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F1: One Formula to Bolster the Singaporean Nation

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According to a recent Straits Times poll, Singaporeans apparently seem uninterested in the upcoming Formula 1 event. However, the race should perhaps be seen as more than a novel sporting event. It is a significant means to cement the dominant role of the Marina Bay landscape in the national imagination.

AS SINGAPORE readies itself to host the World's first Formula 1 night race, the expectant air in the city-state seems to have fallen below expectations. A recent poll by the Straits Times suggests that Singaporeans are perhaps uninterested in the upcoming motoring event. Undeniably, the sport loses in mass appeal to football -- our de-facto national sport. However, hosting such a mammoth event contributes more than just tourist dollars and international publicity. Instead, the event has implicit value -- a potential to bolster the concept of the Singaporean nation and identity.

Sites of Importance

The contributive potential of the race lies in the correlation between the event and the site of action -- the Marina Bay. After all, the salience of a site or place is bound to the concept of a 'nation' which is characterized by a mystical bond between people and place. These sites act as necessary anchors for national attachment, memory and meaning because a city cannot merely exist in the mind. The 'nation' being an invisible concept needs to be personified and symbolized before attachments can be conceived. Hence, such 'anchors' are commonplace for nations across the world to the point where certain images become synonymous with the imagination of the city.

For example, one need only think of major cities such as Tokyo, New York, Paris, or Sydney and the respective images of Shibuya, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, or the aerial view of the water-fronted Opera House will come to mind. These 'totems' ultimately become rallying points of national pride and distinctive forms of national identification -- fundamentally crucial tools for nation-building.

The richness of the Marina Bay

Likewise, for Singapore, the Marina Bay landscape has emerged as the city's dominant image as seen in the reproduced visuals in photographs, maps, televised images, and tourist promotional materials. While this engrains the cognitive prominence of the Marina Bay, the landscape of the city is not simply an aesthetically pleasing image for appreciation and consumption. The spaces of the city should also be valued as highly dynamic, multisensory arenas of engagement and interaction as well as theatricality.

Further, the Bay is a site steeped in value and meaning, which grants it capital to serve as a national 'totem'. As the nation's jewel, it is a site of preservation, renewal, revitalization and reinvention. Government and urban planners have expanded every effort to infuse the Bay with a phantasmagoric array of spectacular devices to enthrall. For example, early immigrant life-in-action at the Singapore River is immortalized in specially commissioned bronze sculptures, freezing the past within the present future.

Structures of our colonial history and Singaporean heritage are preserved and renewed in modern guises such as today's Fullerton Hotel (formerly the old Post Office), the soon-to-be-complete Clifford Pier complex, Old Parliament House, as well as the Supreme Court and the Padang etc. Modernity and progress are enshrined in the distinctive skyscraper-lined central business district (perhaps today losing some of its shine). But no fear – it will soon be buffed and empowered by the massive Integrated Resort and its adjacent new financial district of gleaming new-age metal and granite.

Singapore has also invested efforts in distinct architectural iconography - akin to structures such as Beijing's *Bird Nest* stadium, or Dubai's upcoming *Burj Dubai* - in our infamous Esplanade Theatres. An architectural icon of unprecedented scale on the island, its unique external silhouette and cavernous magnificence contribute to the imagery of the Bay. Ambitiously, the government has also positioned the Bay as the nation's own eden via a multi-million dollar project to transform the Marina Bay into the *Garden City by the Bay* -- announced in 2005 by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Finally, to take this all in, a theatrical device that plays on the imagery and sensory experience is embodied in the Singapore Flyer. This is a timed and calculated optical experience which presents the landscape and ultimately, the nation of Singapore in a luminous and pristine virtuality.

Performance on Site

How does all these relate to the race? Value and meaning aside, the strength of the Bay as a national 'totem' cannot rely simply on the aesthetics of the site. Instead, it requires a certain element of 'performativity' that will attribute the attention and importance needed. There is a conflation of national pride, excitement, joy and exhibitionism that dominates these mammoth events. It is these activities and their resultant interactions between lived space and the living that will bolster the rallying ability of the Bay. For example, the Bay has been frequently utilized for national events; playing host to the nation's most important and nationalistic event – our annual National Day Parade on the world's largest floating facility.

The platform's strategically located position allows participants and viewers to enjoy the arresting landscape as an impressive backdrop to the heralded event. Likewise, the various seating positions of the Formula 1 Grand Prix are carefully calculated angles to not only catch the sporting action but also to experience a visual theatrical presentation of the almost utopian nature of the Marina Bay landscape.

Tracing the Heart of the City

Hence, as the serpentine track winds around the Bay and encircles spectators within a spectacular

landscape pregnant with symbolism and meaning, it becomes evident that these tracks are not simply for the high velocity machine-beasts. Instead, for the observer, with every arresting minute it takes to loop around the bay, the mind's eye traces the heart, character, history and beauty of Singapore in a heartbeat. This, multiplied ad nauseum by the 61 grand laps it will take to win this race, will ultimately add to the centrality of the Bay as a national 'totem' and anchor the imagery in the imagination of both its inhabitants and visitors.

Thus, as the final stages of preparation commences, it is with bated breaths that one anticipates the projection of Singapore's comeliness across the world. Grand emotions will be evoked – the feelings of immense nationalistic pride, celebratory joy, all while witnessing the dazzling hypnotic beauty of the Bay.

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