

***Q: Public art creates tension between binary relationships of the creator/viewer, inside/outside, production/exhibition, subject/object, place/non-place etc. Defining your own choice of museum in the Singapore context, discuss how the design and consumption of this institution has been challenged.***

Like many contemporary museums worldwide, ArtScience Museum in Marina Bay experiences challenge in responding to its own place. As a subsidiary institution of the nearby Marina Bay Sands integrated resort, one of the world's most expensive casino property, the museum is caught in a dilemma to balance between the traditional fine arts culture with the overwhelming commercialized urban space.<sup>1</sup> This conflict is then manifested as 'limits' to the consumption of the museum.<sup>2</sup> The primary role of a museum to preserve and exhibit works of important social meanings has been challenged. On the other hand, in a bigger picture, the boundary of a museum is pushed beyond the enclosed institution in the Marina Bay area, extending to the urban landscape of the newly reclaimed land.

Being an island state with limited land, in order to sustain long-term growth, Singapore has reclaimed 70 square kilometers of land, or 20% of its original size, since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The existing marina bay site was reclaimed from the 1970s. In the reclamation process, places such as Telok Ayer Basin were removed from the map.<sup>4</sup> It was a fresh beginning for the city center, without any public preconception. Coupled with its geographical inaccessibility from the old downtown, the public could hardly connect to the site. In addition to this, spectacles such as casinos, integrated resorts are almost unprecedented and foreign in the local context. As a result, the entire Marina Bay area is a reinvention of a new city center, a result of tabula rasa. As Marc Auge's states, 'A place which cannot be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, will be a non-place'.<sup>5</sup> Here, the public struggles to associate with their prior knowledge and experience, beyond their 'fleeting moments of pleasure'. Therefore, to the public, it is hard to draw a line between locality and eclectic transplantation, in order to create a sense of belonging.

To promote this new city center, the government specifically mandated the architect of Marina Bay Sands, Moshe Safdie, and his firm, to build a 'cultural icon'.<sup>6</sup> Dubbed as the 'welcoming hand of Singapore', the architecture of ArtScience Museum delivers as a prestigious local icon.<sup>7</sup> Moshe Safdie once declared, 'I want visitors to be excited by the architecture and to make them think of it'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the complexity in the architecture of the museum, and its engineering, do justify to its iconicity. Even many local architects recognize the museum as a new spectacular icon in Marina Bay Area. As one of them, Forum Architects' founding director, Tan Kok Hian, describes it as 'quaint shapes blooming upwards and defying gravity'.<sup>9</sup> However, such iconic buildings typically require more capital investment which only the giants in the industry, such as its developer Las Vegas Sands, can seem to afford. Therefore, the specular architecture of the museum becomes a sign of status for its owner. As a result, the museum simply falls into the 'recurring criticism' that modern museums serve 'institutional and architect's ambition', rather than serving the exhibits or the visitors.<sup>10</sup>

Together with institution ambition, the commodity culture of the site shifted the focus of museum design to the design of marketing. Glamorous publicity words such as '*the premium museum destination*' and '*the most renowned collections in the world*' not only introduce hierarchy to public art, but impose preconception knowledge on the spectators.<sup>11</sup> This trend of aggressive self-branding is not uncommon on an international scale over the past few decades. At the start of the millennium, many museum projects, including the New Art Gallery in Walsall, were built in England, as a result of lottery-funded architectural patronage.<sup>12</sup> Besides serving its primary function as a museum or arts center, the New Art Gallery in Walsall was designated as a new visitor attraction, an iconic landmark for the town, while generating new sources of income.<sup>13</sup>

*'But the New Art Gallery in Walsall comes closer than any new cultural landmark built in Britain for years... both extraordinary and extraordinarily good... experience art? Not in my book... an architecture indulgence... to experience an impressive building...'*<sup>14</sup>

The statements were taken from the introductory narrative when the museum first opened. A clear similarity of aggressive self-branding can be observed in both museums. The role of the museums as institutions to exhibit, preserve or educate no longer tops the priority list, but profit and reputation.

In addition to self-branding, the strong monolithic architectural language of the museum causes a more direct impact that outshines its exhibits. What matters are the spectacles such as 'rainwater harvesting', 'museum floating on a reflecting pond' etc.<sup>15</sup> The irony is that being the first museum in the world combining art and science, the museum has little to celebrate about either field, but the grand opening of a luxurious entertainment destination. More emphasized is its dual role of being an exquisite piece of sculpture from the outside, rather than its interior spatial quality. Simply put, the museum works fine without any exhibits. In fact, the museum does not have any permanent major exhibits, but relying on a perpetual collaboration with four exhibitions from world-renowned museum.

Sophia Psarra rightly highlights the importance of architecture to 'give objects a context' in our collective memory.<sup>16</sup> However, ArtScience Museum, as a place for the exhibits, provides an invariant backdrop that limits the space. Like Robert Morris negates the idea of 'blank form' in the subject's field of perception, the layout of a museum affects the spatial quality of the entire exhibition.<sup>17</sup> In ArtScience Museum, all gallery spaces are enclosed with an opening towards the atrium where the rain harvesting spectacle takes place. This not only limits the 'site' for the exhibits, but diverts the spectators' attention to the architecture of the museum, away from the exhibits.

Apart from the physical and spatial limits, there is an evident disjuncture between design and consumption of the programs inside ArtScience Museum. Known as the world's very first art and science museum, the institution promotes 'Curiosity, Inspiration and Expression'.<sup>18</sup> While 'A Journey through Creativity' may sound exciting, it is difficult to receive this 'journey' from the spectators point of view when the subject, the public, becomes the object of the designer. For example, the museum allows the visitors to 'create' digital postcards as an expression of self-discovery and inspiration. However, the so-called 'process of creativity' is generated from a combination of a fixed prefabricated database. Therefore, there is no true originality and the public is given a false sense of ownership and participation. This is not necessary the case for all public art projects. As a group of public art practitioners, *muf* did various projects which allow local communities to participate with their own skills. For example, in their

project 'Pleasure Garden of the Utilities', local porcelain workers were invited in the making of bench tops.<sup>19</sup> Therefore the public could take real ownership of the design, because they could actively process based on their prior knowledge. This is clearly missing in ArtScience Museum. The public are not free to express what they really consume after their journey in the museum.

Thus instead of focusing to serve the primary roles of a museum, the need to attract public attention was one of the main driving forces behind the museum design. Being an entertainment destination, a disposable culture seems necessary, like how the exhibits are constantly changing and being replaced with the latest ones. Here, there are two 'cultural limits'.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, as discussed hereinbefore, the consumerism culture of the site limits the exhibition spatial quality. Second, with a constant influx of 'foreign' exhibits introduces a challenge to rearrange this museum space. The idea of 'Space is a practiced place'<sup>21</sup> suggests that the same place can possess different spatial qualities with the element of time and mobility. Besides the need to reconstruct a space for a new exhibition, this creates an interesting coexistence between different spaces within the same place, the museum. Since the museum is mainly hosting tour exhibitions from museums across the world, placing them in the same place but exhibiting different spatial experience is a complex process. In other words, the museum struggles with establishing its own individuality. The museum proudly brands itself as one of a kind in the world, being the one and only museum combining art and science. Yet, its individuality is dependent upon constantly combining different exhibits from different museums around the world.

In a broader sense, the ArtScience museum is just another artifact in the entire Marina Bay 'museum'. Alongside with ArtScience Museum and Marina Bay Sands, there are many other architectural spectacles on display, such as Esplanade, Bayfront bridge, Singapore Flyer and Marina Barrage. Together, they were intentionally put on display, carefully curated, to both locals and international visitors. Despite being developed by different institutions, all mega projects in Marina Bay were cautiously realized under a common vision of master planning by governmental bodies such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). *'Our city's most exciting and ambitious urban project, a major business and financial hub in Asia, Marina Bay is envisioned to be a Garden City*

*by the Bay, a 24/7 destination for ... exciting array of opportunities...new lifestyle... and a distinctive environment...*<sup>21</sup> The lines were taken from local newspapers that allow us to see a similar kind of ambition in self-branding to ArtScience Museum and the New Art Gallery in Walsall. Besides, Marina Bay project is developed in phases over a 10-15 year period.<sup>22</sup> Thus every progress is under careful supervision. Redevelopment of Marina Bay is far from random collections of architectural pieces.

Certainly, the mere action of exhibition is not enough to legitimize Marina Bay as a museum. The significance of these architectural exhibits in Marina Bay brings it closer to the notion of a museum. Individually, each project plays an important in shaping the urban fabric of Singapore. For example, the opening of the Esplanade brought Singapore one step closer to become an internationally renowned performing arts center; and the Singapore Flyer is the tallest Ferris Wheel in the world till date. Collectively, these architectural works witnessed the growth of a new city center. With these iconic exhibits on permanent display, Marina Bay performs the role of a museum to collect and preserve memories in this urban redevelopment and expansion project.

In addition to having different iconic architectural projects on display, the master planner of Marina Bay is clearly aware of the importance of curatorship. The number of visitors measures the success of a museum.<sup>23</sup> Structuring their spatial experience has a huge impact on the effectiveness of the Marina Bay museum. The Waterfront Promenade at Marina Bay was designed to fulfill both a 'route structure' that facilitates the encounter between displays and visitors; and the 'spatial mechanism' that aid orientation to see the whole picture of a museum.<sup>24</sup> Stretching over up to 3.5km, the promenade master plan aims to 'create a continuous route along the waterfront and links up the necklace of attractions' at Marina Bay.<sup>25</sup> Besides serving spatial accessibility, the promenade provides 'a panoramic view' of the Marina Bay museum, 'set by the water's edge and the signature city skyline as a backdrop.'<sup>26</sup> Just like how the layout of a museum enhances visitor experience, the Waterfront Promenade aims to work in a similar way. In fact, the design of Marina Bay 'produces a public for art', whereby the idea of 'promenading'- walking as performance and display' becomes the focus of museum design, or even urban design.<sup>27</sup> This

new architectural typology is common in many other museums. For example, the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern preserves the massive verticality intact for public interaction, while leaving exhibition spaces peripheral.<sup>28</sup> The idea of strolling while engaging in staging events at the Waterfront Promenade can be compared with a nineteenth-century Parisian arcade. Here, public performances, as exhibitions, spilled out into the access path.

Under the surface of urban development of the Marina Bay area, there is a deeper construction of social monument in progress. The array of so many iconic buildings is a result of destination branding to the global audience. As Singapore's effort to portray Marina Bay as a top-notch tourist and business destination, a myriad of iconic architecture works could be an easy way to bring out the sense of 'uniqueness' which the government has emphasized on all tourism campaigns. More importantly, besides a need for icons on the blank reclaimed land, there is a more profound social search for identity. It is almost expected that debates flare up on iconicity after every completion of a mega project. The Esplanade as durians... and Marina Bay Sands, including ArtScience Museum, is just the latest topic. In addition, future projects such as 'Gardens by the Bay' will be gradually unveiled, refreshing the public perception, as well as the urban scape of Marina Bay. There are almost too many icons for Marina Bay to be iconic. As Daniel Buren states, *'Art is not the prophecy of a free society. Freedom in art is the luxury/privilege of a repressive society.'*<sup>29</sup> Therefore art almost always expresses and reflects what is the hidden or the missing part in its social context, instead of wearing the obvious. In this case, the architecture exhibits in Marina Bay reveals the need for a social identity.

Although museums still serve their principal function as vessels and media to display and preserve art works and exhibits in our collective memory, they are always being tagged with additional values in different situations. Limitations from the site, both physical and contextual, affect not only the design of the museum, but its intricate interaction with the public. A museum space can only be effective when the public actually practice it and take ownership. Besides being an asylum for artifacts, museums reflect the need for social monument. While presenting historical exhibits, museums are in the very process of history

making. The effectiveness of the Marina Bay museum can only be evaluated in the years to come.

## Notes

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