

# **Visual and Sensorial Innovations in Urban Governance: The Singapore Landscape Spectacle**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The efforts to modernize in postcolonial regions such as Southeast Asia have evolved in the guises of the global city – highly interconnected, open entities which function as command centres of regional capital. However, for states like Singapore, with a burgeoning population, shrinking land area and a weak historical past, governing the urban while strengthening national identity becomes a challenging condition. Noting the changing demographic dynamism among emerging economic city centres of Southeast Asia, the paper uses the study of Singapore to examine state innovations and strategies taken to provide urban order while maintaining the vibrancy necessary for sustaining a diverse population and building national community. Inspired by the turn towards the ‘aestheticization’ of politics and the visual intensities of globalization, the paper analyses the acclaimed Marina Bay - a water-fronted value-laden site which comprises a phantasmagoric concentration of eye-catching architectural ‘totems’ as well as theatrical devices to evoke a sense of edenic bliss. These and other sensory-triggers evoke an enthralling hypnotic effect that engrains the imagery of the Bay in the spectator which ultimately could prove as a useful strategy for uniting diverse and foreign voices into the national identity. I conclude by evaluating the sustainability of such a sensory strategy.

## **Introduction**

As the development of cities continues to flourish, urban governance increasingly challenges leaders as well as urban planners to continuously recalibrate strategies to build a harmonious, cohesive nation with equal opportunities for all. This is due to the increasing population densities of cities, and the massive fluidity of trans-migration flows that create new demographic dynamism. Open economies plugged into the global trade network like Singapore, have to provide answers to how national identity and solidarity can be fostered; and how the city, with its limited space and resources, can accommodate the diverse voices, their demands and needs in order to facilitate harmonious living. The paper will be instructive for the emergent economies of the global south, and the modernizing cities of Asia; particularly spatially limited localities with multicultural societies. On the other hand, the case of Singapore is made more peculiar because of its relatively weak history. In this sense, Singapore has an evident lack of a national inspiring narrative, or a significant national totem to anchor its national identity. Naturally, this becomes an issue, as the city absorbs new

bodies that come to make their homes in the city-state. Urban governance ideally, has to weave migrants and assimilate them into the larger national community in order for a cohesive society to exist.

This paper attempts a socio-spatial analysis of Singapore's urban governance and its appropriation, as well as 'creative destruction' of value-laden city space to construct an innovative enclosure. It is argued that via the strategy of concentration, the Marina Bay waterfront plays host to a dazzling array of national spectacles, alluring aesthetics, and capturing performativities that establishes the synechdochal status of the Bay in the imagination of Singapore's inhabitants. In this mode of semiotic communication, the welcoming narratives of leisure and opportunity embedded within the Bay may provide enough capital to ameliorate any alienating discourse that hampers community building. The paper concludes by evaluating the sustainability of such a strategy, and provides several causes for concern.

### **Creative Destruction**

Page's concept of 'creative destruction' is extremely pertinent in the Singapore context. A highly planned society, the constant repackaging and re-imaging of the city centre is part of an 'urban boosterist strategy' (Pow 2002:158) that is necessary for Asian cities to be effective in global and regional competitions (Lo and Mercotullio 2000:91). However, juxtaposed by the gleaming skyline of the business district in its new-age metal and granite, the Marina Bay is patron to significant efforts of heritage preservation. This is part of the effort to maintain the collective public memory and consolidate minds in support of the national narrative of progress and economic pragmatism (Chua 1994:266).

Place memories and historical authenticity is thus necessary social capital for national theatrics. It is the 'historical authenticity' of the place that will lend a base of notable power to build the narratives of the present and future in what Boime terms as the 'locus for staging' that can tap into the collective memory and history of the location (1998:11). This power lies in the memory of the place which grants value and worth to the site to be cherished and revered. As Yeoh and Kong argue, 'part of the enchantment of the spectacle is derived from the terrain on which it was staged' (1997:221). Although the Bay sits predominantly on reclaimed land, its importance is moulded around the historical value and colonial heritage of the Singapore River and the colonial city centre. The landscape is touted as a rich source of memories for residents and visitors. For example, the 'origins' of the Bay have been woven intricately both in discourse and in the physical efforts to 'preserve' heritage - exemplified by the immortalization of early immigrant life-in-action at the Singapore River in specially commissioned bronze sculptures, freezing the past within the present and for the future (See Figure 1). Structures of our colonial history and Singaporean heritage are also preserved and renewed in modern guises such as today's Fullerton Hotel (formerly the old Post Office), the soon-to-be-complete Clifford Pier complex, Old Parliament House, as well as the Supreme Court, City Hall and the Padang.



Figure 1: 'People of the River' Sculptures, this entitled *First Generation* by artist Chong Fah Cheong

However, as Hobsbawn and Bhabha cautioned, these memories are 're-invented'— 'strategically reworked to erase its darker histories. . . replaced with selective landscape narratives of fun and leisure, dynamism and modernity, in keeping with the State's objectives of transforming the river into a world-class site for entertainment, recreation and culture' (Chang and Huang 2005:270). This is the 'semiotic construction of historical sites', where new place meanings are created through strategic reworking of activities and memories associated with the site' (Azaryahu cited in Chang 2005:273).

This ultimately displays the State's ability to control the art of remembering or forgetting, where it can choose to emphasize select aspects while strategically erasing others. (Chang 2005:276-277). For example, in a study of the World Trade Centre, Boyer describes how the construction of Manhattan and its skyscraper image has made it an exclusive global city for white-collar narratives, celebrating white-collar achievements, production and the mighty forces of corporate capitalism. What is failed to be acknowledged is the blue-collared workers and the production that helped to raise Manhattan to its capitalist glory today (Boyer 2002: 114). Hence, the ability of the State to edit and omit the narratives at will is of fundamental importance. If indeed, a national narrative can be maintained within the spaces of the global city, how will this narrative read? The Chang and Huang (2005) argument in this case is persuasive which leads to the point that if the national narrative inscribed on the Bay is now concerned with the fun, leisure and dynamism of modernity, then the unique histories and memories of what constitutes the Singaporean identity is gradually replaced by the narrative of progress and economic prosperity, which is neutral and applicable to inhabitant or migrant, and has galvanizing potential.

## Innovations by the Bay

A result of the government's efforts, the Marina Bay landscape has emerged as the city's dominant image as seen in the reproduced visuals in photographs, maps, televised images, and tourist promotional materials. While this engrains the cognitive prominence of the Marina Bay, the landscape of the city is not simply a pulchritudinous aesthetic for appreciation and consumption. The spaces of the city should also be recognised as highly dynamic, multisensory arenas of engagement and interaction as well as theatricality. Hence, one should read the Bay as a theatrical space where there exists a sophisticated layering of multiple 'performed' narratives and apparatus to form a collective presentation to the audience it wishes to captivate. Thus, there are two processes at work here: the layering of narratives as well as the layering of emotive apparatus meant to conjure up emotions of pleasure, pride and attachment bonds. Together, these twin rotors of the state apparatus propel the 'national performance' to entice, enthrall and retain.

A significant example of urban innovation, Singapore touts its national floating platform as one of the world's largest floating facility. It is strategically located so that participants and viewers can enjoy panoramic views of the city with the skyline and landscape as its impressive backdrop (Skyline July/August 2008) during the national day parade. Holding the most nationalistic Singaporean ritual at this site is testament to the prowess of the Bay. As a landscape metaphor, it impresses by the use of pageantry, fanfare and show, in a celebratory strategy to inspire positive feelings of admiration and wonder. It also conveniently builds on the historical lineage of the site where the nearby Padang and its former usage as National Parade grounds is 'carried over' in its modern-day guise at the floating platform. Other large-scale communal events such as the national year-end countdown events accompanied by the dazzling array of city lights and fireworks provide a unique, spectacular means of 'bonding' the community. Described as an 'area that reflects the spirit of our people' (Skyline Jan/Feb 2007), this builds on the image power and the spectacular nature of events that unfold at the Bay.



Figure 2: The National Platform: Strategically located and creatively used for prominent events (Source: Skyline URA, July/August 2008).

## **Spectacular! Spectacular!**

The strategy of concentration also focuses on an intense sensory experience. The preferred strategy here is one that is highly emotive and in Heideggerian terms ‘blinding’. It is a step up and a testimony to the historical progress of the nation, layering the achievements of modernity over the humble historicity of the site. This is evidently done considering how the mammoth structures of modernity dwarf the symbols of historicity and how the narratives of economic pragmatism resound louder. However, the government attempts to combine past and present with the blueprints of the future in order to cater to the different ‘gazes’ and demands present in the city .



Figure 3: Image Power: the ‘hypnotic’ spectacle of the Marina Bay (Source: Skyline URA, June/July 2006).

This is what I describe as the ‘national spectacle’ - a blinding assimilation of sophisticated lights and theatrical grandeur that creates a distinctively impressive image of beauty. It is at once dazzling and hypnotic, akin to how Kristeva describes the imagery as ‘a bearer of hypnotic emotion’ (cited in Stites 2005:101). It is an image that has accumulated to the point where it becomes capital i.e. its alluring ability turns the image into a powerful industrial communication system capable of producing cultural models and mass identity (Proto 2003:1). It is suggested that the deep impact of these images possess ability to ‘induce something like a robotic or involuntary behaviour’ (Stites 2005:101), almost like an involuntary attraction like flies to the light. This emotive capability of the landscape is facilitated by structures and architecture which have been responsible for the image flow and the production of consumable images that engrain themselves deeply into the recesses of memory For example, nothing captures the imagination more than the images of distinct architectural masterpieces such as Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao or Paris’ Pompidou Centre. Likewise, the aesthetic appeal of the cityscape is the biopower behind its allure and the foundation of the bay’s ‘totemization’ as national symbol.

The ability of this image is grounded in the ‘hyperconcentration of image power’ which develops a ‘blinding light that throws the rest of the world into shadow’ (Wigley 2008:155). The distinction between the city and the hinterland is acute and within the spectacle, the

perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior, yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible. Thus, the agency of the promotional image serves as a mirror, both to block the less-than-appealing reality and to transform reality into the ideological imaginary of the commodity-image or spectacle (Dorrian 2008:43). The ‘image-ability’ of the landmarks helps to etch the landscape in memory, simultaneously distinguishing from and enmeshing within an urban fabric that is intentionally disconnected from and yet integrated to the city and communities which it presides.

While the necessities of modernization compel government to place significant impetus on the structures and architectural icons by the Bay, the embrace of these theatrical devices that play on the political power of imagery and aesthetics, as well as the sensory experience is a well-crafted government effort. Walter Benjamin’s novel idea of how buildings can be ‘appropriated’ is useful in comprehending how the narratives of the nation and modernity can be objectified and experienced through the senses. To Benjamin, the appropriation of structure is where meaning is ‘produced instead of inherited’ (cited in Miller 2005:196).

At present, the Marina Bay is undergoing a massive amount of construction as the final portions of the nation’s urban master plans are put into action. Envisioning an Edenic garden in line with Ebenezer Howard’s utopian ‘garden city’ concept, the enclosure this time is permanent, separating the utopian leisure and sophistication of the city centre from the urban uniformed housing hinterland. Intriguingly, the master plan entails the physical installation of an embankment that will transform the river waters surrounding the Bay into a water reservoir. Lining this new man-made lake within the city-centre are three massive 101 hectare waterfront gardens of lush greenery and foliage that aims to ‘define Singapore as the world’s premier tropical garden city’ (National Parks Board 2008), establishing the Edenic, almost utopian nature of the Bay. This adds to a breathless list of devices and activity that is already present in the Bay and to come – for example, a massive integrated resort consisting a mega-casino, hotel, conference and retail spaces and a new financial centre adjacent to it, - the Bay is set to evolve strongly into a ‘first world oasis within a third-world situation’ (The Straits Times, 2008).

### **How Sustainable?**

However, there is a fear that such investments in the Marina as a central site for citizen leisure and interaction cannot be sustained by the mere use of prosperity narratives and temporal emotions of awe. Thus, the national identity which Singapore’s leaders have sought so hard to create and maintain is in peril if the narrative of economic prosperity and modernization continues to dominate beneath the superficiality of the material structures that surround the citizen. Places of historical and value seem to be preserved as mere ‘shells’ to cater to the needs of building the national identity. However, these soulless, utilitarian preservations are sharply contrasted by the structures of modernity and progress that tower over them. Hence, the Singaporean citizen can astutely highlight that the sites of history are ‘false’, ‘fake’ and simply ‘no longer the same’ (Yeoh and Kong 2003:162-199). Instead, the worth of their identity and the anchors of their attachments to their homeland are grounded in

the temporality of the visual spectacles that are erected around them. In wonder and amazement, perhaps even with pride, they marvel and are captivated by the grandeur of their developing metropolis. They are proud that tourists find these sights captivating, and are elated when visitors commend on the pristine, effortless sophistication of the business hub that Singapore is. 'We are First World' the narrative of the Singapore metropolis seems to announce.

Yet, as temporal as Freud reasoned joy and bliss to be, this captivation and attraction to the intensity of the Singaporean Marina Bay spectacle is evanescent. The result of this indulgence in sensorium and the biopolitical is a constant need by the government to spruce and upgrade the landscape, each time adding more visual devices and broadening the theatricality of the landscape's presentation. Such a community's links to its land are in danger of being weakened and their conceptions of identity diluted because life is now consumed by the images of the grand Metropolis, an image that is increasingly homogenized in all parts of the world. Ultimately, this only contributes to the increasingly transient, malleable identities of the citizen who are well-groomed in the art of living in the city. These individuals could easily relocate and establish life in any other major city in the world, forming part of the worrying problem of 'brain drain' or a society of dependent individuals with no sense of ownership, essential problems in Singapore today. Hence, the fundamental point is that the 'strategy of attraction' via the aesthetics and sophistication of the Metropolis, will entice, but only temporarily, and the moorings of these citizens in the end, require more innovative measures to strengthen their place attachments to the nation.

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