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**From Casino to Integrated Resort:
Nationalist Modernity and the Art of Blending**

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the relationships between architectural representation, spatial production and state power in the context of the making of *Marina Bay Sands*. I critically analyze and unpack the micro-politics of the planning and competition process around 2005 that transformed the Las Vegas casino-resort into the “Integrated Resort” at Singapore’s Marina Bay. My analysis reveals how the “Integrated Resort” – as discourse, image and building - was not merely discovered elsewhere and imported into Singapore. Rather, it had to be manufactured through a hidden process of negotiations, contestations and misrepresentations. I argue that this process should be seen as an “art of blending” - by hiding the casino and blending into the aesthetic order of Marina Bay, the architectural design of *Marina Bay Sands* was an attempt to resolve the crisis of representation produced by locating the controversial casino on this prominent site. Rather than interpreting the art of blending simply as a mystification of structural political economic forces, I show that this process was fraught with unlikely alliances and inexplicable contingencies such that it cannot be reduced to a single ideology or economic model. Architects, planners, bureaucrats and developers found themselves in shifting and differential power-relations mediated by the administrative procedures of the competition. Though the success of *Marina Bay Sands* lay on how well the crisis of representation was ultimately resolved, a constructivist critique provides a way to unravel what appears to be coherent representations of the state as a monolithic and univocal entity and its sponsored narratives of nationalist modernity.

At that point [of the meeting], there was no mention of a casino. So we spent a long time talking about that side of Marina Bay, the sea side, as to how to handle it in urban design terms...and then of course it was completely blown away by the decision to put this vast casino concept there! I mean you've got an interesting concept, but it's an entirely different concept to the one we spent a long time discussing! I think that's the only time in my experience where all the thinking and conceptual thinking was in effect totally altered by a major strategic decision that came up and just [bangs fist on palm] did that!

Sir Peter Hall¹, 30 August 2011 (Yap E, 2013)

“Do you *dare* to place the casino at Marina Bay?!”

Government Planner, 2010, interview with author

When the competitive tender was launched in 2007 for the casino license at Marina Bay, Singapore, only four developers submitted their bids. Steve Wynn had withdrawn after what he thought was excessive interference by Singaporean planners on his architectural design. Sheldon Adelson of Las Vegas Sands had replaced his architect, Paul Steelman who specializes in casino design, with Moshe Safdie, known ironically for designing social housing and cultural institutions. Though *Las Vegas Sands* eventually won and built *Marina Bay Sands*, it looked nothing like a typical Las Vegas Sands project, both in its architectural form and spatial organization.

The proposal to build a casino in Singapore has surfaced several times over the course of its post-independence history – in the 1960s, 1980s and again in 2000s. In each instance, it was raised as a way to boost declining tourism receipts, but always turned down on moral grounds. Over the years, along with other social and cultural policies on housing, education and censorship, the anti-casino policy has helped to construct a narrative of the state as the moral foundation of the nation, birthed together at the point of independence and which continues to be wedded to the ruling party's identity. Thus the reversal of this policy was controversial because it threatened the moral pillar of nationalist modernity.² It is significant that, despite historical repetitions, the “Integrated Resort” only appeared in the latest iteration. As this paper shows, the emergence of the Integrated Resort as architectural form and representation is crucial to taming this threat. By drawing a fine distinction between the Integrated Resort and the casino, and materializing this distinction through architecture and urban form, the moral authority of the state can remain somewhat unblemished. Indeed, saying ‘yes’ to the Integrated Resort is not quite the same as saying ‘yes’ to the casino.

As the above quotes show, the decision to place a casino at Marina Bay in 2004 was a political decision completely unanticipated by government planners and bureaucrats. Like many mega-projects carried out under the rubric of Asian developmentalism, Marina Bay was to be a cosmopolitan hub of financial centres, cultural institutions and luxury residential developments (Shatkin 2011; Yeoh, 2005; Douglass, 2000, among others). It was also planned as the site of national

¹ Sir Peter Hall is an urban planner and theorist and Professor at The Bartlett, University College London. He was interviewed in his capacity as one of the invited experts in the International Panel of Experts chaired by the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore.

² I have provided a longer exegesis of this argument in a separate short paper. Lee, K W (forthcoming) “Have we always said ‘no’ to the casino? Rethinking the myth of progress in Singapore” in Thum P J, Loh K S, Chia, JMT (eds) *Living with Myths* (n.p.). See also Terence Lee's (2008) concept of “gestural politics” in the case of the casino debates.

celebrations, supplanting the Padang, the colonial open field, and the Kallang National Stadium which had hosted many such events in the past (Lai, 2010). Unlike many postindustrial urban waterfronts around the world, Marina Bay was created out of reclaimed land and, coupled with a centralized planning bureaucracy, conceived with a totalizing image and narrative in mind. The ring of developments around the edge of the waterfront was especially important, as this constituted the face of cosmopolitan Singapore in the new millennium, an image widely circulated in mass media to Singaporeans, investors and tourists alike. Thus, from the conservation of Clifford Pier and Fullerton Hotel to the relocation of the Merlion statue to create “photo opportunities” to the urban design control of new developments like *The Sail* and *The Marina Bay Financial Centre*, what was imagined was a concentrated scenography of seamless progress from the past to the future.

This paper interrogates the relationships between architectural representation, spatial production and state power in the context of the making of *Marina Bay Sands*. By unpacking the micro-politics of the planning process that transformed the Las Vegas casino-resort into the “Integrated Resort” at Singapore’s Marina Bay, I show how the “Integrated Resort” was not merely discovered elsewhere and imported into Singapore. Rather, it had to be manufactured through a hidden process of negotiations, contestations and misrepresentations. I argue that this process should be seen as an “art of blending”. By hiding the casino and blending into the aesthetic order of Marina Bay, Marina Bay Sands was an attempt to resolve the crisis of representation produced by locating the controversial casino on this prominent site, thus preserving the moral foundations of nationalist modernity.

A CONSTRUCTIVIST CRITIQUE OF THE STATE

Marina Bay Sands and the development of Marina Bay as a whole has attracted much scholarly attention. The casino project is often framed as a faultline of globalization where the economic restructuring of Singapore as a tax haven, cosmopolitan hub and tourist playground clashes with socio-cultural norms and local political culture (Vlcek, 2015; da Cunha, 2010; Wong, 2008; Henderson, 2006; Rodan, 2006; Chong, 2006; Ooi, 2005). While these analyses bring to surface the structural transformations of the Singaporean society, and usefully frame its political and urban development within the larger debates on neoliberal globalization, they suffer from several empirical and normative blindspots. First, both academic and official discourses generally lack critical historical awareness. Instead, they tend to dramatize the present as a moment when the social and moral contract between the state and its citizens is (once again) challenged by forces of globalization. Second, due to disciplinary boundaries, academic analyses generally ignore the site and the building. This gap in turn allows some assumptions to pass unquestioned – in particular, the claim that the “Integrated Resort” is a new model developed elsewhere that is now safe to be imported to Singapore. Finally, by engaging and critiquing official discourses on grounds of political economy, both academic and official discourses mutually reinforce key terms of the debate: the state is seen as monolithic which coheres with the self-representation of the government; and the contradictions of this project are arrested at the pivot between the economic and moral.

Such analysis tends to conceptualize the crisis as a set of predefined categories placed under pressure by their binary opposites: the nation-state and globalization, the economic and the moral, the past and present. As such, they do not engage at the level where these very categories are mediated through agents other than the “state” and “civil society” and how such categories are themselves constructed and interpreted in specific situations. In making this criticism, my intervention is not to dismiss a tradition of analysis, but to borrow the anthropological voice and bring to surface a broader range of human conditions and settings, from decision-making to architectural design to public debate. It is to recognize that the crisis of representation challenged

the ability of various expert communities to predict, articulate, agree with and think about what is at stake in Marina Bay and its future possibilities. This self-reflexive awareness of uncertainties and divergences and the rebounding attempts to bring them under control animated the processes through which the “Integrated Resort” emerged and blended into the aesthetic order of Marina Bay.

In this paper, I trace this process of emergence by following a terrain of complex and multiple negotiations in different political settings. This terrain is, in the words of anthropologist Michael Fischer (2005: 56), a series of “ethical plateaus” - “spaces in which multiple technologies interact; where ethics and politics cannot be reduced to two-person, zero-sum games; and where often incommensurable frames of reference come into play, involving irrational passions and fundamental commitments, as well as rational calculations”. This concept is particularly useful here as the very idea of an Integrated Resort had to be invented and this process of invention entailed a series of situated encounters between multiple actors whose material interests, ethico-political concerns, cultural dispositions, and calculative practices were both distinct and shaped in relation to each other. Along with other scholars who pursue an ethnographic and social constructivist approach to understanding globalization, this paper interprets the binary and pre-given categories of political economy discussed earlier as localized constructs that are contingent on cross-border flows of capital, ideas and practices (Ong and Collier, 2008; Sharma and Gupta, 2005; Smith, 2001; Yap, 2013 and Pow, 2014). Thus, rather than taking the state as a monolithic category with the centralized planning bureaucracy as its operational arm, and global capital as something that enters into partnership with the state but remains outside of it as a unit of analysis, I identify the key actors – government planners, bureaucrats, developers and architects – and study their differential engagements throughout the process of making the Integrated Resort. These focused networks of social relations were mediated by images, bureaucratic rules and planning instruments, without which the relations between different actors would become unstable and ineffective. As such, I also pay attention to the administrative procedures and planning instruments and analyse how they exerted a certain influence on the agencies of all those who were involved in the project.

My analysis is divided into three moments: In the first moment, I map the anxieties that permeated the parliamentary debates leading to the decision to open up two sites for casino development in Singapore. Here, I focus on the government’s sanctioned vision of what an Integrated Resort might (and should) look like. In the second moment, I turn to an early proposal submitted by architect Paul Steelman on behalf of casino developer, *Las Vegas Sands*, and analyze the ways in which it frames the building in relation to Singapore as a site. Finally, I examine the competition process and tease out the micro-politics and technical processes through which the sanctioned vision and winning design became indistinguishable from each other. This chronological sequence of moments should not be understood as a structure of interpretation or theoretical framework - that would run counter to my conceptual and methodological commitment to understanding contingency and relationality. Rather, it is a formal reflection of the rigid and linear planning process which, as my critical analysis will show, is anything but rigid and linear.³

³ I wish to thank a participant in the audience who challenged me on this point during my presentation at the Asia Research Institute which gave me the opportunity to clarify my position.

FIRST MOMENT: THE “SANCTIONED IMAGE”

In 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that while the government had turned down the recommendation of the Economic Review Committee to legalize casinos, it was ready to reconsider if the casino was part of a larger entertainment complex: “So you have shows, you have family entertainment, you have food, restaurants, art, all sorts of things and in the middle of course you also have this place” (Lee 2004). An Integrated Resort was a “different group of casinos” - it was “really a water theme park ... where casinos are built simply to make the entire resort viable”⁴ Having seen the proposals submitted by interested casino developers and based on study trips conducted by government officials⁵, many politicians expressed surprise at how different casinos are today compared to what they imagined them to be. Instead of dens of iniquity, they were seen as serious and highly regulated businesses with deep connections to various sectors of the tourism industry. Then-Minister of National Development Mr. Lim Hng Kiang attempted to provide the most definitive representation of the Integrated Resort: it is a “large-scale development offering multiple world class attractions. ... an entire complex of classy hotels, luxury shops, fancy restaurants, spectacular shows, convention centres all found in one single destination. The gaming component will occupy not more than 3-5% of the total area of the IR development.... Casino gaming is an important part of the mix, but only a part” (Lim, 2005). The crucial marker of the IR is that it does not derive most of its revenue from the casino and that it is, in contrast to casinos, “decent and wholesome” (Lee, 2005).

Yet, this representation of the Integrated Resort only internalizes what it is not. Always defined in the negative sense, the Integrated Resort can only be understood as something more than and other than a casino. Indeed, within the bureaucracy, the possibility of a non-casino Integrated Resort was reflexively understood as highly unlikely – after all, the study trips undertaken by government officials in 2004 to study possible models were targeted at resorts with casinos.⁶ When the Singapore Tourism Board launched a Request for Concept in December 2004 seeking proposals from prospective developers in order to gauge their interests and products, the stated objectives implicitly eliminated the option of a non-casino Integrated Resort, and instead tried to fashion a development where the casino was minimized (Singapore Tourism Board, 2004: 2).

The crisis of representation continued into the visual realm. The first attempt to create an authoritative image to elide these contradictions in the public imagination appeared in 2005, a few months after the decision was being made. Many politicians had opined that the people did not have the right image of the Integrated Resort in mind. Like themselves, the public needed to be reassured that the Integrated Resort was not a casino in order to appreciate the newness of this

⁴ “There is a different group of casinos, what we call the integrated entertainment complex. An example is the Atlantis Resort in the Bahamas. If you look at the complex, it is really a water theme park ... For the developer, they can make money from the hotel but cannot make much from the other entertainment so they have casinos which bring in 30-50% of the revenue and this more or less subsidizes the entertainment. Because of that, the whole complex is profitable and viable. This is the kind of proposal the government is thinking of – where casinos are built simply to make the entire resort viable.” Lim H K (24 Oct 2004)

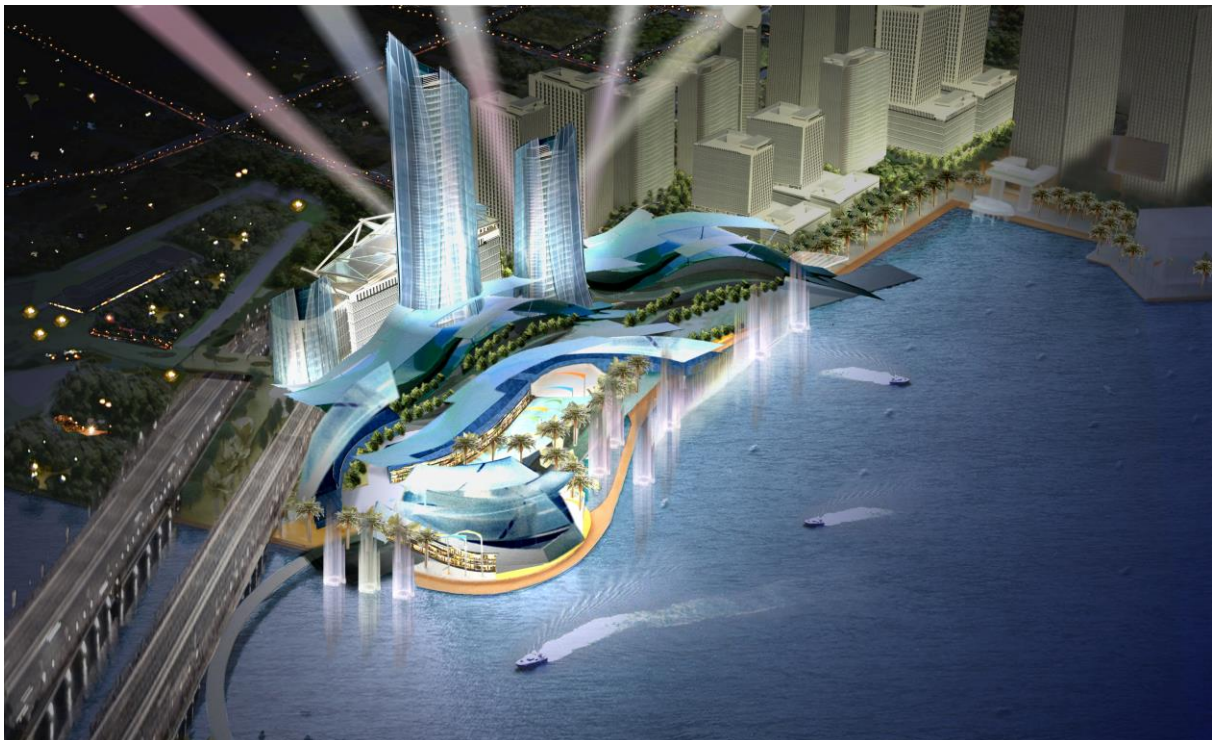
⁵ Between May and July 2004, a study group visited Las Vegas, Bahamas and Macau. In their report, they identified that casino-resorts leverage on complementary facilities to differentiate themselves from each other, attract more visitors and maximize investment returns. They further argued that it is necessary to move quickly to undercut the growing competition in the region (notably Macau and Batam, but also Taiwan and Japan), and that the prize is not the tax revenue from the casino, but the convention/entertainment complex that will increase Singapore’s attractiveness as a tourist destination.

⁶ Personal correspondence, anonymous, July 2010

creature. Thus, during the National Day Rally speech that year, a digital image of an imagined Integrated Resort was created by the national planning authority and broadcasted to the entire populace (Fig. 1). In this image, the Integrated Resort is a modern avant-garde glass-clad edifice that would sit comfortably in any financial or cultural district in the world, rather than a gaudy fire-spouting pyramid. The contrast is aimed at “kitschy” Las Vegas theme parks and “seedy” Macau casinos (despite the fact that Macau had by then transformed into the “Las Vegas of the East”).

The Integrated Resort, the image assures its viewers, *fits in*. Not only is it the kind of architectural icon that aspiring global cities like Singapore should aim for, it is something that is sensitive to the specific context of Singapore’s new downtown. Thus, the contextual information given in the image is vital. In the background, one can see faded renderings of future developments. They are simple blocks that step down in scale towards the waterfront. So does the Integrated Resort, though in a more flamboyant way. The tree-lined promenade – the only other fully rendered urban element in the image – suggests that the Integrated Resort completes the circulation system by linking the promenade to the footbridge that crosses the Bay. An urban atmosphere is also generated by the building - three water-crafts skim the surface of the Bay, while fountains and light beams suggest some dramatic celebration underway. The background is also suggestive of urban life – lights and roads signal recreational activities and developments to come. These details are strategic rhetorical devices that rearticulate an unknown object in a vernacular language.

Fig. 1: A digital simulation of an “Integrated Resort” prepared by government planners



Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2005

The Integrated Resort thus takes form as a *sanctioned image* that sanitizes the project so that the casino component is not just invisible, but always preceded by a more palatable image that is consistent with the aesthetic order of Marina Bay. Through this camouflage, an ideal sequence of synecdoche is thus established whereby the Integrated Resort stands for Marina Bay in the same way that Marina Bay stands for Singapore as a whole. Created by government planners and broadcasted to the public *before* the actual tender process for the casino license had even begun, the strategic function of the image was to tame the unknown and preemptively correct the imagination of the public. Yet, in making public and visible an architectural form, the image also became an aesthetic contract on which the promises made by the government to its citizens had to be kept. As the next moments will show, when the planners produced this image, they were not merely speculating. In negotiating with architects and developers, this sanctioned image set the boundaries of an architecture-to-come.

SECOND MOMENT: THE “CENSORED IMAGE”

The tender process for the casino license at Marina Bay was divided into two stages – a Request for Concept followed by a Request for Proposal. The first stage was designed to gauge the level of interest from prospective developers and ascertain their business and development models. This stage was non-committal, but it provided an important opportunity for government planners and bureaucrats to engage with the casino developers at a time when no one was sure of what each other’s specific interests. As such, it functioned as a zone of strategic informality nestled between the confident display of the sanctioned public image of the Integrated Resort and the formal stage of the Request for Proposal where the submitted proposals were evaluated and a winner chosen.

In the Request for Concept, the Singapore Tourism Board laid down some general parameters that tried to communicate the authoritative vision of the Integrated Resort to prospective developers. Yet, most of the developers reinterpreted these suggestions based on their own formulaic models of a casino-resort. The most important case is the initial proposal submitted by Sheldon Adelson, CEO of Las Vegas Sands. Though he eventually won the competition with architect Moshe Safdie, his initial idea was dramatically different from the winning entry. Paul Steelman helped to prepare the initial proposal which shows a complex designed around a “tropical garden” theme:

Las Vegas Sands has collaborated with its design team to pattern the organization and architecture of the resort component after floral and botanical forms found in nature. Rather than the historical reference made by the design of the Venetian Macau, the Garden City Resort’s design thesis draws inspiration from tropical leaf and orchid floral shapes interpreted in a modern and timeless design that is conceived specifically for Singapore.

(Las Vegas Sands, 2005: 13)

The complex is a series of leaf-shaped objects organized around a single hotel tower. The lean streamlined glass tower sits on a ring of decorative lotus-like petals. As with the standard Las Vegas practice, the complex is designed to accommodate more hotel towers in the future. Along the side of the waterfront, retail outlets, theatres and a museum dot the promenade, as well as a secondary entrance into the casino and the hotel. On the opposite side is the porte cochere designed like a rose in bloom. Internally, the complex follows the standard layout perfected in Las Vegas – the porte cochere, the hotel lobby and the casino are grouped tightly together so as to provide a seamless transition from the car or coach to the hotel and the casino. Flanking this organizing core are the retail areas to the left, and the convention centres to the right. Steelman’s design proposes to redirect the road that cuts the site into half, so as to create a single large plot that facilitates the

replication of this formula. Furthermore, following the strategy used in Las Vegas and Macau where casino developers redirect infrastructure to capture potential customers and marginalize competitors, this proposal considers a monorail that links the Integrated Resort directly to the International Cruise Terminal.⁷

This interpretation of the Integrated Resort clearly attempts to adopt the localizing features of tropicality. Yet, it is far from the sanctioned image produced by the planning authority. Relative to the sanctioned image, this design carries the wrong symbolic content because it uses botanical elements formally and rhetorically without sufficient abstraction. The casino is also too visible. Steelman had tried to hide the casino from the outside: “Nestled between the botanical garden concourse and the convention and expo centre, the casino is visible from the bay but sits quietly behind the pointed forms of the theatres and appears understated next to the iconic Guggenheim Museum Singapore” (Las Vegas Sands, 2005: 57). Yet, following the Las Vegas model, the casino is the first thing one encounters when entering the complex, either from the porte cochere or the waterfront promenade. Along this promenade where the planners envisage a series of vibrant activities, the proposal instead has mini shopping malls and green buffers separating the promenade from the inward-looking casino and theatres. The idea that this complex would, in the future, grow two more lotus towers is anathema to the idea of a “potentially award-winning” icon – not in the field of casino and theme park design, but within the mainstream architectural fraternity.

For the planners, everything captured in the sanctioned image is very *real*, and that includes the formal attributes of individual buildings and the overall vision of the city. Steelman’s perspective showing a solitary building sitting on vast vacant plain suggests that the new resort is seen as something separate from the city, recalling one of his own principles that casino-resorts work best as a ‘suburban’ enclave where people can escape to.⁸ The proposal to alter infrastructure – either by diverting the road or building a monorail – reverses the relationship between the building and city that is embedded in the planner’s sanctioned image: instead of fitting into the established order of Marina Bay, Steelman’s proposal attempts to reshape the city to serve this building.

The discordance extends to what an Integrated Resort is supposed to be as a business model. In the submitted report, it is projected that all cultural activities like theaters and museums are loss-leaders and will be subsidized by revenue from hotel, retail and gaming (Table 1). That in itself is not surprising, as most casino-resorts in the US follow such a model. What is problematic is how the expected revenue from the casino is drastically disproportionate to the space it occupies. In the report, the casino occupies 3% of the floor area and 4% of the construction budget, but represents 81% of the total revenue and 40% of the jobs generated by the complex (Las Vegas Sands, 2005: 169). These numbers potentially undercut the official representation that the casino is there “simply to make the entire resort viable”. In this model, the Integrated Resort is not something more than or other than a casino – it is merely an excuse for a casino.

⁷ It seems from the report that Las Vegas Sands was offering to run the International Cruise Terminal and the monorail system, in addition to paying for dredging the harbor. This “generous offer” is understandable when we consider that one of the biggest regional competitors in the gaming industry are the six floating casinos operating on international waters just outside of Singapore. This is similar to how Stanley Ho in Macau has for many years financed the dredging of the Inner Harbor – one of the key entry points for Chinese gamblers and workers into Macau.

⁸ Interview with Mr. Paul Steelman, 8 Sept 2011

TABLE 1

	Car Parking	Hotel	Casino	Retail	Theaters	Convention	Museum	Cruise Terminal
Floor Area by component	34	23	3	13	2	19	4	2
Construction Cost by component	18	22	4	9	2	20	22	3
Revenue by component	-	6	81	10	(loss item)	6	1	(loss item)
Job creation by component		14	40	41	1	2	2	1

Source: Las Vegas Sands, 2005: 167-171

Furthermore, the unfiltered market logic of financial analysts runs counter to the moral and political sensitivity around the issue of casino gambling. Thus, when the official assurance is that the casino will target overseas gamblers, and that local gamblers will be shielded from the seductions of casino gambling, the report treats the region as different classes of potential gamblers carved out by existing casino competitors. From this perspective, there are three classes of customers – “foreign visitors to Singapore, Singaporeans that engage in gaming in other locations that shift to Singapore, and Singaporeans that do not engage in casino gaming at present but who may at the Integrated Resort”. Spending by Singaporeans “should really be treated the same as spending by foreign visitors because it too represents spending that would not take place in Singapore without the Integrated Resort” (Las Vegas Sands, 2005: 96).

The dividing moves that constructed a moral citizenship rooted in a territorially bound nation-state came apart in these representations. The initial proposal submitted by Las Vegas Sands reveals that the Integrated Resort was not something that appeared elsewhere ready to be imported into Singapore. In fact, it began eminently incompatible to what the government and the planners had in mind. Based on Adelson’s experience in Macau and the large untapped market of gamblers in the Asian region, he knew that a model that maximized the gaming component would be the most profitable. He interpreted the government’s attempt to suppress gaming profits as economically irrational. The most suitable model for Singapore was not the Integrated Resort in the official representation, but a reversion to the Las Vegas casino-hotel of the 60s and 70s – a model that earned about 80% of its revenue from casino gambling alone.

The discordances recorded in the report of Las Vegas Sands represent only a part of many points of contention. For example, in order to force developers to reduce the percentage of earnings from the casino, the Request for Concept included a “super tax” which kicks in if the casino contributes above a certain percentage of the total revenue of the development.⁹ This condition was removed in the formal tender after much resistance from all the casino developers. The developers also advocated for a fixed land price so as to provide more certainty in their financial calculations, a move contrary to how the government usually sells land to the highest bidder. Urban planners tried to impress upon the developers their vision for Marina Bay, and advocated what one planner called the “principle of zero visibility” for the casino. Frustrated by what he saw was unnecessary fiddling with

⁹ Anonymous, Interview with author, 7 Dec 2010. This was nominally reported in the mainstream newspaper. See Li, Tor Ching, “Cap on casino earnings lifted” in *The Straits Times*, 20 May 2005: 8

his signature architecture, casino developer Steve Wynn withdrew from the race. Others withdrew due to probity checks and the projected cost of development. Out of the 19 developers who expressed interest in the Request for Concept, four submitted proposals in the formal stage of the competition.

The bureaucratic processes created by and which in turn governed the interactions of various actors mediated these conflicting interests and models of development. The Request for Concept was more than a way for the government to identify possible investors and gauge their offered products. It provided an opportunity for various parties to lobby for and negotiate on specific conditions that would appear in the next stage of the tender where these conditions would form the basis for evaluating and awarding the various proposals. As an informal space of encounter within the black box of bureaucracy, these initial discordances were symptoms of the difficulties of translation across multiple agendas that were simultaneously moral, economic and technical. As the first stage of the tender process, it also marked a threshold wherein the differential power relations between different actors were tested and played out before entering a formalized space where a rubric of transparency, fairness and technicality was to take control. Yet, as last moment will show, it is not to be assumed that politics was henceforth excised entirely and a winner emerged out of the purified logic of competition itself.

THIRD MOMENT: THE BUREAUCRACY OF COMPETITION

On 15 November 2005, the Request for Proposal was launched. To evaluate the competing proposals, the government set up a hierarchy of decision making committees. A technical committee composed of three teams examined separately planning and architectural design, tourism appeal and financial-legal issues; an evaluation committee composed of high ranking bureaucrats received and evaluated the recommendations of these teams; and a committee of ministers made the final decision. Experts in the technical committee comprised of foreign consultants, local experts and bureaucrats. To reflect the objectives of the project, the proposals were judged according to four weighted criteria: tourism appeal (40%), architectural concept and design (30%), development investment (20%) and track record of the operator (10%). Deviating from standard practice, the government fixed the land price at \$1.2 billion (Lee, 2010).

The set-up was informed by a commonly used decision-making process called the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) which was developed and popularized by mathematician Thomas Saaty in the 1970s. Rather than reviewing the copious amount of literature on the AHP, it might be more instructive to hear it from the very person who overviewed the process.¹⁰ Mr. Neo-Chian Lim was the Chairman of the technical committee, and he explained to me how this decision-making process tames complex problems, disciplines the individual and ensures transparency:

¹⁰ For those interested, a lively exchange of debates between Saaty and his allies and detractors can be found in the journal "Management Science." See Thomas Saaty, 1990, "An exposition of the AHP in reply to the paper 'Remarks on the analytic hierarchy process.'" *Management Science* 36(3), 259-268; Thomas Saaty, 1986, "Axiomatic foundation of the analytic hierarchy process," in *Management Science* 32(7), 841-855; Harker and Vargas, 1989, "The Analytic Hierarchy Process: Applications and Studies" in *Management Science* 33(11), 1383-1403; Harker and Vargas, 1990, "Reply to 'Remarks on the analytic hierarchy process' by J.S. Dyer", in *Management Science* 36(3), 269-273; James S. Dyer 1990, "Remarks on the analytic hierarchy process" in *Management Science* 36(3), 249-258

The way it works is like this. We used a process which is called Analytic Hierarchy Process. You know I was in the army, so I used this quite a lot to buy aircrafts, weapons, guns that sort of thing. Essentially, it requires to you breakdown your problem into different parameters and give a weight to it, the weight changes a little for the two projects. We basically “subcontracted” architecture to Koon Hean¹¹ to evaluate with her panel. And when the numbers come back – when we did all these, it is completely opaque. I do not know what Koon Hean was doing. So we don’t end up having to, you know, play the system. I can’t play the system because I don’t know what scores she is going to come up with. And when everyone is finished, we come together and, on the spot, start the presentation. So we will be seeing each other’s numbers for the first time.

The main advantage is that it forces people who are selecting the system to be transparent. Now, if I don’t use the AHP, then you say you want to buy the equipment. But on what basis do you choose A and B? You can, on the spot, after you have seen what people proposed, that I like this one. Then you can always come up with ways and means to say that that one is better. But that is changing the parameters to suit the gun! The AHP requires you, at that time when you say you want to equipment, to say how you evaluate. And that is exactly what we did. Even before we looked at the submitted proposals, we have to say what are the factors, what are the weights.

Some key points can be picked up from Lim’s representation of the AHP. First, the system requires the problem to be defined before it can begin. This is why it was important that the Integrated Resort as an architectural, urban and developmental model had to be identified and agreed upon by the various participating parties. Second, not only does it require the problem to be defined, it must be quantified into a series of discrete independent variables. These variables are weighted based on an overall analytic of what is the desired outcome. The purpose of this is to break down a complex problem into separate components to facilitate decision-making. Finally, the independence of these variables is reflected in the bureaucratic division of labour. This separation is designed to blind the evaluators and participants so that no one can see outside their immediate problem-space. The sum of these techniques is to create a system that is impersonal and transparent. Hence, “you cannot play the system”.

Thus, as a form of systems analysis, the AHP attempts to instill a certain ethic on the analyst. In Lim’s representation, he suggests that this is a defense mechanism to prevent any individual from “playing the system.” Its overall rationality must be protected. This suspicious attitude towards the AHP and its experts highlights its ineluctably political nature because it acknowledges that experts are also political creatures that must be disciplined. More importantly, it shows how the process itself prefigures the product. In order for the process to begin, the analyst must define the desired outcome by identifying the key parameters of measurement. Thus, the AHP is not just about *finding* the optimal or best solution - it is simultaneously about *producing* the acceptable solution. In the case of this Marina Bay project, the latter effect was highly significant, despite the impression that this is a competition and thus, the best proposal should win. Given that only four developers submitted their bids, the limited choices applied increased pressure upon the system to make sure that at least one of them would veer toward what the government desired in all departments that were being evaluated.

¹¹ Ms Cheong Koon Hean was the CEO of the national planning authority of Singapore.

The convergence between what the government desired and what the developer and architects could offer did not fall in place in a symmetrical or logical manner. Rather, acting in their own narrow interests, participants of the competition played by the rules of the system and focused on obtaining the highest score, which often meant double-guessing what the government wanted. At the same time, bureaucrats used this opportunity to identify those who are credible and open to working with them to close the gap between the sanctioned image and the final product - all meta-attributes not listed in the criteria and incommensurable with the AHP method. None of these tactical maneuvers can be considered in any way as “playing the system” because they work in the interstices of the formal procedure, thus introducing guesswork and opportunism into the competitive logic of the bureaucratic process.

As with many globalizing projects around the world, one key tactic was to establish alliances with well-connected and informed local players (Yeung, 1995; Olds, 1995; Hall and Hubbard, 1996). In this case, an important role played by local architects, developers and planners who partnered with casino developers was to decipher the codes of the bureaucracy and communicate them to the foreign players. After all, the sanctioned image produced in 2005 and the Marina Bay plans are heavily coded representations which an outsider may not be able to interpret. Thus, in their different capacities, local allies advised on general issues or helped craft proposals that were more in line with the government’s vision so as to maximize the chances of winning. Thus, one consultant reveals how his team persuaded Sheldon Adelson to give up the “Venetian Singapore” idea. Another local architect advised the casino developer to use foreign architects since “we are unfortunately still in the mindset that foreign architects do much better work than local architects”.¹²

Another tactic employed was to treat the rules of the competition as more than rules, but as opportunities to present the team as a committed, cooperative and well-organized unit. In that sense, the technique of the competition is instrumental in producing subjects whose relationship with the technique itself is both subversive and docile. A participant explains how the team presented in front of the judges:

We know that the committees and the government bodies will be extremely meticulous people, *the Singapore way*. You know marks will be allocated to architecture, everything. We basically followed that extremely closely, making sure that every topic in that list is addressed and represented. So, if you look at the list, and I can’t remember what it has, but it has everything from architecture to finance. It even has M&E.¹³ It has everything! So that was how we tackled it: to make sure that every topic that was listed was presented.

Second thing is that we were only given 1hr 15 minutes with 45 minutes of Q&A. Knowing that we only had 1hr 15 minutes, we allocated time to every topic. And we made sure that if we were to talk about architecture, it doesn’t take any longer than 10 minutes because every topic has to be addressed.

There are a lot of things to be discussed. So we rehearsed for three days. Everybody flew in, locked ourselves in a hotel, and we rehearsed for three days, down to that 10 minutes.

¹² Anonymous, interview with author, 3 May 2010

¹³ M&E: Mechanical and Engineering

We were rigorous because we knew that the government bodies will be. Having been through other competitions, you know they are so specific on marks. Basically they will tick you off and give you points for this and that. So to score maximum points is to basically answer everything in the list.¹⁴ [Emphasis added]

To follow the rules strictly was a way to connect culturally with the bureaucratic institution. As this participant elaborates, this cultural connection extended to how they structured their presentation according to the evaluation criteria, allocated to each topic a weighted amount of time, and rehearsed the performance until perfection. There was therefore nothing mechanical about following rules – it was an art-form that required discipline and coordination. The ability to address every single topic the bureaucrats were required to tick off and to anticipate possible questions was not just about maximizing scores – it was a performative act that presented oneself as a partner who shared the same material interest and cultural disposition of the bureaucracy.

Again, the competitive mode, or the “Singapore way,” plays a constitutive but inexplicable role in producing the Integrated Resort. As the participant’s recollection shows, the architect must be a salesman, businessman and bureaucrat in order to win the competition. The micro-politics described are not external to the administrative machine, nor do they pervert it or determine the end result. Rather, they are generated in the interactions between a technique and its users, such that the interests of every player become intersected with and contingent on each other.

When Las Vegas Sands submitted its formal proposal, Moshe Safdie had replaced Paul Steelman as the architect. Safdie had prior experience building in Singapore and understood the institutional culture of planning and urban design. He also directed the Urban Design programme at Harvard University, where several senior planners in Singapore received their postgraduate education. Over and above the merits of the design itself, there was a common cultural sensibility that connected the architects with the bureaucrats, and this created unexpected political divisions that shaped the final Integrated Resort.

Safdie’s ability to interpret the planners’ representations is evident in his competition entry. His design included stand-alone pavilions in the water-body and a monumental sky-park that connects all three hotel towers at the top. Though these were not stipulated by the planning authority, similar features had appeared in previous planning documents. Besides the Integrated Resort, the other most important development at Marina Bay was the Marina Bay Financial Centre. When the land was tendered in 2005, incentives were given to the developers to incorporate “sky-connectors” and water pavilions in their development. These were not taken up by the developers of the Financial Centre, but Safdie picked up these clues and understood the rationale to be about the activation of the waterfront as a space of spectatorship and public urban life. The adoption of these features thus establishes him as a perfect mediator between the casino developer and the planner’s vision.

This mediatory role created both conflict and opportunities. Sheldon Adelson was not keen on the sky-park, water pavilions or other “loss centres” like the museum and theatres. He was also generally oblivious to the relationship between the building and the city. When Moshe Safdie was elaborating on the urban qualities of the sky-park during the competition, Adelson interjected and told the jurors that this feature was not necessary. The jurors jumped on the side of the architect and insisted on it. Unlike the long list of design conditions provided by the planners, Sheldon Adelson’s only instructions to the architect were to maximize the floor area for the hotel, retail,

¹⁴ Anonymous, interview with author, 13 January 2011. Certain words are replaced with ‘X’ to protect the identity of the interviewee.

convention halls and casino – apparently this was delivered verbally and through a hand-written note passed under a table.¹⁵ He told the architect to spend as little time as possible on everything else. Another architect who had worked with Adelson in Macau highlights how he thinks purely in terms of numbers. When his colleague presented a project to Adelson, he made the mistake of beginning, in his typical fashion, by talking about design concepts and was shot down almost immediately.¹⁶

This political divide where the architect mediated the conflicting worlds of the developer and the planner continued to shape the rest of the project. On the one hand, the planning bureaucracy exercised its institutional capacity to ensure that the integrity of the winning architectural proposal was not compromised in the course of construction. Without this support, many “extraneous” features such as the sky-park would likely be dropped in the name of speed and economization. The bureaucracy also expedited the various design review meetings to keep the project running on time and track every important design change. On the other hand, the disinterest shown by the developer in these design features allowed the architect to proceed somewhat unmolested. By meeting the raw numerical logic of developer at the global scale, the architect was able to compartmentalize a semi-autonomous zone to focus on design explorations for features such as the sky-park and the Art and Science Museum.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has unpacked the processes that went into assembling the Integrated Resort and how these processes were politically and culturally inflected through a bureaucracy of competition. This does not ignore the agency of architects, developers or bureaucrats, but expands the range of mediating agents and techniques and shows how their interactions cannot be reduced to a single state ideology or economic logic or developmental model. Through this process, the Integrated Resort, assembled to approach the sanctioned image, represents a crisis “resolved”.

The case of Marina Bay Sands attests to the enduring power of urban spectacles in mediating national identity, state power and global corporate interest. Though I have emphasized the contingencies, surprises and tactics at every stage of the process, it is clear that the state - understood as a network of agents, processes and techniques – was instrumental in mediating, and more importantly, concealing conflicting interests. This process of mediation and concealment, which I have called the art of blending, constituted an urban spectacle both in its material and discursive forms. Thus, Sheldon Adelson’s success in winning the bid was in part due to a business model that matched what the government wanted, and in part due to his willingness to delegate the architectural design of the development to the favored architect of the establishment. The Integrated Resort, with its celebrated sky-park, iconic Art and Science museum, bridge that connects the building to the Gardens by the Bay, and an overall star-architect pedigree, has become a spectacle of national pride and global ambition within the larger context of Marina Bay.

By examining carefully the situated encounters in which state power is instantiated through specific agents and procedures, this analysis challenges us to become more alert to the ragged edges where what appears to be coherent representations come apart. Though it is tempting to interpret the new architecture as yet another way to obscure what is *essentially* an inflated casino, this analysis shows that the art of blending was also fraught with internal inconsistencies resulting from unlikely

¹⁵ Interview, anonymous, 18 January 2011

¹⁶ Interview, anonymous, 2 Nov 2010

alliances and inexplicable contingencies. Thus, inside the building, shadows of Venetian gondolas (now in the form of a modern water feature on which plies a Chinese sampan) point to an older developmental model which lingers on uncomfortably, a remnant that somehow was not eradicated. The “successful” partnership between the state and the corporation would also appear strange if we recognize that *Marina Bay Sands* is the only casino in the empire of *Las Vegas Sands* where the brand-name “Sands” comes *after* the location. *Marina Bay Sands* as a hierarchical portmanteau of two identities is not just an expression of how the state and the corporation had come to an agreement on how to preserve each other’s interest through the management of urban spectacles – it is also a powerful expression of how the state struggles to present itself as a coherent and monolithic entity that is univocal and uniform in representation. As this paper shows, a constructivist critique of the state and its sponsored narratives of nationalist modernity can happen not merely at the level of ideology, but also in the middle layer of governance where a set of actors encounter and engage each other within the organized space of the bureaucracy.

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