

November 18, 2011 9:55 pm

Garden state



By Edwin Heathcote

Seductively curvaceous greenhouses and eccentric ‘Supertrees’ are transforming Singapore



The curvaceous greenhouses

It may sound odd but since the 1960s Singapore has been slowly remaking itself as a garden city. Tiny, dense, hyper-urban and constantly clawing back land from the sea to accommodate its booming centre, the city-state has nevertheless seen green tentacles creeping into every corner, every central reservation, every sliver of leftover sidewalk. Plants here thrive in the year-round tropical climate and grow in the most obscure places. The effect is impressive: a skyscraper city framed by palms and blooming bougainvilleas.

But no matter how green the city is becoming, it has always been defined more by its architecture than its horticulture. Most recently, Marina Bay Sands, an unimaginably vast casino and hotel complex, has become the city's *de facto* symbol. Desperate not to loose out to the urban hubs emerging in the Middle and Far East, Singapore set out to attract tourists by building the most expensive hotel the world has ever seen. At a cost of more than \$5bn, it surpasses even the dripping gold of the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi.

The hotel is built on reclaimed land, across the bay from the city's Central Business District, and operated by the Las Vegas Sands Corporation. At 57-storeys high and with 2,561 guest-rooms, the structure straddles the city like a colossus. Singaporeans are discouraged from visiting by a S\$100 (£49) levy on entrance; tourists can enter for free. Despite this, the casino, along with another in nearby Sentosa, is set to surpass the whole

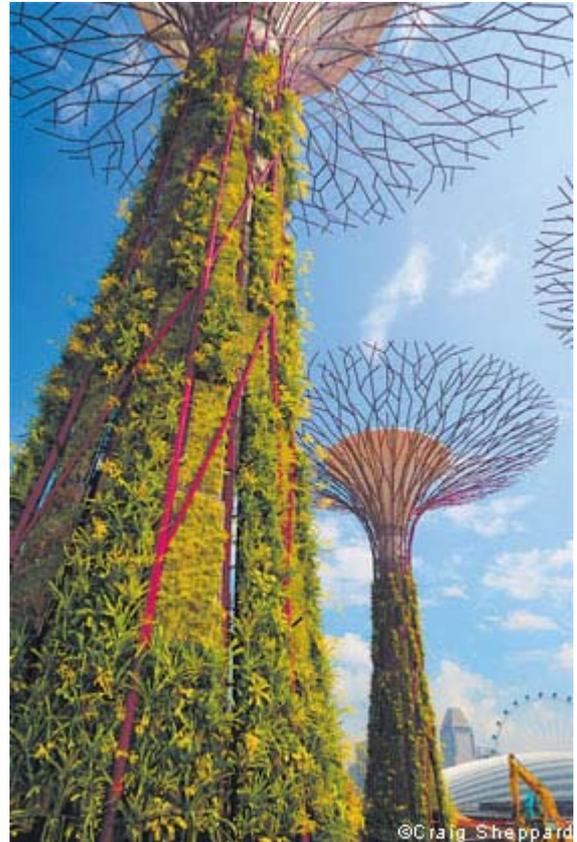
of Vegas in revenue (though not Macao, which is in another league). Singapore – puritanical and strait-laced, with its abiding acceptance of law and order and its aversion to chewing gum – finds itself in an uncomfortable position: its most iconic building, the one which symbolises its skyline like no other, is its “IR”, or “Integrated Resort” (they can’t quite bear to call it a casino). And apart from its surfboard-shaped roof garden, it isn’t very green at all.

The city’s solution has been to counterbalance the casino by constructing a huge green Eden, the Gardens by the Bay project, which is due for completion next summer. Singapore’s answer to New York’s Central Park, the gardens comprise a green corona which will encircle the bay to create a ring of almost continuous green space at the centre of the expanded city, transplanting its heart from the crowded colonial centre with its familiar landmarks (Raffles, the old post office, now the Fullerton Hotel and the rest) to a new CBD. It has realised that towers, the ubiquitous signifier of commercial modernity, are not enough to make it distinctive, but this garden certainly is.

Stand on top of the Integrated Resort (the best thing about it – you can’t see it from its own roof), look down and what catches your eye is not the city’s dense matrix of towers but a pair of seductively curvaceous greenhouses and a forest of diaphanous steel mushrooms. To a northern European, there is something desperately counterintuitive about building a greenhouse in the tropics but here they’ve been employed to introduce non-native species in a theatrical burst of colour largely absent from the rainforest greens of local vegetation. The structures are stunning. Designed by Wilkinson Eyre, an international architecture firm based in London, they look much like the inheritors of that very British tradition of glass houses which led to Crystal Palace and Kew’s Palm House.

Vast roofs stretch into the distance with the lightness of a spider’s web. The larger, flatter greenhouse, the Flower Dome – open temporarily this weekend to host the World Orchid Festival – covers nearly 200,000 sq m, rises to 38m and creates an artificial world which resembles the 1960s sci-fi visions of lunar greenhouses. Its landscape embraces bulbous South American trees, huge succulents, African baobabs and vast fiery carpets of red and gold flowers. The other “biome” is taller, its structure like a wave of glass and contains a simulated mountain up which grows the greenery of a tropical forest. Its roof reaches 58m and it creates an extraordinary landmark, a crystal mountain in the city’s flat, watery centre.

Wilkinson Eyre has made a successful habit of creating elegantly, and seemingly

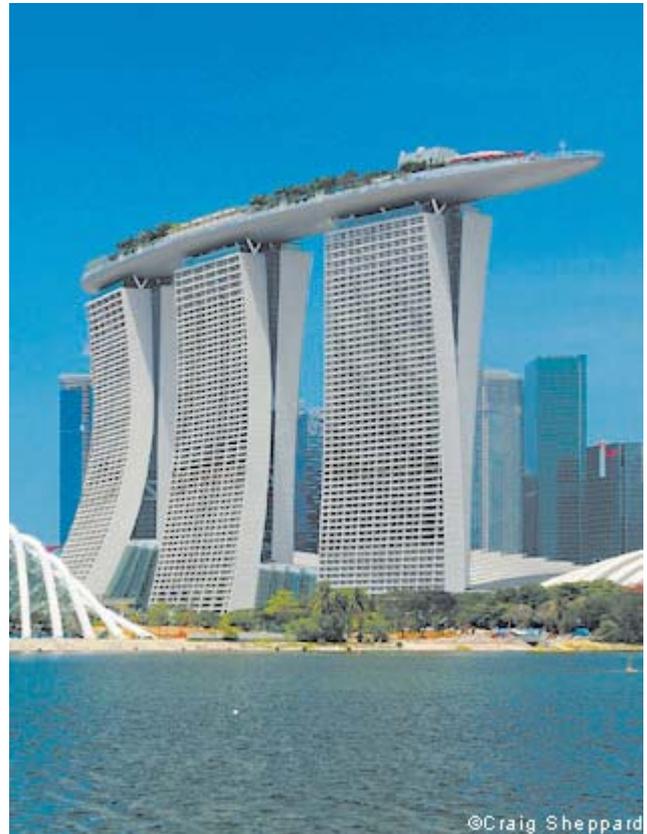


'Supertrees' form part of the Gardens by the Bay development

effortlessly, engineered structures that quickly come to define new or revived city centres. The firm's "Winking Eye Bridge" over the Tyne has become a symbol of Newcastle's regeneration; the 100-storey International Finance Centre in Guangzhou is one of the slickest skyscrapers of recent years; and the cable car in London's Docklands (currently under construction) looks set to redefine this disconnected, desolate flatland.

These greenhouses are the finest thing the firm has done. But they are not the only structures in the gardens. Equally prominent are the eccentric "Supertrees". Designed by the gardens' Bath-based landscape architects Grant Associates and London engineers Atelier One and Atelier Ten – in a curious echo of a colonial past this is a completely British project – the trees are a forest of steel armatures which rise between 25-50m, their structures composed of a complex, twiggy network of steel. They are designed to act as frames for climbing plants, creepers and "epiphytes" which clad the trees of the tropical rainforests.

The guiding spirit behind the gardens is Dr Kiat W Tan. "We need to grab people's attention," he tells me, "and these structures are about creating a 'wow factor'. Education is good, but without entertainment no one will pay attention."



The Marina Bay Sands hotel

Tan has high hopes for what the gardens might achieve. "They can teach civic manners – for example, how to use and inhabit public space. But they also create a sense of belonging. This is prime real estate in the Central Business District and yet people can feel they own a bit of it, and that this is their park. It counterbalances the casino, a paradise to its mammon with buildings that become condominiums for plants."

The gardens represent a huge civic investment – S\$1bn spent on the greening of prime land – but the city is clear that it creates value. Just like Central Park, the plots around the gardens will become highly desirable, massively raising their value in an already expensive location.

The project is not, of course, only for Singaporeans. The city is already a magnet for tourists: its location serves as a genuinely cosmopolitan metropolis at the heart of Asia, which makes it popular with Chinese and Indians, as well as with Westerners looking for that touch of Asian exoticism minus its chaotic flipside. The gardens, with their delicate ecosystem of burgeoning tropical growth and carefully controlled spread, have become the perfect metaphor for this meticulously and intelligently-planned city. And what a nice

touch that even the plants have been given megastructures and skyscrapers to allow them to compete with the city on equal terms.

Edwin Heathcote *is the FT's architecture correspondent*

.....

Details

Edwin Heathcote was a guest of Singapore Tourism Board (www.yoursingapore.com), Singapore Airlines (www.singaporeair.com) and Fullerton Hotels. Double rooms at Fullerton Bay (www.fullertonbay.com) start from £192 and at The Fullerton (www.fullertonhotel.com) from £114

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/91d8116e-0b91-11e1-9861-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2011 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.