

## The Singapore Arts Festival and the aestheticisation of the urban landscape

Chris Hudson

RMIT University

### ABSTRACT

In the last two decades Singapore has experienced a proliferation of arts and cultural events, paralleling changes in the economy in the post-industrial era. Events such as the Singapore Arts Festival have precipitated material change and the redesign of public space. The emergence of post-Fordist regimes of flexible accumulation and the production and consumption of symbolic and cultural goods have not only transformed economies, but have reconfigured urban space in sites around the world. Typical of this transformation is the deindustrialisation of innercity space and urban regeneration to accommodate tourism, new forms of global cosmopolitanism and cultural consumption. The reconstruction of the urban landscape has also incorporated new forms of aestheticisation of urban life. These spatial and aesthetic changes are implicated in the control of both space and culture.

Through an investigation of the 2009 Singapore Arts Festival, this article examines the ways in which the aestheticisation of the urban landscape provides the space where economics, culture and politics intersect. It examines the construction of the nation's global brand image, the culture of consumption that drives the economy, and the manipulation of individual consumer desires.

### Arts and the economy

When Jean Baudrillard said that “aesthetic fascination is everywhere ...” and “... a kind of non-intentional parody hovers over everything” (Baudrillard, 1983: 150) he might have had Singapore in mind. The urban landscape in Singapore has been transforming progressively since independence in 1965 until it seems that the aesthetic dimension of urban space dominates everything, where so many features of everyday life are aestheticised.

In the last two decades Singapore has experienced a proliferation of arts and cultural events. In 2009 a large number of events were staged, amongst which were: the Worldwide Festival Singapore, the Global Festival of Indian Dance and Music, the International Tamil Film Awards, hundreds of art exhibitions, constantly renewed special museum events, the Flute Festival, the Night Festival, the World Gourmet Summit and the Singapore Food Festival. The main event, however, is without doubt The Singapore Arts Festival—a month long spectacle attracting high profile international and local theatrical performance. The Singapore Arts Festival has precipitated material change and the redesign of public space. The reconstruction of the urban landscape has also incorporated new forms of aestheticisation of urban life. These changes are located in a constellation of overlapping

and multilayered discourses which incorporate, amongst others: the construction of the nation's global brand image; the culture of consumption that drives the economy; and the manipulation of individual consumer desires. This paper will examine the ways in which the aestheticisation of the urban landscape provides the space where economics, culture and politics intersect through an investigation of the 2009 Singapore Arts Festival. It will also consider the implications of spatial and aesthetic change for the control of both space and culture.

Throughout the postcolonial period the economic and political dynamic of Singapore has been developmentalism, underpinned by an instrumental rationality intent on radical and far-reaching modernisation. Since its inception the government of Singapore has been fixated on order and security to ensure a hospitable terrain for this agenda. From its early success as a colonial *entrépot* economy, in the postcolonial period Singapore has gone through a series of economic transitions—from the labour-intensive, export focused, industrialisation of the 1960s to the postmodern, consumer economy of today. These have been paralleled by transformations in the urban landscape, which has included extensive high-rise public housing projects, vast industrial estates and various forms of urban renewal. According to C. J. Wee, the spatial characteristics that accompanied Singapore's agenda of radical modernisation amount to a bland, homogenised, even authoritarian, urbanism (Wee, 2007: 77-79) befitting its relentless developmentalist agenda and "rather dour and puritanical modernity" (Wee, 2003: 85).

More recently, however, the decline of the Fordist production model and the emergence of global financial, media, entertainment, information and communication technology industries, amongst others, has resulted in the development of an economy more accurately characterised as "post-modernisation". The emergence of post-Fordist regimes of flexible accumulation and the production and consumption of symbolic and cultural goods has not only transformed economies, but has reconfigured urban space in sites around the world. Typical of this transformation is the deindustrialisation of inner city space and urban regeneration to accommodate tourism, new forms of global cosmopolitanism and cultural consumption.

In this economic environment, every city of substantial size aspires to global city status. Ranking on the various registers of hierarchies of cities is determined, broadly speaking, by the city's location on a circuit of other global cities, by its competence as a command point in the global financial economy and by the establishment of itself as node in the flow of global culture. Singapore is one such city that has reconstructed itself as a global city to suit the contingencies of a global cultural economy. In a post-industrial global regime, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) as a mode of economic power is paralleled by the growth of a new middle class, with a "lifestyle" and associated regime of consumption.

The role of cultural production and consumption in the transformation of urban space in the post-industrial city has been well established in Western (Zukin, 1995; Crewe & Beaverstock, 1998) and non-Western (Hee, Scroepfer, Nanxi & Ze, 2008) sites. The role of the arts, in particular, in the reshaping of public space and urban regeneration has also been noted (Wynne, 1992; Quinn, 2005; Hee et al., 2008). Arts festivals have been one catalyst for the transition of cities from landscapes of production to landscapes of consumption (Quinn, 2005). Waterman (1998) asserts that arts festivals are a ubiquitous phenomenon in Western culture, but the proliferation of arts festivals in Asia (for example the arts festivals in Shanghai, Tokyo, Hong Kong and elsewhere) suggests that they are also now ubiquitous in Asian societies. New forms of tourism as a feature of the restructuring of capitalism has also been well theorised (Lash & Urry, 1987, 1994) along with the role, in a postmodern economy, of World Fairs, arts festivals, shopping malls, theme parks and other spaces of cultural consumption.

This paper will consider the aestheticisation of the urban landscape in Singapore. In the context of the post-industrial era, global economic forces have reconfigured and restructured the local, and precipitated Singapore's agenda to become a global city. Since the 1990s a crucial part of the strategy to intensify global links and secure its status as a global city has had several strands relating

to the development of cultural capital: firstly, in order to attract global elites and creative classes to the city-state it has attempted to dispel the nation's enduring reputation for being a boring, straight-laced nation of overly disciplined workaholics. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's stated aim was to create an oasis of talent (Yeoh & Chang, 2001: 1030). This has meant reinscribing Singapore as exciting, innovative and creative—a space of global cosmopolitanism. Secondly, it has intensified the development of a sophisticated symbolic economy in which culture is commodified and cultural capital is accumulated. Thirdly, it helped fulfil the need to remake Singapore as an exciting place in which Singapore citizens would want to stay to counter the substantial emigration problem and brain drain that the country experiences. These agendas converge in the reinvention of Singapore as a “Global City for the Arts”.

### **The aestheticisation of everyday life**

In his study of postmodern culture, Harvey asserts that: “Postmodern flexibility ... is dominated by fiction, fantasy, the immaterial (particularly of money), fictitious capital, images, ephemerality, chance, and flexibility in its production techniques, labour markets and consumption niches ...” (Harvey, 1990: 339). Two aspects of the increased flexibility in the postmodern era of capital accumulation and the consumption of the immaterial and the ephemeral are important for an understanding of the Singapore Arts Festival and the aestheticisation of the urban landscape. They are: the erasure of the distinction between high art and mass culture, and the increasing aestheticisation of everyday life. Featherstone identifies three ways in which we can speak of the aestheticisation of everyday life (2007: 64- 80). Firstly, he refers to those artistic subcultures, which produced twentieth century, avant- garde art movements such as Dada and Surrealism, with their challenges to the conventional boundaries between art and everyday life. One of the key ideas of those movements was the idea that art can be anywhere and can be anything; even common everyday consumer commodities can be art. The completely banal can be poeticised in the genre of Salvador Dali's lobster phone or Andy Warhol's soup cans. Secondly, the aestheticisation of everyday life can refer to the project of turning life into a work of art in the form of personal affectations and aesthetic enjoyment (Featherstone, 2007: 66). This typically takes the form of the desire to enlarge oneself, accompanied by the quest for new tastes and sensations, and the exploration of more and more possibilities for sensation and affect. In this form of aestheticisation, the self becomes a work of art, a lifelong project, in the manner of Oscar Wilde's dandy. Such an aesthetic move was related to the development of mass consumption, in general, and the pursuit of new tastes and sensations with the construction of distinctive lifestyles, which is now so central to consumer culture. Featherstone's third sense of the aestheticisation of everyday life refers to the rapid flow of signs and images, saturating the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society, that are designed to promote the cultural value of an object (Featherstone, 2007: 66). This form of aestheticisation is related to the development of mass consumption and the spatial arrangements of consumer capitalism epitomised in the proliferation of shopping malls—Ritzer's “cathedrals of consumption” (2007). Jameson has pointed out that, along with the suppression of difference, one of the key characteristics of postmodern life is the “relentless saturation of any remaining voids” (Jameson, 1991: 412). The “postmodern body” is now “exposed to a perpetual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed” (Jameson, 1991: 413). The massive proliferation of images that this implies assails the consumer with symbols that express the value and cultural meaning of objects and which create the regimes of signification, or a system of commodity sign production designed to heighten the exchange value of commodities.

Featherstone argues that we need to investigate this phenomenon in specific locations in time and space (Featherstone, 2007: 69). Thus it seems appropriate to investigate forms of aestheticisation in Singapore, specifically during the time of the Singapore Arts Festival in May 2009. All these senses of aestheticisation come together in that conjuncture of time and space, reflecting

not only the commodity culture of an advanced capitalist society, but the politics of Singapore and the state's continuing nation building agenda.

### Global city for the arts

In Singapore, consumption is not just the dominant mode of public life, but, as Chua Beng Huat argues, consumerism is *the culture* of Singapore (Chua, 2003). This was reiterated in the public discourse when former PM Goh said in his 1996 National Day Rally speech: "Life for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping." Since the late 1960s the construction of shopping malls in Singapore has paralleled the growth in consumer culture. The physical landscape, especially the upmarket shopping strip, Orchard Road, has been transformed by massive shopping malls such as Ngee Ann City. The street is now a globally recognised and to some extent standardised space of consumption, comparable to Shanghai's Huaihai Road, Kuala Lumpur's KL City Centre, or Tokyo's Omoto-Sando. Since the 1980s Singapore has appeared as one continuous shopping centre to foreign tourists (Chua, 2003: 12). This has not abated and a visit to Singapore continues to be viewed as a shopping trip. With official maps of the island featuring all the major shopping precincts, thereby inscribing Singapore as a geography of consumption, the shopping mall is now one of the dominant organising principles of social life in Singapore; everything seems to happen in malls, or in the spaces next to them. They reveal an aestheticisation of the urban landscape through architectural wonders, certain kinds of spectacle, and a constant barrage of images constituting a regime of signification specific to Singapore consumer culture.

Without abandoning consumption as the core economic activity, however, Singapore no longer wants to be known simply for shopping. In a strategic move to reinscribe itself, Singapore has remade its brand image as "Global City for the Arts", and over two decades ago embarked on its ambitious plan to become a global city. By the 1990s it had moved further towards becoming an e-commerce hub, an educational centre for international institutions, a regional medical centre, a science and innovation hub, a centre for research and development, and a tourism capital. "Global City for the Arts" is one strategy for intensifying global connections and creating a symbolic economy; the Singapore Arts Festival is at the centre of this strategy.

The Arts Festival, under the aegis of the National Arts Council, has been running annually for more than thirty years, but its most significant expansion was between 1992 and 1999. The establishment of the National Arts Council in 1990 was a catalyst, but even before that in 1988, a government committee had already outlined an agenda for the performing arts in economic rationalist terms:

With a relatively small population, strategizing for a potentially vibrant performing arts environment is no different from the strategies successfully applied to Singapore's high-tech economic activities ... performing arts in Singapore will form an integral part of Singapore lifestyle no different from its greenness and cleanliness campaigns which will affirm its position as a centre of excellence and an attractive place to do business (*Report on the Performing Arts*, November 1988, cited in Peterson, 1996: 121).

The "Global City for the Arts" promotion finds its most cogent expression in a document titled *Renaissance Singapore. Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* (Singapore Government, 2002). The report put forward a vision for a new Singapore for the twenty-first century in which aesthetics was seen as a tool for creating a competitive economy:

Renaissance Singapore will be creative, vibrant and imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics. Our industries are supported with a creative culture that keeps them competitive in the global economy. The Renaissance Singaporean has an adventurous spirit, an inquiring and creative mind and a strong passion for life. Culture and arts animate our city and our society consists of active citizens who build on our Asian heritage to strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through expressing their Singapore stories in culture and the arts (Singapore Government, 2002: 5).

The mission for culture and the arts was to globalise Singapore's economy while reviving its Asian heritage. It was prescriptive in its invention of a new kind of person who could challenge the stereotype of the straight-laced Singapore workaholic. The national rebirth also deployed aesthetics to reinvent Singapore as a global city with an expanded economic base in a postmodern economy that would purvey advanced services and aestheticised cultural goods:

Renaissance Singapore will be an active international citizen with a reputation for being dynamic, creative, vibrant, aesthetic, knowledgeable and mature. It will be an international centre for arts and arts-related activities, similar to its status as an international centre for communications, finance and commerce. Plugged into global networks, Singapore will be an active member of the global community ... The 'Made in Singapore' label gains a reputation for technologically advanced, aesthetically designed and creatively packaged products and services (Singapore Government, 2002: 40).

Renaissance Singapore offered no less than a minor social revolution in its aim to reinvent its economy and its citizenry as passionate and creative.

### Arts in the city

It has been noted that arts festivals are carnivals for elites (Waterman, 1998) and that support for the arts is a process by which elites establish social distance between themselves and others. Waterman argues that the maintenance of the distinction between "high brow" and "low brow" is an important feature of the cultural politics of arts festivals. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) critique of taste, and suggests that a socially recognised hierarchy of the arts has a corresponding social hierarchy of consumers. Taste functions as a marker of class, and the work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, an understanding of the cultural code (Bourdieu, 1984: 1-2). The Singapore Arts Festival, however, provides an example whereby these distinctions are much more fluid and the boundaries between the levels of hierarchy much less defined or differentiated. It would not be putting too fine a point on it to say that the festival is a quintessentially postmodern event if, according to Featherstone, in postmodernism "we find an emphasis upon the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and a playful mixing of codes" (Featherstone, 2007: 64).

The arts festival in Singapore is not merely a carnival for the elites, but conflates elements of otherwise differentiated spheres of taste and a range of aesthetic dispositions embedded in a profoundly aestheticised urban landscape. A useful way to conceptualise this is to consider the festival as falling into two overlapping cultural spheres, each ordered spatially. The first is the standard spaces of performance such as built theatres; the second is more or less the whole of Singapore.

The premier performance space in Singapore is without doubt the spectacular performing arts complex, the Esplanade, also known as Theatres on the Bay, or more colloquially "the durian building" due to its apparent likeness to the fruit. Built on six hectares of land on Marina Bay, near the mouth of the Singapore River, it was opened on October 12, 2002. It features a 1,600-seat concert hall, a 2,000-seat theatre and a range of smaller performance and recital spaces. It also encompasses retail and food outlets and is connected to a shopping mall. The site itself was an extraordinary feat of aestheticisation. It is an artificial bay formed by land reclamation and engineered changes in the course of the Singapore River. The area now houses other sites of importance for the symbolic economy of cultural goods, such as the Marina Bay Golf course, the Singapore flyer (Singapore's version of the London Eye) and the Marina Bay Street Circuit—the route for the Singapore Grand Prix. The Esplanade Theatre is also linked by a covered walkway to the Marina Square Shopping Mall. The area, including the theatre, is a complex in which high art and mass culture circulate in the same discursive and actual space characterised by an aesthetics, which incorporates a stylistic promiscuity and playful mixing of codes—a space where, for example, global brand advertising and popular



culture can be juxtaposed against European opera. The former mooring point for barges filled with fresh produce and other goods is now a post-industrial landscape, befitting a symbolic economy, and a regime of cultural consumption.

The Esplanade is the environment for what might be called the elite consumption of the arts. It was built specifically to attract world class performances and is said to have cost some SGD\$600 million (US\$345 million) (Wee, 2003: 87). In May 2009, it reaffirmed its elite standing and ability to maintain its place on a circuit of global cities. The 2009 festival included the Finnish National Ballet's version of *Anna Karenina*, the Cullberg Ballet from Sweden, the Moscow State Chamber Choir, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* by the Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio from China (under the heading of Western theatre classic redefined by Asian theatre masters), African adaptations of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, recitals of Schubert *lieder* and so on. There were also extraordinary and varied performances by international performers in a range of built spaces all over Singapore including plays, dance performances, music recitals, voice recitals, choirs, drama workshops, acting workshops, dance workshops, Indian dance, Malay dance, symphony orchestras, poetry readings, drama workshops and so on. It was a huge commercial success (<http://www.singaporeartsfest.com/>). The Singapore Government understands culture as a commodity and is quite candid about the returns on investment that the Esplanade complex provides. As an aestheticised space of cultural consumption, it has reaffirmed Singapore's position as a node in a global cultural flow, and demonstrated that global cosmopolitanism is good for business. Of the cost of the complex Tan Chin Nam, permanent secretary of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, said:

\$600 million is a worthy investment for Singapore to attract world-class musicians and performers. When they come, not only the local, but foreign businessmen also, are elated by the buzzing arts scene. Add to that the whole hotel industry, F & B (Food and Beverage) industry, airline, transport and local designers gain from the dollars these foreign performers as well as [their audiences from the region] spend in Singapore (cited in Wee, 2003: 91).

The Esplanade is a prime site for the effacing of the boundaries between art and life and for the de-differentiation of formerly differentiated spheres of taste and distinction. Textual representations on the promotional website for the Esplanade Mall mark it as a "lifestyle" destination:

Eat, Drink, Shop!

The 8,000sqm Esplanade Mall offers an exciting mix of retail, lifestyle and entertainment outlets over three levels. From show-related merchandise to flowers, custom made hand lotions to home decorations and even guitar and violin shops, the mall provides a unique shopping experience to complement your visit to the arts centre ... Wine and dine in style

... if you're not catching a performance, Esplanade Mall provides the perfect environment for you to catch up with family and friends or just chill out and immerse yourself in the artistic ambience of one of the world's busiest performing arts centres ([http://www.esplanade.com/eat\\_drink\\_shop/index.jsp](http://www.esplanade.com/eat_drink_shop/index.jsp)).

Here the truly banal is aestheticised (catching up with family and friends; chilling out). Consumers are offered the promise of turning themselves into works of art while they perform quotidian feats (wine and dine in style; immerse yourself in the artistic ambience), and the possibility of aestheticising their whole life is held out. It is not only that the Esplanade complex is linked by tunnels and walkways to malls that help efface the boundaries between art and life; the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay complex is itself a mall, a space teeming with signs and inundated with images, where all remaining voids have been saturated (Jameson, 1991: 412).

Since all the processes of aestheticisation described by Featherstone are so obviously at work in the production of the arts as a symbolic value in an economy of signs, and the boundaries between art and life so radically erased, it is not surprising that seemingly the whole of Singapore has been invaded by the arts. The second most important space of performance during the Singapore Arts Festival 2009, was, therefore, the whole island. In an aestheticisation of an extensive urban landscape performance came out of the theatre and onto the streets. There were

performances in markets, spaces between high rise apartment blocks, parks, plazas, open fields, bus stations, commercial squares, neighbourhood meeting spots, libraries, museums, community centres, public walkways, river banks, in stations on the underground rail system and in the tunnels which link shopping malls with other shopping malls and the stations with shopping malls, and of course the ubiquitous shopping malls themselves. Performances designed to appear in food plazas and amongst noodle hawker stalls were advertised as “Arts Where We Eat”. In an extraordinary example of the erasure of the boundaries between art and life, one play called *Etiquette* was performed in a cafe amongst unsuspecting coffee sipping patrons. There was also a seemingly endless series of mobile performances throughout the month-long festival. Moving through streets, subway tunnels, parks and gardens, but especially in malls, they were preceded by signs announcing: “Arts on the Move”.

One of the most cogent statements on the aestheticisation of space as an aspect of the symbolic economy in its invasion of everyday life is to be found in the VivoCity Mall. Like the Esplanade at Marina Bay, VivoCity is built on a site of great natural beauty on the Southern Waterfront (called Harbour Front). The promotional website for the mall proclaims that VivoCity is “an iconic retail, entertainment and lifestyle destination that constantly surprises and stimulates visitors” (<http://www.vivocity.com.sg/aboutvivo.html>). It was the stage for an almost constant procession of “Arts on the Move” performances that made their way through the shoppers. These acts included clowns, acrobats, mime artists, traditional Sumatran dancers and so on. During the month of the arts festival there were also performances in the more static spaces of indoor and outdoor stages, including yo-yo championships, hip hop competitions, belly dancing, local traditional dances, break dance competitions, puppets, stilt walkers and more. VivoCity, like much of the rest of Singapore was animated by an almost constant presence of artistic expression. Since the Arts Festival finished, events which bring arts into everyday life have barely ceased. In a rolling series of “happenings”, Disney Princess Parties, Christmas at Vivocity, roving drummer boys, photographic exhibitions and displays of world best design art have all been staged as part of the symbolic economy, complete with extended shopping hours. Indeed shoppers have no choice but to stroll among the art in a life enhancing, aesthetic experience because, as the promotional material proclaims, “Vivocity is home to a series of extraordinary art works by 6 international artists. This larger-than-life collection is permanently displayed all around VivoCity, bringing an exceptional touch of the arts to everyday life” ([http://www.vivocity.com.sg/happenings\\_promotions.html](http://www.vivocity.com.sg/happenings_promotions.html)).

It is in spaces such as this that Featherstone’s three aspects of aestheticisation can be seen in their interconnection. VivoCity, like Singapore itself, is a profoundly aestheticised landscape of dreams, saturated with the signs and images that create meaning and value in a political economy of consumption; here the banal and the quotidian are aestheticised so that life becomes “lifestyle”; here, in the “cathedrals of consumption” (Featherstone 2007: 17), the project of the self can be continued by recreation through fitness centres, and through forms of self-aestheticisation provided by global clothing chains, hairdressers, jewellers, and cosmetics stores.

## Conclusion

One precondition for success as a symbolic economy capable of constituting a node in a global cultural flow is the production of space, a symbolic landscape that can, as Zukin (1995) puts it, provide cues of urban vivacity and cultural dynamism. In Singapore, as in cities around the world, this has meant the aestheticisation of the urban landscape through the thousands of events associated with the Arts Festival. In Singapore, however, it does not stop when the festival finishes. While the Arts festival is the main event, there are many other cultural events occurring throughout the year. Given the proximity, both physical and ontological, between culture and consumption, one should also include here the supreme festival of consumption, The Great Singapore Sale, which runs for approximately two months every year. The Singapore Arts Festival was a truly global event

that connected Singapore with a global high culture and enhanced the nation's reputation as a space of global cosmopolitanism and a city with a serious claim to "globalness".

Apart from the obvious boost to business in a postmodern economy of signs and symbols, the modes of associated aestheticisation also afforded a number of other advantages. Ritzer (2007) points to the Weberian tradition for an understanding of the increasing ubiquity of rationalised structures, seen most obviously in global food chains where everybody eats the same thing, and global clothing chains where everybody wears the same thing. The otherwise oppressive rationality of these chains, however, has been ameliorated by aestheticisation. It is not too much of a leap to argue that the hyper-rationality and "authoritarian capitalism" (Lingle, 1996) of Singapore itself has been mitigated in a similar way. If ordinary citizens have anxieties about being arrested in the middle of the night for misdemeanours (Tan, 2007: 1), the Arts Festival might convince them that Singapore really is an exciting, vibrant place hospitable to creativity and individuality. A "cultured" environment might also appear to be a depoliticised one.

Singapore has reinvented itself as a Global City for the Arts. The increasing aestheticisation of the urban landscape, and life in general, has been crucial for this strategy. Lash has described this process most succinctly:

... postmodernism means at least the partial collapse of some fields into other fields. For example ... the implosion of the aesthetic field into the social field. Or, with 'commodification' the collapse of the aesthetic field into the economic field (Lash, 1990: 252).

It is clear that the Singapore Arts Festival is part of a strategy not just to reinscribe Singapore, but also to change the aesthetic conditions and to create a symbolic landscape where culture and consumption are conflated in a postmodern economy.

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