

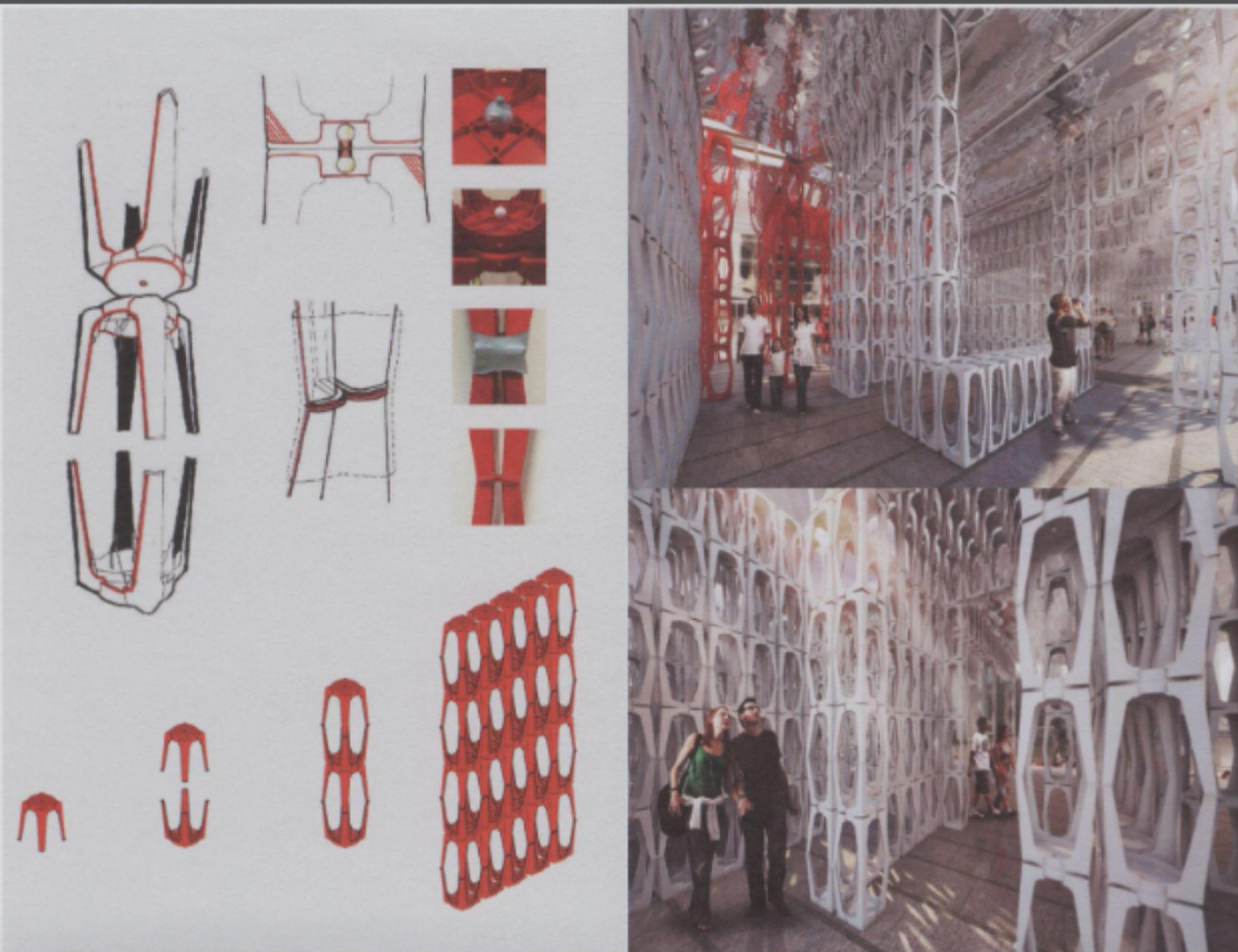
In for the Long Haul

The Singapore Sports Hub, its Public, the Spectacle and the Body

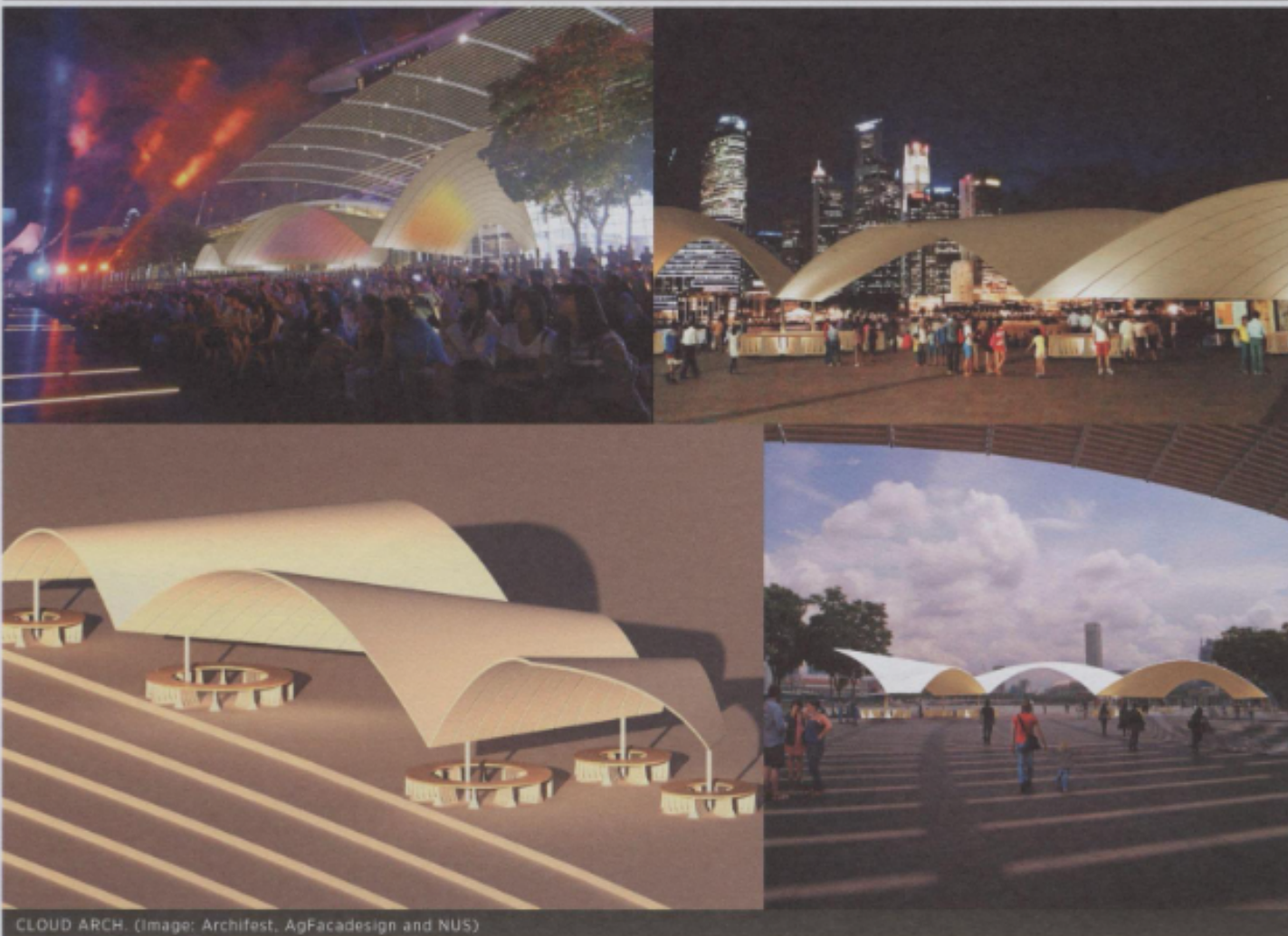
Text by Lilian Chee

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Designed by Arup Associates and DP Architects, the Singapore Sports Hub is a sporting facility integrated with a retail mall, the Singapore Sports Museum, and the Sports Hub Library. *Lilian Chee* ponders the monument's impact on the psyche of our nation.



FUGUE 1357. (Image: Archifest and HCF and Associates)



CLOUD ARCH. (Image: Archifest, AgFacadesign and NUS)

PROJECT CREDITS

Master Plan: DP Architects + Arup + AECOM

Architecture | Sports Venues: Arup Associates + DP Architects

Architecture | Office, Retail, Leisure: DP Architects

Engineering: Arup

Landscape: AECOM

The contest between the monument and the body is a recurring theme. It is essentially the story of architecture told through the user, the occupant, or the people who work and live in these architectures.

The middle months of 2014 have seen a frenzy of news and media coverage on Singapore's new Sports Hub, the largest public-private partnership known.¹ This new state icon promises to deliver the goods, striving as it were, to present itself anew every single day, for the next twenty-five years.² Built on the site of the old National Stadium (demolished in 2010), replete with the latter's socio-historical memories of National Day parades and the home team's football fans' unmistakable "Kallang roar," the outward premise of, and brief for, this instant monument are straightforward—an arena for world-class sporting activity, and a place where the populace may be enticed to engage sport as leisure.

Answering these calls, there are several landmarks already sprouting on this not-so-large site: The new state-of-the-art National Stadium with a moveable roof (spanning 310 metres, it is also the largest and lightest free-spanning dome structure in the world) and retractable seating (completely reconfigurable within 48 hours) that makes this stadium the first in the world to be able to host football, cricket, rugby, and athletics in the same venue. Each of its 55,000 seats is air-cooled, affording the spectator an experience both comfortable and sustainable. The OCBC Aquatic Centre, which houses three pools for competition, training, and diving, and relies predominantly on natural daylight.

The Water Sports Centre facing the Kallang Basin, which combines elite training and supports both professional and amateur racing programmes. The indoor OCBC Arena comprising six halls on two storeys, with flexibly-sized venues and a sustainable lighting and ventilation system for changing occupancy and activities. And as witness to its new neighbours, the Singapore Indoor Stadium (Kenzo Tange, 1985) whose distinctive conical sloping roofscape is now in dialogue with the new National Stadium's openable bowl.

The Sports Hub is an endeavour to create a facility on par with any Olympic sporting venue but without the pressure or premise of hosting one, a trait not inconsistent with the Singaporean obsession for being unsurpassed in any national undertaking. Yet, because the ambition was not just to raise the bar of elite sport alone but to simultaneously transform an entire nation into one of naturally inclined sportspersons, the strategy was never just to design a world-class sports venue and icon. Thus, the extended brief of embracing the people without the catalyst of a world event like the Olympics by creating an architecture that performs optimally as social condenser and sporting machine, becomes the challenge of the entire enterprise. The question being—how do you get the crowds to come, and then to come back, again and again?

1
The 20,000-square-metre roof will be clad in a multi-layer ETFE pillow and incorporated with LED lights, making it one of the largest addressable LED screens in the world (Image: DP Architects).

2, 3, 4
The stadium is first in the world to be able to host football, cricket, rugby, and athletics in the same venue. (Photo: Daniel Swee | Visual Peak)

The ancillary facilities of this programmatically and aspirationally complex architecture are, more or less, predictable. Communal hard courts, skate parks, water play areas, a bioswale park, and the obligatory shopping mall, are offered together with a sports-themed library and museum. However, in addition to these programmed spaces, the Sports Hub has at least four other main "attractions"—the Stadium Riverside Walk, which is a 250-metre-long unobstructed waterfront setting; the one-kilometre public connector called the Sports Promenade, which encircles the outer perimeter of the National Stadium; the Stadium Roar, a 5,000-square-metre open space leading directly into the main entrance of the National Stadium; and the OCBC Square, a 16-metre-high sheltered plaza opening directly towards the Kallang Basin and a network of routes to the other facilities of the Sports Hub. The last four areas are essentially "public," "open" spaces, singularly named perhaps because these constitute substantial floor area, but not tightly programmed, and not (yet) over managed. These constitute part of the two kilometre "social plinth"—a contiguous landscape connected on three levels that provides for "a mixture of community and other uses at human scale."³ These are still free-for-all spaces, the kind where different groups of people might congregate on any given day—for instance, school groups, tourists, skateboarders, joggers, young mothers and their charges, the members of a running club, or domestic helpers.

Given the competing requirements for this architectural scheme—catering for the specialist but not leaving out the amateurs, planned and loosely planned, sporting cathedral and shopping mall rolled up in one, an architectural commentary of the Sports Hub cannot limit itself to deciphering one dominant narrative, which might pull all these disparate threads together. One immediately contentious argument

might be to discuss the responsibility of this building towards its "public" or the "community." Certainly, there are enough spaces here—both programmed and un-programmed—which have considered this largely unknown quantity. In fact, the Sports Hub continues to perpetuate affections for, what Dora Jones observed, the architecture of the twentieth century tended to favour—technology and the betterment of the masses.⁴ However, as much as the Sports Hub appears to be a coherently visualised network for sport and leisure, "the conditions of (its) presentation"—the proximity of hard-nosed sport training with mindless shopping, the juxtaposition of uncompromising spaces for specialist events and unscripted interstitial spaces for public grazing, the connection of the Sports Hub (a site once divorced from its immediate contexts, an island on an island) to its adjacent surroundings may prove more risqué than salubrious, for instance the healthy, untainted body brought in sharp contrast to the deviant bodies (arguably the outcome of another form of "leisure") found in the nearby red-light district of Geylang—these unlikely pairings, not quite binaries, more like strange bed-partners with possibilities of overflow, cross-contamination or cross-fertilisation, require further contemplation.⁵ At what point does the public need to be reined in? Will this architecture, with its earnest intentions to connect and not separate, allow for such containment when it is needed? The Sports Hub is at the verge of bringing its public into new territory. These are new coordinates of the public sphere, not previously tested.

Then there is the question of spectacularity. Everyone has, and is entitled to have, an opinion of this building. One cannot avoid it. For example, travelling down the Pan Island Expressway towards the eastern part of Singapore, amidst the monotony of row upon row of public housing, nondescript private apartments, and functionalist

5
The Sports Hub boasts individually air-cooled seating and the lightest steel roof of its kind. (Photo: Daniel Swee | Visual Peak)

6
The OCBC Aquatic Centre houses three pools and relies predominantly on natural daylight. (Photo: Daniel Swee | Visual Peak)



flatted factories, one suddenly chanced upon a gaping red hole in the landscape, as the first glimpse of the National Stadium comes unannounced and unexpected, its great roof opened, inciting response. The encounter is sudden and momentous. Seeing this red-based bowl peeking through its immense roof (convertible into one of the largest media screens in the world) while travelling at 80km/h is an assault on the senses—one has no choice but to subscribe either to a wave of nationalistic fervour or personal skepticism. Very soon, as the Sports Hub is marketed and sold as a destination, it will enter more newspapers, magazines (as it is doing here and has done even before its foundation was laid), textbooks, student essays, everyday conversation, list of places to go, list of tourist attractions, be seen in films, watched on television, talked about in boardrooms and classrooms, and slowly saturate the national psyche. Many of the fact sheets and articles produced thus far of the Sports Hub have focused on quantity—reiterating the superlative aspects of this architecture through its unimaginable feat of logistics, materials, skills, man-hours, techniques, collaborations and innovations.

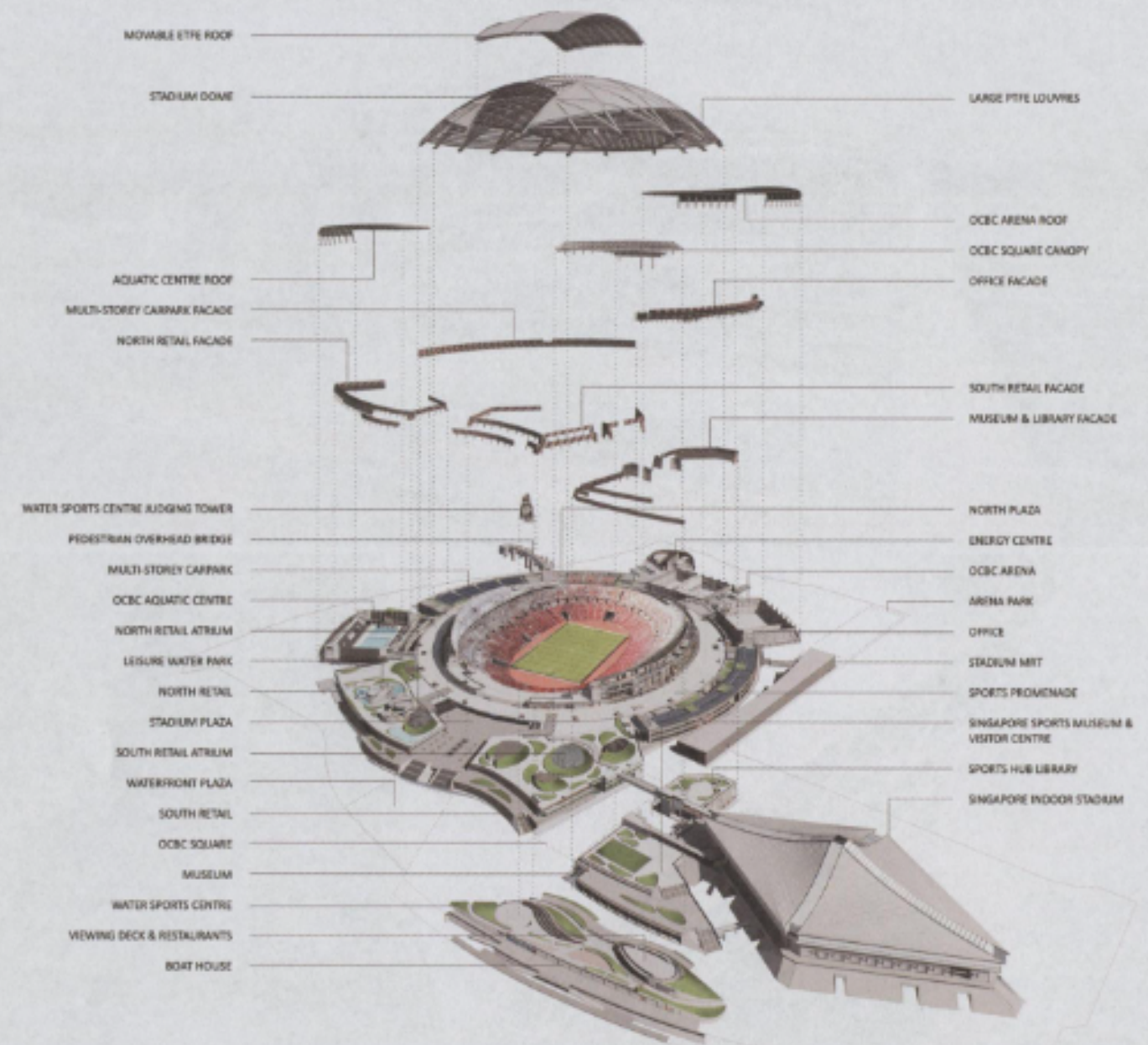
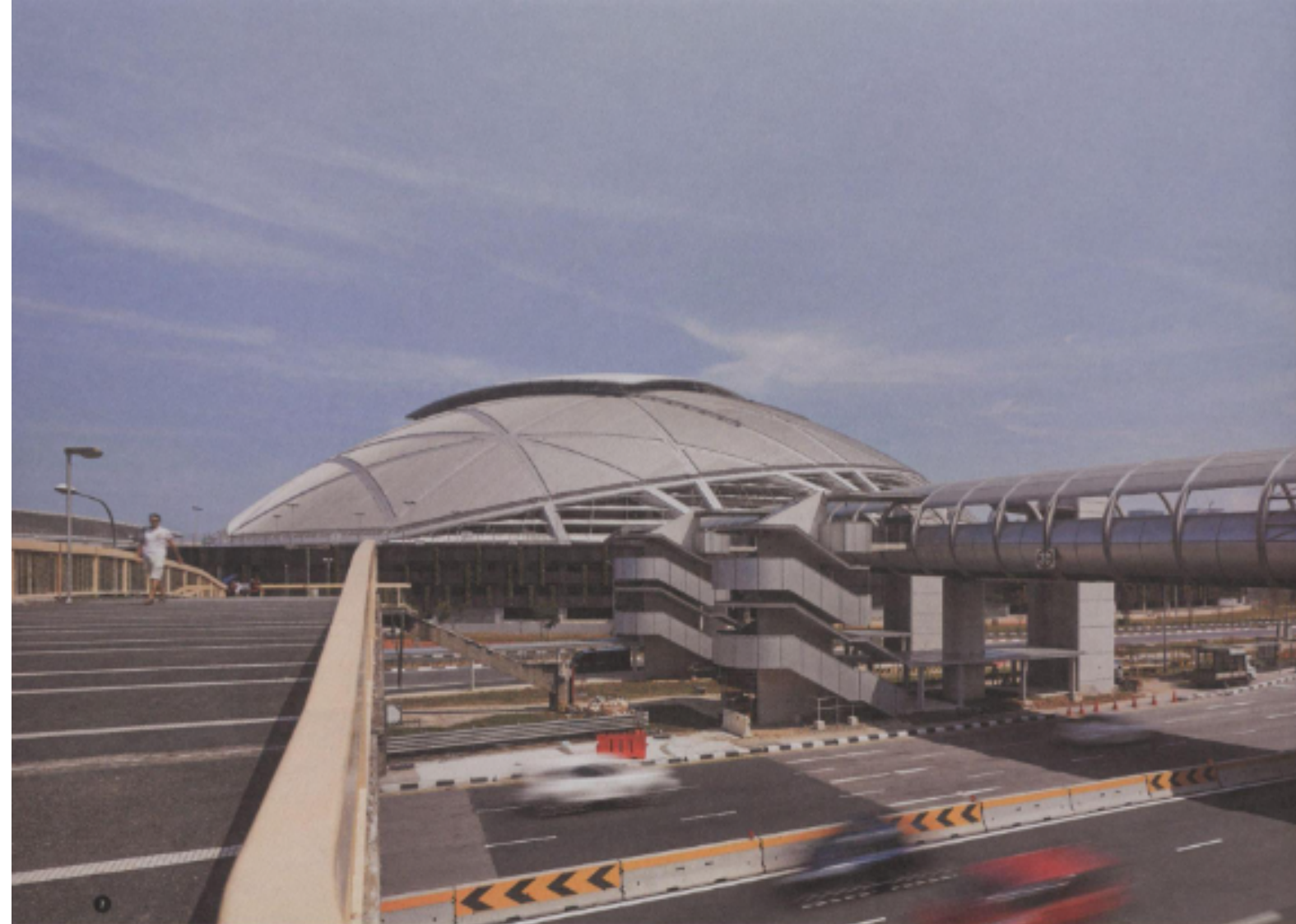
In this sense, the Sports Hub has already met tremendous success in its capacity as a “high-bandwidth medium,” what Mark Wigley writes as the basic premise for the architectural spectacle, which must involve a discussion about “...quantity: the escalating size of the images, audience, flow, density, frequency, resolution, colours, channels, bits, feeds, frames-per-second, and so on.”⁶ Nevertheless Wigley reminds us that this obsession for quantity is not contemporary:

“To take the most obvious examples, the medieval cathedral was a dominating, spectacular, three-dimensional image system, and the revered Parthenon called attention to itself on the Acropolis above the city by posing in its coat of

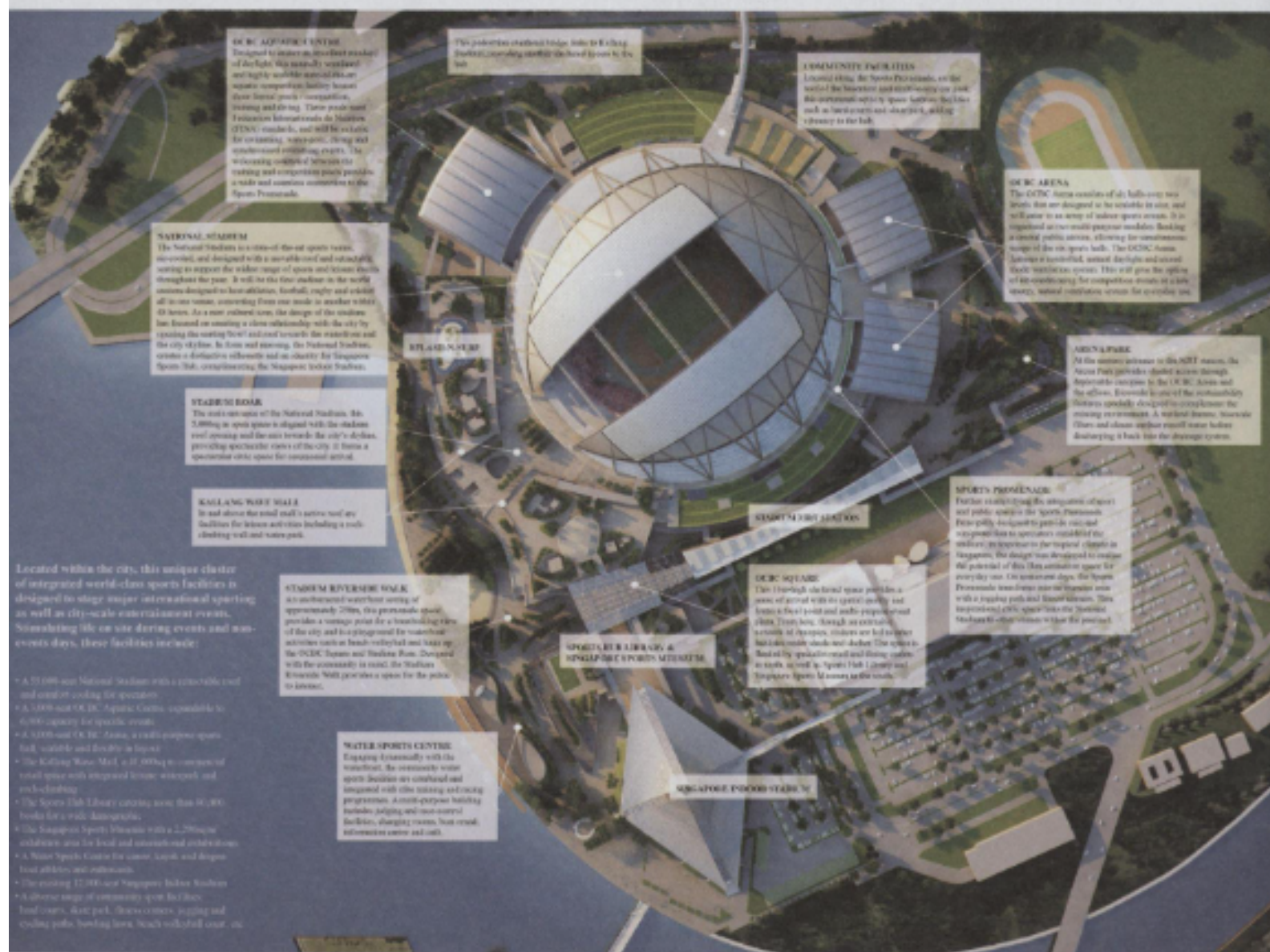
brightly coloured paint packaging a 40-foot-tall gold and ivory statue of Athena. These buildings were precisely designed to support multi-media spectacles through a collaborating array of banners, clothing, texts, rituals, music, speeches, dance, insignia, furniture, processions, animals, food, poetry, and smells.”⁷

Despite the huge gap in time and context, there is an uncanny convergence in presentation, purpose, and effect between what is taking place in the Sports Hub today and the events occurring in the ancient monuments iterated here by Wigley. In the upcoming sporting meetings, rock concerts, New Year’s Day celebrations, and National Day Parades, similar inventories of processions, sounds, smells, and experiences will unravel on this site.

Yet, there is a difference here in that today, almost anything—whether excessive, minimalist, monumental, or tiny—can achieve “high-bandwidth” simply by standing out from the crowd. And this comment is not made in respect merely to a building’s geometry, its form, scale, or materials, but rather what it manages to capture in its architectural drift net, its ability to include, sense, and bring up what is often peripheral, overlooked, the “almost nothing” which could also be the very basis of radical transformation and change.⁸ In the case of the Sports Hub, the “almost nothing” might be the audacity (or naivety) of connecting the sporting arena to the public, or exposing it to the people of Singapore, making it, as its original masterplan visually described, a place into which all the “green lines” of the city state’s park connectors would eventually flow. Instead of reading this plan in its single dimension or use the “green” sustainability argument to counter debates over the Sports Hub’s potentially superficial spectacularity, the ambition to network beyond itself reveals something else—the edges of this site “complicated by habitually



EXPLODED AXONOMETRIC OF THE SPORTS HUB SHOWING MAIN COMPONENTS. (IMAGE: DP ARCHITECTS)



SPORTS HUB FACT SHEET. (IMAGE: SINGAPORE SPORT HUB DESIGN TEAM)

unseen and actively hidden connectivities that make (the architectural spectacle) available to thought in a new way."⁶

Where all the "green lines" flow into might conjure another kind of landscape. A reservoir of bodies—active, inactive, disabled, ageing, deviant, patriotic, rebel, foreign, exilic, migrant, immigrant—may then descend upon this place transforming a predictable and rooted geography into an intensely mobile and vibrant space. This is one unexpected (and possibly ironic) outcome of noble ambitions to embrace the whole of this cosmopolitan nation. There could be many others. The contest between the monument and the body is a recurring theme. It is essentially the story of architecture told through the user, the occupant, or the people who work and live in these architectures. One is reminded of another tale where bodies interfere with architectural purity. Entry to the opulent casinos at the Marina Bay Sands Resort in downtown Singapore is limited to Singaporeans and its permanent residents who must pay a daily levy to gamble (and so, avoid the ills of gambling debt and insatiable habit), but open without charge to foreigners who may freely enter and use these facilities once they prove non-permanent residence status on these shores. The unlikely outcome is that every now and then, one finds the odd foreign construction worker sleeping rough on the granite-cladded sidewalks of these money cathedrals, inebriated, exhausted and out of cash, too poor even to take a ride back to the workers' hostels by public transport. The disparity of wealth and poverty is here displayed too starkly: the body sully architecture's shiny promise of a better future.

But the Sports Hub is a different kind of place. It is non-exclusive—everyone can enter, and by implication, it signals a wholesome space, fit for all, good for any body. Here, for the first time, one may walk along the waterfront, not accosted

by the need to buy something just to be by the water's edge. There is a promise of swimming, running, and playing alongside the best in Singapore and in the world. Here, an egalitarian view of the world and our right of place in it, are still for the time being, in focus. ■

- 1 The main equity shareholders and partners of the Singapore Sports Hub consortium are InfraRed Capital Partners (major equity partner), Dragages Singapore (equity partner, Design & Build contractor), Global Spectrum Asia (equity partner, venue operator), and DTZ (equity partner, facility manager).
- 2 Comment made by Oon Jin Teck, CEO of Sports Hub Pte Ltd, in "National Stadium impresses with Design," in ActiveSG, accessed July 9, 2014, <http://www.myactivesg.com/news/2014/6/national-stadium-impresses-with-design>.
- 3 Singapore Sports Hub: Project Design Statement, provided by DP Architects, the Singapore firm in charge of the overall masterplan for the scheme. Approximately 39 percent of the overall space is given over to public outdoor components (remaining 51 percent for sporting facilities and 10 percent for retail).
- 4 Dora Jones, "Community," in Crib Sheets, Sylvia Lavin, Helene Furjan and Penelope Dean, eds. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005), 175.
- 5 For a cogent argument on the difference of the making of public spaces in Asia, see Jane M. Jacobs, "Re-making Public Space Through and in Asia," in *Public Space in Urban Asia*, William Lim, Sharon Siddique and Tan Dan Feng, eds. (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2014), 186-9.
- 6 Mark Wigley, "Toward a History of Quantity," in *Architecture Between Spectacle and Use*, ed. Anthony Vidler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 155.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See Ibid., 162.
- 9 Mark Dorrian, "'The Way the World Sees London': Thoughts on a Millennial Urban Spectacle," in *Architecture Between Spectacle and Use*, 56.

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The Sports Hub has four main "attractions" — the Stadium Riverside Walk; the Sports Promenade; the Stadium Roar; and the OCBC Square. (Photo: Daniel Sweet | Visual Peak)