, Changsha ceramics, celadon, green-splashed wares, white wares, Tang blue-and-white, mirrors, gold and silver wares. Three hundred of the 'rare and strange goods' (Guy 2010) were exhibited. The 'pearl cups like the moon' were said to have brought a spurt of manufacturing innovation and a golden age of the arts and economy to the Abbasid Empire, which was made possible by imperial patronage and 'inventive individuals' skilled in pottery and linked to 'the educated elite and the merchants involved in overseas trade' in the port city of Basra (Hallett 2010: 79).

The hope was for the same to happen in the space of Marina Bay, forged by state patronage, inventive foreign talents, educated elites running the civil service and cultural institutions, and global capitalists. These were not just commodity fetishes transcending historical time, sensuous objects made more valuable by the trade in antiquities. They were also hyperbolic symbols, their metaphorical significance and associations exaggerated to leave a strong emotional impression.

The spectacular consumption, in the Debordian sense of the spectacle of commodity-image fetishism, induced by the hyperbolic commodities is not about the momentary thrill of opulent and conspicuous enjoyment. It is not postmodern consumption of the simulated that has no depth. On the contrary, it evokes the intimate and resolves to create lasting memories, thus shaping our very subjectivities. As eminent urban planner Gary Hack puts it, Marina Bay Sands exemplifies 'the architecture of memorability'. Hack (2013: 136) describes the highlight of resort lifestyle at the Sands: 'couples talking quietly at the razor's edge of an outdoor swimming pool fifty-seven stories above the ground, with Singapore's skyline across the bay seemingly almost close enough to touch'. The architecture meant to



intimate rather than to create awe and intimidate. For Safdie, this was part of his program to humanize the mega-scale. For the government and the planners, the architecture of memorability burns the impression of Singapore into the minds of visitors, both foreigner and local, and turns the merely monumental into the compelling iconic.

Safdie (2013: 38) differentiated the Sands hotel building into three towers, each twisted to create 'a dancelike relationship' between the two slabs of east-facing and west-facing rooms. This was to avoid building a massive wall shielding Marina Bay from the world. For the URA planners and the government, the design won their approval partly because the two gaps between the towers framed 'the spectacle of the proposed Gardens of the Bay right behind it' (Loo 2006). The gaps also put the city in a welcoming frame for those approaching from the sea on the historical gateway route to enter the city or for those looking at the downtown from the gardens. From either direction, a picturesque framed painting was visually produced. Spectacular consumption becomes intimate and memorable.

Safdie had wanted to build extensive gardens around the Sands interlaced with swimming pools and jogging paths, because of his own fond memories of staying at Singapore's Shangri-La located between Orchard Road and the Botanic Gardens. But constraints on space meant that he would have to build the gardens and swimming pools on the podium roof of the casino and convention center, which would be 'overshadowed and overpowered by the adjacent hotel' (Safdie 2013: 38). Facing the conundrum of where to place the swimming pool, Safdie and his team, with the model of the three towers in front of them, cut a plank of wood and placed it on top of the towers. The idea of the SkyPark was born. It resulted in a mega-scale 150-meter-long 'infinity' pool that allowed for intimate views of the city skyline over its edge. Some 250 trees and 650 plants were planted on the SkyPark, and the many lounging spaces, Jacuzzis, and celebrity chef restaurants to break up and soften the massive roof. In the first year of its opening, one million visitors, foreign and local, who were not guests of the Sands, paid to enter the SkyPark to enjoy the 'tropical oasis in the sky' and take in the 'unforgettable sights' of the city and country (Marina Bay Sands 2012: 62, 60). The SkyPark was itself a hyperbolic commodity.

The bay itself became the venue for spectacular consumption. Safdie's design did not just curve the bay to make it more organic. He built a semi-circular Event Plaza into the curve and then playfully added two islands made of steel and glass to the north and south. The Crystal Pavilions are accessed by tunnels at the lower level of the Grand Arcade and offered all-round views of the downtown core and Sands. One pavilion houses Louis

Vuitton's largest flagship store and the other the world-famous Pangaea and Avalon nightclubs. They 'appear to float on the bay' (Marina Bay Sands 2012: 83), glistening in the sunlight at day or reflecting the city lights at night, beckoning to the world pedestrians around the bay to the spectacular consumption taking place at the Sands. The nearly 300 luxury boutiques and bistros in the Grand Arcade are symbolically linked to the Crystal Pavilions by the 150-meter-long canal that runs through the lower level of the Arcade. For ten dollars, one could ride along the canal in a Malay-style sampan navigated by a paddler dressed in old Chinese peasant costume and leisurely soak in the architecture and window-shop the spectacle of luxury goods.

This was no mimicry of the Venetian of Las Vegas or Macau (see Simpson, chapter four in this volume), but a hyperbolic invention of an Asian Venice. By 2006, the bay was dammed up to create both a reservoir and a grand stage. Clifford Pier, a ferry terminal on the old downtown core waterfront dating from the colonial era, was moved to the southern tip of Marina South to serve as one of four eventual terminals making up the maritime hub serving the region. The bay would serve as a grand stage. In 2007, the annual National Day Parade organized by the state to showcase its military defense capabilities and mobilize citizens as actors and spectators for national identity formation was held for the first time in Marina Bay. The Float, a 130-meter by 100-meter platform, was constructed to stage the event, themed the *City of Possibilities*. Built on the Marina Center waterfront, it adopted the entire downtown core stretching from the Fullerton to the Sands as the U-shaped backdrop. The float sat 27,000 official spectators, but over a 100,000 additional spectators could watch the parade from around the waterfront.

The National Day Parade was supposed to open up the bay to the megafestivities envisioned to take place on and around the water. To date, no major concerts or cultural performances have yet been staged on the water or the Float, except for the opening and closing of the disappointing inaugural Youth Olympics held in Singapore in 2010, and the many dressed rehearsals for the parade (see Figure 5.2). The only festivity worth its salt has been the annual 'I Light Marina Bay' event, supposedly Asia's first and only sustainable light art festival, which in 2012 involved some 30 installations using green materials. The festival purportedly brought more than 500,000 local and international visitors to the bay to 'revel in Singapore's signature cityscape' (*Straits Times* 2012), though the accounting methods are not clear.

Filling in the gap is the Sands' nightly *Wonder Full – The Light and Water Spectacular* show, which employs cutting-edge technology such as lasers, video projections, and giant water screens held at the Event Plaza (Marina

**Figure 5.2** The spectacular consumption of the Bay at a National Day Parade dress rehearsal, 2013



*Marina Bay Sands (left) and the Marina Bay Financial Centre (right) framed the stage, while the ArtScience Museum (center) provided the stage backdrop*

Daniel P.S. Goh, used by permission

Bay Sands 2012: 113). Mandated by the URA, it was to become a ‘must-see’ show on par with Las Vegas’ dancing fountains and Hong Kong’s *A Symphony of Lights* (Goh 2007). Here, the choreography of ‘utopia by the bay’ goes off-key, since the show manages to make neither the water nor the city skyline dance like the two reference shows. In other words, the art-science hyperbole fails to signify either the bay or the city, only the colorful lights and cutting-edge technology. *Wonder Full* becomes a mere spectacle.

## Conclusion: Reflections on Urban Choreography

Through the spatial production of Marina Bay, the Singaporean developmental state has taken its historical legacies – land reclamation, the downtown commercial and cultural districts and waterways – and built its aspirational utopia on and around them. I argued that the production of space was not only functional for a liquid, globalizing capitalism, but it also

stages a liquidity play of seamless flows and the effervescent transformation of Singaporeans into cosmopolitan global subjects. I also showed that this utopia dreams an art-science renaissance in which spectacular consumption gives rise to a great commercial and cultured global city and yet affords intimate experiences and lasting memories for individuals.

The instrument in this exercise of choreographing utopia by the bay, the URA, has since taken a global consciousness of its own. It prides itself for 'place making', creating a 'sustainable high-density city' that was achieved 'in tandem with economic growth, the protection and enhancement of environment, and societal cohesion' (URA 2008: 23). In 2009, it formed the URA Consulting Group to export its planning expertise. For the URA, Singapore had become a brand in itself, needing no tagline or slogan, with values such as 'transforming', 'nurturing', 'collaborating', and 'daring to dream'. Marina Bay had become a brand-name place-commodity for other government agencies to market the city – the Economic Development Board promoting business investments with its tagline 'Singapore, Future Ready' and the Ministry of Manpower attracting local and foreign talents to collaborate for 'collective creativity' (*Straits Times* 2010).

But the trouble with the hyperbolic commodity is that its trader can believe his own created hype so much that public opinion gets ignored or dismissed. The initial unpopularity of Marina Bay due to local opposition to the casinos was brushed away by a member of URA's International Panel of Architects and Urban Planners advising the government as a matter of the locals taking time to like the place and realizing the casino is more than just a gaming floor and that the place is being built for them (Teo 2005b). Amid talks of holding the 2020 World Expo on or under the waters of Marina Bay, prominent public figures lament the lack of the 'X-factor' of love allowing creativity and mistakes, a Singapore that would be a great place to live and not just a great place to stay, and more landmark buildings built by local and young Asian architects (Teo 2005a).

There were also earlier criticisms in the 1990s of URA planning for being merely technical and aesthetic and ignoring social, cultural, and political factors (Raman 1992), followed by alternative imaginations of Marina Bay development by four architects stressing chaotic creativity, organic community focus, local sensibilities, and small-scale sustainability directly involved in the production of knowledge, as well as artistic and cultural diversity (Ho 2002). All these were ignored in favor of the mega-scale, the global, the spectacular, and mall culture, albeit humanized.

Even the art park next to the Float featuring 27 artworks by youths with the theme 'Aspirations for Life in Singapore' was choreographed to the

mega-scale. Initially named the ImagiNation Park to encourage community ownership of place at the Bay (*Straits Times* 2008), it is now the Youth Olympic Park with professional enhancements and additions to the public art to make the Olympic theme more pronounced. It is important to note that all the choreographic moves by the URA described in this essay began with the nation and went on to the global city with the nation elided, trading one teleology for another all the while neglecting the truly local and cosmopolitan. There is thus a lingering feeling for Singaporeans that Marina Bay caters to jetsetter international elites and they do not have a stake in the space.

Worse still, reactions to the bay are inevitably cloaked in nationalist dress, caught between the two moments of the choreography. When a local businessman brought the *Dîner en Blanc* event to Singapore and staged it at the Marina Bay Sands promenade in 2012, it raised some hackles. The event was invented in Paris as a flash mob urban picnic by participants dressed in white told the secret location at the last minute. The aim was to claim collective ownership of public spaces and rejuvenate them with the experience of the unexpected. Its franchises in other cities have taken lives and meanings of their own. In Singapore, it was turned into yet another lavish party for yuppies, expatriates, and poseurs, and celebrated as yet another Singaporean first – the first flash mob dinner in Asia. Marina Bay Sands promenade was not reclaimed for collective ownership, but was simply the most logical choice for the staging of spectacular consumption.

The event became controversial when prominent local food bloggers demanded favorite local foods such as chicken rice and soya bean curd dessert be allowed and they and the foods promptly got banned for not keeping up with taste. It quickly descended into shrill nationalism with critics accusing *Dîner en Blanc* organizers for disrespecting Singapore and being highhanded and elitist. The organizers and the central organizers in Paris eventually apologized and re-invited the bloggers, though the damage was already done and calls to boycott the event and hold alternative flash mobs celebrating national foods persisted (Mahtani 2012). In 2013, the event was held at the Marina Barrage, far enough from the bay and out of its spectacular consumption grid, but with the Sands and the city still visible as the backdrop. It took place without controversy.

Urban choreography, in its directorial projection of aesthetic obsessions and symbolic fantasies unto urban agents with diverse interests and motivations, is prone to errors and missteps. The Sail luxury condominium, which was completed in 2008, had faced serious allegations by its resident-owners of poor maintenance and workmanship. In 2013, after failing to address the issues, the owners prepared to do legal battle with the developers over a

burst pipe, shattered glass canopies, and other defects. Residents also took aim at property agents and non-resident owners who had been subletting the units like serviced apartments, leading one resident to compare Marina Bay to Geylang (Lim and Yong 2013), a red-light district at the edge of the Kallang Basin popular with low-income migrant workers. After the Marina Bay Sands opened, it became a popular icon featured in artists' impressions in advertisements for condominium launches. This led to pressure on the government to curb such 'visual tricks' (Teo 2011).

Even authentic though hyperbolic commodities can be wrecked on unpredictable rocks in international waters. *Shipwrecked*, the exhibition with great archaeological significance, was supposed to have launched Singapore into the international museum and culture scene. The next stop for its international tour after the ArtScience Museum premiere was the Smithsonian to coincide with the latter's silver jubilee celebrations. But months into the Marina Bay Sands exhibition, controversy erupted. The Society for American Archaeology, the Council of American Maritime Museums, the International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage, and scientists within the Smithsonian called on the institution to cancel the exhibition. The critics did not like the fact that the wreck's artifacts were commercially salvaged for profit and under less-than-scientific conditions and time to ensure minimum loss of data (Taylor 2011). The 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage, which disallowed the treatment of underwater cultural heritage as commercial goods in any form, was cited. It was lost or it did not matter to the critics that the Singapore state was the de facto owner of the artifacts by proxy of a subsidiary company of one of its statutory board. Backed by UNESCO, the Smithsonian canceled the exhibition after months of debate and recommended scientific re-excavation of the remaining wreck to be led by Southeast Asian scientists (Pringle 2011).

Notwithstanding the missteps and errors, utopia by the bay is now a fait accompli. Singapore and Singaporeans have to live with its success and failure. There are no possibilities for heterotopia. But the choreography has moved on. A new Draft Master Plan released by URA in 2013 envisioned Marina South to be characterized by fenceless private housing and mixed-use developments and focused on a slower urban pace conducive for social interaction and recreation. The original plans for Bayfront, the site of the Sands, have moved south. So has the discontent, as 'jaded' locals called for less crowdedness, more space for scenic exercise routes, less costly dining options, and greater community-oriented activities (Ong 2013). The choreography of utopia begins anew.

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