

**AR 3222 | HISTORY & THEORY OF
WESTERN ARCHITECTURE**

Architecture + Spectacle

Singapore: The Shopping, the Parade & the Race

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Tutorial 9

“The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.””
- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

INTRODUCTION

From the ancient temples of Greece to the palaces and shrines built for the Emperors in the Far East, the notion of the spectacle has been imbued in architecture since the beginning of time. In the past, foundations that which constituted a spectacle were strongly driven by and greatly entrenched in culture, faith and ideology and as Debord puts it, “*the spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity*”(Debord,) one that has the ability to generate immense pride amongst the citizens of the state through its showcase of wealth, ideals and construction prowess. With its great regard to the history, culture and ideals of the land it stands on, the spectacle is in its own right the “*advertisement*” for the place it originates.

Aligned to precise definitions, the spectacles of the past were notable, dramatic and eye catching to say the least, claiming an unspoken decree that the physical construct of the architecture was of utmost importance in the establishment of a stronghold.

However, as society progresses, the constituents of the same spectacle has evolved as well. With the inception of advanced technology, new construction methods and materials, the physicality of the architecture can no longer be said to be the only discerning element of the spectacle albeit still as important. Some might even go so far to argue that gigantism is no longer a precursor for a structure to be considered a spectacle.

Acknowledging this, the increasingly globalized world of today, stricken by the ideals of consumerism and western capitalism, has, as a result, introduced an added dimension to the modern spectacle; money-centrism. Undeniably, the larger, more luminous and more lavish still drives the spectacular in architecture; that which is slowly waning from this *ever-so-bright* picture is its origins. Perhaps, architecture (spectacle) today has indeed quietly fallen into the effects of “*corporate advertising and consumerist displays*”, arguably giving up the social, cultural and historical context in favor of creating the iconic spectacle, one without a foundation that is rooted deeper, beyond the surficial display of wealth and the want for more of it.

With that in mind, modern spectacles seemingly promote a new culture that is no longer distinct to different states. This new culture of consumerism fuels the need for even more of

the spectacular, creating a self-powering cycle of visually striking performances or displays. This inevitably leads to an accumulation of spectacles in the modern city that targets the globalized citizen, an accumulation of iconic architecture and specifically those that extend even beyond the physical construct of the architecture. In advancing, society has highlighted the more symbolic nature of the spectacular: by way of a person's behavior in and around the architecture, embracing the act of consuming as part of the performance as well. In any case, the reason behind why the spectacle is conceived is as important as, if not more than, the manner by which it is being constructed.

That said, through the use of two prominent public events in Singapore, namely the Formula 1 Grand Prix and the National Day Parade, and the nature of the country itself, this essay aims to explore the makings of the modern spectacle with a focus on how it extends beyond the physicality of the architecture, encroaching into the areas within and around. This represents a move into the intangibles (human perception and social construct); the validation of which is based on the understanding of the resident and visitor dichotomy. The essay will also look into how the new economy, with its money centrism, places an overt emphasis on 'The Spectacle' rather than that which gave rise to it.

DISPUTABLY "OUT OF REACH"

It is widely understood that the modern spectacle establishes itself as an entity of the human psyche with the aid of digital tools and advertising in today's contemporary society. Notwithstanding its exterior formal language, the modern day architectural spectacle employs the means of print technology and digital imaging in advertising to achieve its desired subliminal effect. Arguably, the modern spectacle seemingly advertises for itself, with little regard for the place it originates, unlike those of the past. Debatably, spectacles such as the Formula 1 in Singapore use advertisements and its branding to promote the universal culture of consumerism highlighting nothing more than wealth and its money centric nature. What you see on the billboards fail to encompass the actuality of the performance.

Dorrian suggests that technology plays a big part in conveying the spectacle. Computer renderings have the ability to create utopic imagery through the elimination of visual noise in the periphery of the object. An idealized notion is often the product of this purification where

“objects seem taut, more than present.”¹

While it seems that technology has enabled the ‘creation’ of an ideal and allowed for reality to be superseded, we are nudged back into reality, once we see that the actuality *“won’t be seen in the official portraits...”*(Dorrian 47) With reference to nineteenth century spectacles that *“emerge within a magical, enchanting aura, that dazzle with their own brilliance”*(Dorrian 48) –what you see is what you get–, the spectacle of the contemporary society is seemingly based on pure human perception and advertising condition, repetition and technology manipulation.

An architectural spectacle is expected to serve up a visual feast, the gap between what is expected and what is presented is to be “compensated for by the actions of a willing and complicit viewer”² – convincing oneself of the grandeur. With this regard, the spectacle can be said to have attained its position as an intangible entity, almost conceptualized in the human psychological as *“the more difficult it is to believe... the more it is worth it to manage to”*(Dorrian 43)

SPECTACULAR SINGAPORE: GP + NDP

Encompassing a vast majority of the traits of a contemporary society is the highly urbanized city-state, Singapore.

In the context of Singapore, two similar public events come to mind. The Formula 1 Grand Prix (GP) and the National Day Parade (NDP) are both annual events that take place in the city centre, making use of the city’s skyline as its backdrop. Both public events are in fact considered urban spectacles in their own right: visually striking, unusual and dramatic. However, as similar as they might appear to be, the two spectacles maintain vastly different approaches and outcomes in enforcing itself as spectacles within the boundaries of society’s social construct.

The Singapore GP is a motor race on the calendar of the FIA Formula One World Championship. The event takes place on the Marina Bay Street Circuit, marketing itself as the world’s first night race and Asia’s first street circuit.³ This annual act awakens the city centre, bringing it to life and to light quite literally. Every September, for the 3 days of the event, the vocal prowess of performing artists and resounding motor engines echoes through the city centre, overriding the otherwise monotonous drone of daily city commute. The race makes use

¹ Dorrian, Mark. *The Way the World Sees London: Thoughts in a Millennial Urban Spectacle..* Anthony Vidler. Williamstown MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008. 44.

² Dorrian, Mark. *The Way the World Sees London: Thoughts in a Millennial Urban Spectacle.*

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_Grand_Prix, Accessed, 09 October 2012

of existing road infrastructure as its course while lighting technology⁴ enables artificial sunlight at night. Tourists flock from all around the world for the GP, significantly increasing tourist receipts. According to the Trade and Industry Ministry, “*the race has (also) reaped benefits such as enhancing Singapore’s image...*” calling it a necessary event in Singapore.⁵

Celebrated just one month before the GP is the National Day Parade. The NDP is a national ceremony in Singapore held in commemoration of the country’s independence.⁶ Traditionally held at the National Stadium, a location away from the city centre, the parade has since shifted to The Float@Marina Bay in light of the demolishing and rebuilding of the stadium. Similar to the GP, NDP transforms the city’s skyline with a dazzling fireworks display. In a more literal manner, the theatrical and thematic aspect of the parade easily classifies the celebration as a spectacle. And for a few minutes in the night of celebration, after the military shows, march-past and fly-past, the city centre comes to a standstill as proud Singaporeans sing to the national anthem.

As Debord puts it, “the spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness converges.”⁷

Both events are undoubtedly highlights on the Singapore yearly calendar and surely they both make use of the urban construct of Singapore as a spectacle but therein within the statement by Debord, lie the fundamental difference between the two.

In sync with spectacles of the past, the NDP is fuelled by the need for nation building and citizenship pride, rooted deep in history, ideals and culture – it is a spectacular celebration of the nation’s independence after the demerger from Malaysia in 1965. Conversely, the GP is driven by the consumerist culture, a spectacle leaning towards all that makes up a ‘modern spectacle’. Some locals, in fact, shun the race “*as the city’s financial district is sealed off for the weekend, causing traffic difficulties*” Attributes that contributed to this unpopularity are the inconveniences, “*in terms of getting to work, the crowd and, the noise.*” (Mohandas) The reality of the performance is thus being overshadowed and downplayed by how it is carried out, portrayed and sold to the globalized citizen – almost a mild example of Potemkin⁸.

⁴ “Let there be light - illuminating the Singapore Grand Prix”. Formula1.com. 2008-02-08. Accessed 09 October 2012

⁵ Vimita, Mohandas. “Singaporeans must accept F1 race as necessary event: MTI.” Channelnewsasia [Singapore] 22 09 2012, Web. 09 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/11227488/11.html>>

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Day_Parade, Accessed 10 October 2012

⁷ Debord (1994) [1967] *The Society of the Spectacle*, translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books)

⁸ “In modern usage, is any construct, physical or figurative, intended to deceive outside people into thinking that something is better than it actually is.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potemkin_village>

This is where the dichotomy between the resident and the visitor, and/or globalized citizen, filters in. How the spectacle is viewed is greatly skewed and biased. In its essence, the GP can be described as a visitor's spectacle and the NDP a resident's spectacle. Fabricated precisely for the purposes of boosting tourism receipts, the GP epitomizes the consumerist culture, creating a 'meaningless' space that *"performs the same role as black holes in the universe: essences through which meaning disappears"*⁹, creating junkspace. While the resident sees the GP as empty, almost meaningless, the visitor wows at the spectacle that has been constructed for them, wowed by the 'sale' of the idea, held in captivity by consumerist, cooperate advertising. Arguably, the derivation of citizen pride can however, be leached from the praises of the visitor. But more often than not, this does not happen.

That said, it would be a folly to claim that the NDP does not display any form of the consumerist nature of the country. The truth would be that while both the spectacles exist within the confines of the contemporary consumerist society, the FI is clearly more overt while the NDP takes a more subversive stance with regards to its portrayal.

Perhaps the NDP is the best example in Singapore where a spectacle is derived from keen intentions. It is a spectacle created for the people, one that promotes the Singapore story, rooted in history. But with the creeping lichens of consumerism that is embedded into the system, we can only hope away the risks of going through *"the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing."*(Debord)

SHOPPING + JUNKSPACE

That said, the act of consuming as a spectacle comes into light. Amongst many things the country promotes itself to be, Singapore endorses itself as a shopping paradise, one that posses 'an unrivalled selection of shopping malls'. Acknowledging that the GP is in itself an act of consumption, shopping aligns itself to all that has been discussed earlier – the act of capitalist consumerism is seen defined as a nonstop performance of a built space, where the constant revamps and renovations, have reduced the role of the builder to be part of the system where history is over written by something supposedly 'greater', universal and more desired, embracing the ideals of capitalism, creating spectacles that are borne out of consumption i.e. the developments along orchard road, Orchard Ion etc..

⁹ Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," in *Havard School of Design Guide to Shopping*, ed. C. J. Chung (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2002), 09 October 2012

The urban landscape of Singapore is therefore a symbol of wealth and metaphor of consumerist ideals. The accumulation of which results in the classification of Singapore as an urban spectacle with most of the spectacular being derivatives of the consumerist culture and of capitalist consumption.

Jameson's spectacle *describes* the mall architecture of capitalist consumerism. The shopping mall is depicted to be a matrix of space with preconditions ranging from technological improvements, such as mechanisms like the escalators and air-conditioning, to 'theatrics' such as mannequins, counters, mirrors and display windows, masking service systems.¹⁰ In a more symbolic gesture, consumerism/consumption in itself is the spectacle resulting in what is known as junkspace.

Rem Koolhaas propose the urban construct of modernization as junkspace.¹¹ More specifically, junkspace is that which 'coagulates' while modernization is in progress. It can be understood that junkspace is a landscape of 'placelessness' where the purpose of an area does not entail operating "socially as a culturally defined place"¹², in the likes of air-conditioned shopping malls, spaces that encourage conspicuous consumption and discourage discrepant social interactions.

Hal Foster further observes that, "*As megastores govern more and more movement through cities, architecture and urbanism are more and more exposed as the mere coordination of flow.*"¹³ Hence the spectacle of the contemporary society extends beyond the physical construct of the architecture, penetrating the hard surface of the actual building into the space within. Reduced to mere coordination of flow, the physicality of the architecture is usurped by the literal act of consumption which in turn fuels the construction of more 'vessels', sustaining the performance.

The adaptation of the consumerist culture in Singapore has arguably led to the slow demise of the Singaporean culture with the increasing number of malls built and events carried out that are deep-seated in money centrism. The globalized citizen marvels at these spectacles, which are equivalent to junkspace, sometimes even ignorant of their participation in the performance. The extension of the spectacle beyond the physical construct of architecture can be argued to be a modern phenomenon leaving behind the elements of traditional spectacles and decisively moving into the catering the spectacular for the new global citizen.

¹⁰ Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* (May/June 2003):74

¹¹ Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," in *Havard School of Design Guide to Shopping*, ed. C. J. Chung (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2002), 09 October 2012, <http://www.quotesque.net/junkspace/>

¹² <http://archinect.com/forum/thread/20324/koolhaas-junkspace>

¹³ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime, and other Diatribes*, London:Verso, 2002), 56

It is encouraging to note that while the creation of junkspace is matter-of-fact in the contemporary society, the NDP provides us a glimmer of hope where the likelihood of a modern spectacle being purely a residue of capitalism, one that has been reduce to a mass-manufactured good¹⁴, is being challenged.

CONCLUSION

With the extension of the Formula 1 Grand Prix through till 2017¹⁵, it seems like the spectacular sights and sounds in the heart of the city are here to stay. But with the impending completion of the new national stadium, the NDP's new home could well represent an existential withdrawal from the city center, deliberately distancing itself from any notion of a visitor's spectacle. The NDP can be said to be returning to its roots returning ironically, to the world's largest dome.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ian Buchanan, "Space in the Age of Non-Place," *Deleuze and Space*, ed. I. Buchanan and G. Lambet (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Up, 2005), 29

¹⁵ "Singapore GP extends F1 deal through 2017". 22 September 2012. Retrieved 09 October 2012.

¹⁶ Voon, Terence. "New National Stadium to have world's largest dome: Roof can double as projector screen; stadium on track for opening in 2014." *Straits Times* [Singapore] 05 10 2012, n. pag. Web. 15 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/new-national-stadium-have-worlds-largest-dome-20121005>>

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<http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/browse/shopping/shopping-in-singapore.html>, Accessed 09 October 2012

ANNEX

Modern		Old
New universal consumerist culture		Rooted in the culture and history of the land
Advertises for itself and the non-distinctive culture of the contemporary society		Advertisement for state ideals, distinctive culture and proponents
Physicality not the main discerning factor as technology enabled great construction possibilities		Physicality and size were discerning factors
Extending beyond the physical – spectacle as psychological construct	Use of technology and advertising to tap into the human psyche	What you see is what you get
Singapore is a contemporary society, propagates the modern spectacle (i.e. the MBS vs. the Pyramids)		
Extending beyond the physical – extension into space outside the architecture (public events)	FI – visitor's spectacle	NDP – resident's spectacle
	Similar location in the city centre, the distinction between how much of a resident's spectacle the NDP is in question, slow weathering of foundation?	
	Completely modern and represents the consumerist culture	It's a little of both the modern and the old, showcases Singapore's capitalistic nature yet rooted in history of the land.
	Overtly consumerist mass produced and non distinctive – for the globalized citizen)	Subversively consumerist
	Creates Junkspace brand	Opposes the creation of Junkspace
Citizen pride, if any, derived externally	Citizen pride derived internally within the system	
FI as consumption, Singapore as a shopping paradise Extending beyond physical into the space within the architecture - The act of consuming as a spectacle Singapore is dramatically seen as an urban spectacle due to the endless production of junkspace.		
Shopping epitomizes the modern spectacle, shopping malls catered to the new culture of consumerism (self-powering cycle) – increased creation of junkspace.		NDP moving away from the city centre, seemingly distancing itself away from a location that makes it comparable to the FI as a proponent for the new consumerist culture but ironically it's moving into the world's largest dome.