

The Star Vista **THE BOLD SHAPE OF LANDSCAPES TO COME**

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PROJECT CREDITS

Location: Between Buona Vista MRT Station and Rochester Park, One North, Singapore **Client:** CapitaMalls Asia Limited and Rock Productions Pte Ltd **Completion Date:** 2012 **Lead Landscape Architect:** ICN Design International Pte Ltd **Architect and Interior Designer:** Aedas Pte Ltd (Hong Kong and Singapore Offices) **Civil and Structural Engineer:** Parsons Brinkerhoff Pte Ltd **Mechanical Electrical Engineer:** Mott Macdonald Pte Ltd **Lighting Consultant:** Lighting Planners Associates **Quantity Surveyor:** Langdon & Seah Singapore Pte Ltd **Main Contractor:** Hexacon Construction Pte Ltd **Soft Landscape Contractor:** Nature Landscapes Pte Ltd **Fountain and Water Feature Contractor:** Venus Enterprises Pte Ltd **Site Area:** 19,000 m² **GFA:** 62,000 m²

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The Buona Vista and Portsdown terrain of the One North precinct is one of low rolling hills and narrow valleys, studded with mature trees. Much of the area was previously part of military camps and residential quarters occupied long ago by the British Army. Roads were mostly narrow and winding, and there was almost a countryside air to the place.

The master plan prepared for One North by Zaha Hadid Architects in 2003 prescribes a relationship between the new developments and existing topography, where buildings become fused with remodelled hills, so that the landforms wrap around the buildings, while the buildings mould themselves to the landforms at different levels.

The 15-storey Civic and Cultural Centre, renamed Star Vista, was proposed as part of this vision. The monumental building houses a 5,000-seat theatre, set like a huge spaceship high above the mall below; the new-generation lifestyle mall comprises more than 100 shops and restaurants. The site is just across the road from the quaint houses of Rochester Park and within an easy walk from Buona Vista MRT Station.

Form of a Star

The building was constructed on a seven-metre-high hill, which was completely cut away to provide for basements and underground car parks. The back of the hill, however, was kept, as the existing MRT line and its supporting columns run the full length of the original hilltop along the northern boundary.

To compensate for the loss of the hill, the planning conditions required the new architecture and landscape to “reconstruct” the appearance of a hill by wrapping a man-made “landform” around all the lower

structures, thus creating the impression that the building is rising above the original terrain. Much of the building does not connect immediately to the street level, as most buildings do, but seems to sit above a sloping green base.

The building is both huge and awe-inspiring. Few buildings break away from the rectilinear form as far as Star Vista does. Its presence evokes the grand imagery of a “geological” formation lifting itself from the bedrock or a vast boulder perched upon a tectonic tumble of rock shards and fossilised trees. This was instant inspiration for the landscape designer. The decision to take this dramatic object and set it into a new landscape that befitted its extraordinariness was clear.

As the design evolved, the new landscape served less to add to the architectural fantasy, but rather to bring it down to earth, to connect it to its roots that were deemed to lie deep underground in the basements. Rather than hide the imagery of shattered geology, the landscape designer set out to make the building seem like a rocky outcrop, one that has weathered a long time and been covered by overgrown landscape.

Breezy Basement Cavern

So the landscape grew from below the ground and crept up to the three landscaped main public levels. The lowest level is the basement atrium, a vast semi-exposed cave-like space, where huge columns rise up from the floor like giant tree trunks to support the massive structure above. This atrium is thus the cavern at the base of the “hill”, with outdoor eating and entertainment spaces, fountains, paths, and plazas weaving in and out of the scattered greenery and water features. The entire space is naturally ventilated, enhanced with air-flow devices, but not air conditioning.





The basement is very much a “people’s place”, with a large gathering area in the middle and shops and restaurants all around, connected to all levels by escalators. A big and well-used open-air amphitheatre faces the central space, with a dancing fountain set in the floor of the performance area. When required, the fountain can be turned off and the dry floor can be used as a venue for a number of activities.

The choreographed water jets of the circular fountain are a great attraction for children. Plants suited to the rather low light levels are laid out in curved formations to match the main pathways, so that it is easy and comfortable for visitors to get around. As always in semi-outdoor landscapes, where rain does not fall on the plants, leaves tend to get dusty. Hence, plants need to be washed regularly.

Higher up, inside the vault of the atrium, trailing greenery at parapets enhances the sense of being in a green and airy cavern. On the third floor, a semi-outdoor performance theatre with sloping seating juts out high above the street, separated from the elements only by a row of frangipani trees.

Tectonic Fountain

The basement leads up to street level, where the streets are sloping so nothing is flat and where the main entrances are. Recognising that the first floor is several metres above the road at the main entrance, this entrance facing Buona Vista Park became the ideal location for a grand water feature. Extending the metaphor of a “geological uplift”, the water feature was conceived as a “tectonic” abstraction of fractured rock and broken strata, down which sheets of water would flow. The word “tectonic” refers to the structure of the earth’s crust and the large-scale processes that take place within it.

The tectonic fountain is located at the southeast entrance to the building, which has the widest spaces and opens directly into the high atrium. The tectonic fountain therefore occupies a position of importance, as the first element that visitors will see upon entering the building from this side. The entire landscape was stratified in layers, a series of sedimentary outcrops culminating in a rift, from which the waters of subterranean aquifers pour.

The fountain appears in two parts, with a ramp and stair dividing it, but was conceived as one water system. Thus both its left and right sides flow similarly. To the right, as one looks towards the building, water cascades down the stratified terraces from the “stream” above and gushes into a sloping textured surface that curves down to the lowest pool below. To the left, the main fountain follows the same form and configuration and flows with gushing white water. On both sides, “intrusions” of linear granite blocks rise above the water, like the harder pieces of rock seen in natural waterfalls, dividing the flow of water.

The fountain is designed as a series of horizontal layers with a combination of pools, waterfalls, and rock. The top pool slopes toward the timber café deck, to give the diners the view of a wide arc of falling water as a backdrop. This also fulfils one of the principles of feng shui of letting water flow towards the building.

Although the end-result was not nearly as “shattered” as intended at the start due to constraints of cost, safety, structural loading, and maintenance, the fountain is still a dynamic feature that fits the building and creates a dramatic entrance. The timber-decked sitting areas and cafés set within this rock and water feature are unique and popular corners.



1. Star Vista is envisioned as part spaceship and part crystalline earth formation (Photo: Jiwen).
2. Star Vista is lifted above the road level on planted "strata" that remake the original hill.
3. The building shape inspired a vision of a fractured geology, which gave rise to the tectonic fountain, a dynamic water feature at the southeast entrance.

4. The hillside behind the building is the MRT route, perched on a sliver of original ground.
- 5, 6. The breezy lower basement atrium is filled with shops, cafés, and a performance area.
7. Densely planted terraces conceal parts of the building behind, but give the impression of a landform wrapping around the base of the building.

8. The tectonic fountain lies at the main building entrance and cools the transition from the hot street to the shady interior.
9. Greenery defines walkways and, with well-positioned openings, access to café decks and outdoor eateries.



Remaking the Hill

From the first level, the building rises to a much higher second level, and this is where the remaking of the hill comes in. A series of steep earth-filled terraces wrap around two sides of the building where the hill used to be. These terraces are integral parts of the building structure, with shops, car parks, and services embedded within them to recreate “slopes”.

The remains of the existing hill beneath the MRT line were also fused into the new topography, adding to the impression that the new building is set on the original hill. The fact that four basements lie below is admirably not immediately obvious to most people who see and experience this building.

The created “hilltop”, at the second level on the north side, is a pleasant and atmospheric place, where the outdoor cafés sit amidst sweeps of shrubs that are set with clusters of lightly foliated Katong (*Cynometra malaccensis*) and *Tristania* (*Tristaniopsis whiteana*) trees. This verdant hilltop with its open plazas, cafés, and walkways has a direct connection to Buona Vista MRT Station via a covered walkway and escalators. There is a water connection too between the upper level and tectonic fountain below. The eastern side of the second level is bordered by a stylised “mountain stream”, a flowing water channel that runs alongside the main footpath and cascades down towards the main entrance at street level. The terraced hillslope, with its lush foliage, follows the cascading stream all the way down.

Outside, shrubs and trees are planted at the street level around all sides of the building, where the walkways, drops-offs, taxi stand, and outdoor refreshment areas all form parts of a lively and shady streetscape. The open, south frontage to Buona Vista Park will ensure that the building is not overshadowed, allowing light and fresh air into the complex at all levels.

Planting Strategy

The planting strategy for the project followed the natural theme of the rebuilt hill and inspiration of geological formations. Planting needed to be robust, easy to maintain, and good-looking, which were the primary considerations over stretching the botanical vocabulary. Plants like *Murraya paniculata*, shrubby *Ficus microcarpa* “gold”, *Syzygium campanulatum*, and *Calliandra ermarginata* formed the green masses on the “hillslope” terraces. As trees planted in the terraces needed to be slender and have narrow roots, the moderate-sized Katong tree was chosen to be the main feature.

A range of reliable shrubs and ground covers were planted throughout the landscape levels. Although there were no “wunderplants” in the selection, the key was to achieve an attractive landscape as a whole. The interior plants were also selected for their tolerance to lower light levels and ability to survive in heavily trafficked spaces where many plants would struggle to survive.

Conclusion

The final landscape fulfilled all of the objectives of the original master plan. Building and landscape coalesce and merge with the surroundings, even connecting to the thin sliver of Buona Vista Park at its northern extremity. Star Vista presents a remarkable green city, where a seamless landscape flows throughout the park, path, road, and building. Unfortunately, the district around it remains dominated by roads, with few shady, landscaped, traffic-free pedestrian connections. The next innovation needed is to tame the road portion of the planning equation. If we were to succeed, buildings like Star Vista would have far bigger landscapes surrounding them and pedestrians would walk more freely in far more pleasant surroundings. 



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10. The scenes after dark are cool and enticing. Late night revellers are, however, discouraged from cooling off in the water course.

11. At night the basement atrium is full of light and movement, due to the fountain and occasional show, exhibit, or event.

12. Cooled using simple, low-cost methods, Star Vista offers plenty of opportunities to dine outdoors despite the hot climate.