

Singapore's  
super structures

# TOP OF THEIR GAME

When it comes to urban planning, the Little Red Dot keeps reaching for new heights, and striking architectural innovations in the last 10 years have led to a radically new — and spectacular — skyline



STORY BY JONATHAN EVANS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE YIK KEAT





Almost 10 years ago, a gleaming Ferris wheel looking across Marina Bay was hailed as the major new draw in a city with a penchant for at-all-costs aheadness and record-breaking. The world's tallest observation wheel at the time, the Singapore Flyer's presence felt premature despite its impressive size and slow-gliding elegance; a viewing point built before there was a view. Then in 2010, Marina Bay Sands, now one of Asia's most iconic buildings, was completed across the water, and what had superficially seemed like an extravagant folly suddenly made perfect sense.

Singapore is a meticulously planned art project in constant flux. It's a testament to the far-sighted vision of its town planners and architects that the functional urban sprawl I arrived in back in late 2007 looks, and feels, very different from the global city I inhabit a decade later. Back then, Singapore was essentially divided up into ethnic enclaves, heartland towns and airbrushed "hubs" of business, retail or leisure, connected not organically but merely physically by a transport network ceaselessly praised as "efficient".

Though past glories remained prominent — The Fullerton Hotel, rows of pastel-colored heritage shophouses — there was little in the way of modern destination architecture aside from the durian-shaped Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay, the "bioclimatic" National Library Building, with its solar-optimizing design, and the playful asymmetry of Lasalle College of the Arts. Skyscrapers and condos pierced the skyline but largely prized function over form, while the mixed-use blocks and imaginatively repurposed public spaces that are common today were rare. Hindered by regulations — such as its maximum height restriction of 280 meters — Singapore's enclosed spaces were less famous than its open ones, such as the now-UNESCO-garlanded Botanic Gardens.

But in recent years a government drive to nurture a design economy that would complement the city's impeccable credentials in production and industrialization began bearing fruit. Eight buildings completed in the last 10 years are particularly striking.



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### HOMES IN THE SKY

Rising over the CBD and Chinatown's low sprawl of mostly three- to four-storey shophouses, the 50-floor megastructure The Pinnacle@Duxton, completed in 2009, is still a staggering sight eight years on. Seven residential tower blocks configured in an "S" formation, with two wraparound bridges on the 26th and 50th levels, brought "gardens in the sky", complete with walking paths, play areas, seating zones and water features, to the doorsteps of residents. Architects Khoo Peng Beng and Belinda Huang's monolith instantly became a landmark and redefined the potential of high-density, eco-savvy public housing in Asia. For a

S\$5 ticket purchased at the ground-floor 7-Eleven, non-residents gain access to the 50th floor sky gardens and a sweeping view of the city below.

In densely urbanized Singapore, The Pinnacle's aerial parks also pointed a way forward for architects seeking creative space-saving solutions. "The idea of alternative areas in the sky meant that we could reclaim land in the air," recalls Khoo. "We knew it should have a strong identity that people could relate to and be proud of. So we invented this repetition method that used a small number of modules to create a diverse-looking façade."







## A CITY GETS ITS ICON

By early 2010 the groundwork for the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort, on a vast tract of reclaimed land, had long been evident from across the water, but its official opening in June that year heralded a watershed for the city. Israeli-Canadian-American architect Moshe Safdie's blueprint, implemented by global practice Aedas, planted a world-class integrated resort with an unfathomable 581,400m<sup>2</sup> of gross floor area in the Downtown Core. Combining casino, hotel, expo, shopping, dining, theater, MRT and museum facilities, it proved a key factor in Singapore's emergence as a tourist destination in its own right.

Marina Bay Sands is now a bona fide city icon, representing Singapore in

much the same way the Eiffel Tower represents Paris or the Empire State Building does New York City. Much of it has to do with the jaw-dropping feat of engineering that's integral to its curious design. Portuguese architect José Silva oversaw the development of MBS's pioneering Sands SkyPark while still in his late 20s, and recalls the unique challenges involved in finessing this cantilevered, submarine-like colossus that straddles the hotel's three towers, with their different gravitational demands. With a 160-meter-long infinity pool lining the SkyPark's edge, the margin for error was infinitesimal. "Everything seems so elegant and smooth," Silva says. "But

there's so much technical information for the detail to work. The infinity pool needs to be absolutely horizontal. There are 800 jacks below it."

For all its mechanical intricacy, MBS's curvilinear simplicity is one of its most appealing qualities. "The geometry sits really well with the marina; the SkyPark follows the curve, the towers suggest movement with the SkyPark's cantilever and there's a relationship with the façade that faces the city and the water," says Silva. "It's grounded in very solid architectural principles. It pushed the boundaries to the limit — the SkyPark particularly — and influenced a generation of architects in Asia and around the world."

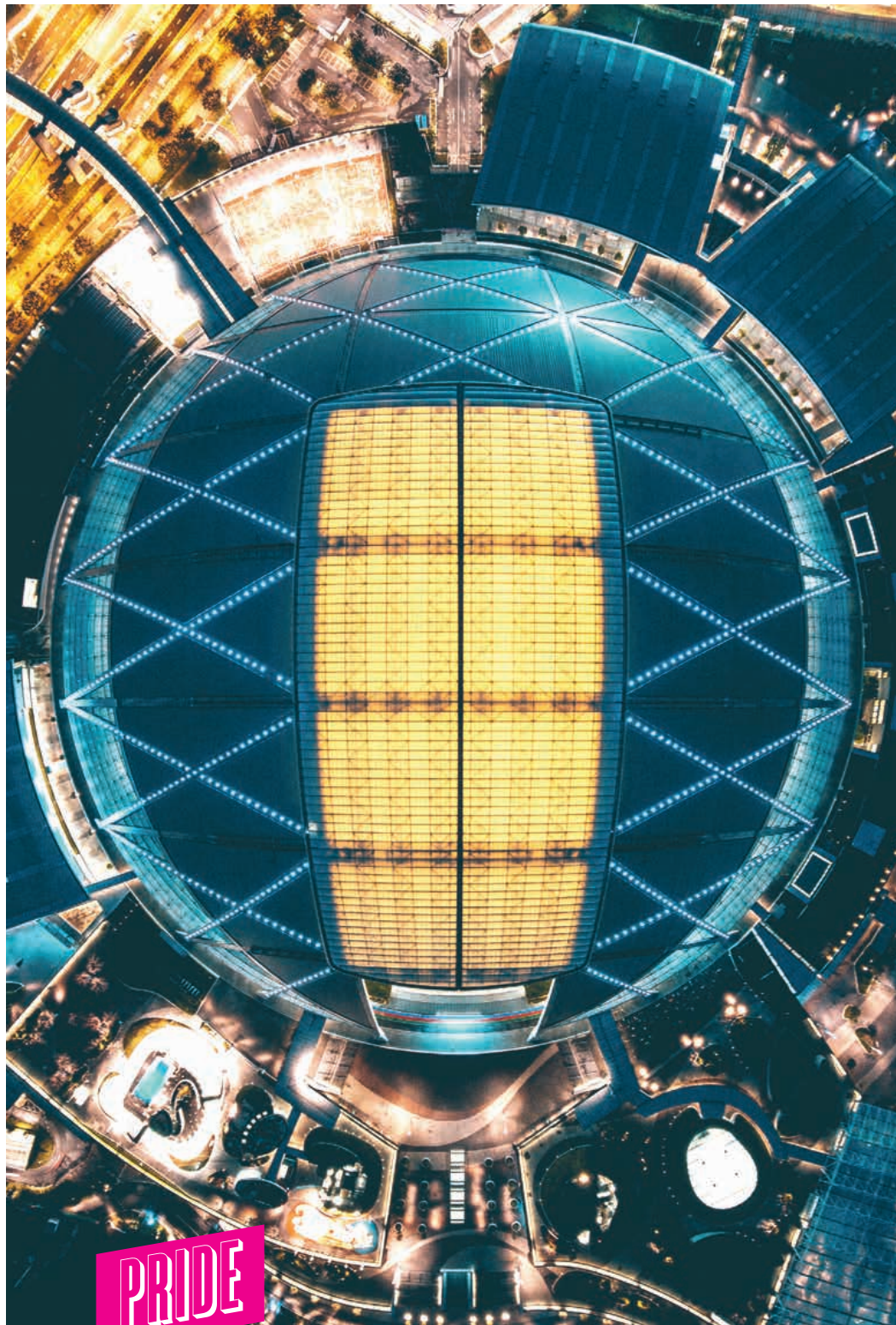


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IT TAKES  
A VILLAGE



Designed by German architect Ole Scheeren, the iconoclast behind the pixelated MahaNakhon tower in Bangkok, The Interlace made jaws drop on leafy Alexandra Road in 2013 with its free-spirited reimagining of suburban apartment living. Its 31 interlocking “bricks” in hexagonal formations, containing 1,040 units, coalesced into an extraordinary, jagged whole. When the audacious showpiece was named World Building of the Year in 2015, judges noted how the relatively low-impact, low-lying “vertical village” maximized space and vegetation.



PRIDE  
OF A  
NATION

The UFO-like National Stadium opened in 2014, brandishing best-in-class features (in this case, the world's largest dome with a retractable roof that opens or closes in just 25 minutes), in time to stage the 2015 SEA Games and — as if to put the seal on this time of unprecedented progress — a string of triumphant performances by the host country.





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### NATURE MEETS FUTURE

If MBS became the adopted home of Asia's free-spending jet set, another milestone opening in 2012 gave them a garden to roam around in, too. Situated behind the hotel, Gardens by the Bay reconceptualized the horticultural park experience across 101 hectares, incorporating two giant greenhouses (the Flower Dome and Cloud Forest), themed gardens and the still-dazzling Supertree Grove at its center, blending nature with technological ingenuity in spectacular style. The two free nightly shows of electric psychedelia transform the Supertrees in an ethereal light-and-sound spectacle fit for a blockbuster alien movie.



### COOL AND CONNECTED

Aedas's Star Vista in suburban Buona Vista, Singapore's first naturally cooled mall, is a short MRT ride from downtown. The oddly shaped mall and performance hall — which looks different from every angle — was unveiled in September 2012.

The Star Vista's open roof brought natural wind flow, while a 200-seat amphitheater and water feature below allowed cool breezes to flow through the building. The upper levels of the development also house the Star Performing Arts Centre, a 5,000-capacity venue designed to elicit first-class acoustics. Usher, Tony Bennett and Elton John (in an uninterrupted, two-hour extravaganza) are just some of the vocal greats who have performed here.

*Star Wars* geeks, a tip: this high-tech part of Singapore is also home to the Sandcrawler, Lucasfilm Animation's state-of-the-art headquarters.



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## BRINGING A BIT OF BUZZ

And still, the metamorphosis goes on. Ole Scheeren was once again at the helm for DUO — the most ambitious recent project to grace the architectural hotchpotch of Bugis, better known for low-rise malls and bazaars.

By day, the concave silver twin towers — bringing together offices, high-end apartments and a retail plaza above a landscaped “civic nucleus” at street level — evoke the form of a couple dancing. By night, DUO’s illuminated hexagons across a dramatically darkened exterior call to mind electric beehives, bringing an imposing focal point and connectivity to a nondescript patch straddling the commercial hub of Bugis and the heritage district of Kampong Glam.

In a city that in the last decade has also courted world-renowned talent such as the late Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster — with his South Beach hotel and residential project across the road from the Raffles Hotel — it’s clear the once staid approach to building design has turned a corner for good. “Singapore is definitely open to modern architecture,” says José Silva. “It is proud to be avant-garde in its building approach. There’s a lot of investment and a culture of having international names.” For those who’ve not stopped by, or not visited for many years, there’s never been a better time to admire the architectural revolution that’s swept this truly 21st-century city. **S**

## A HOME FOR URBAN GARDENS

The latest landmark in Tanjong Pagar came courtesy of WOHA. Oasia Hotel Downtown’s color scheme and rocket-like design were already distinctive — copper cladding running from the base to the dome-like roof, punctuated by square openings allowing cross-ventilation — but its exterior vegetation meant the façade would be a continuous work in progress. An infinity pool flanked by palms on the top floor completed the effect: nothing less than a vertical tropical garden in the heart of the CBD.



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