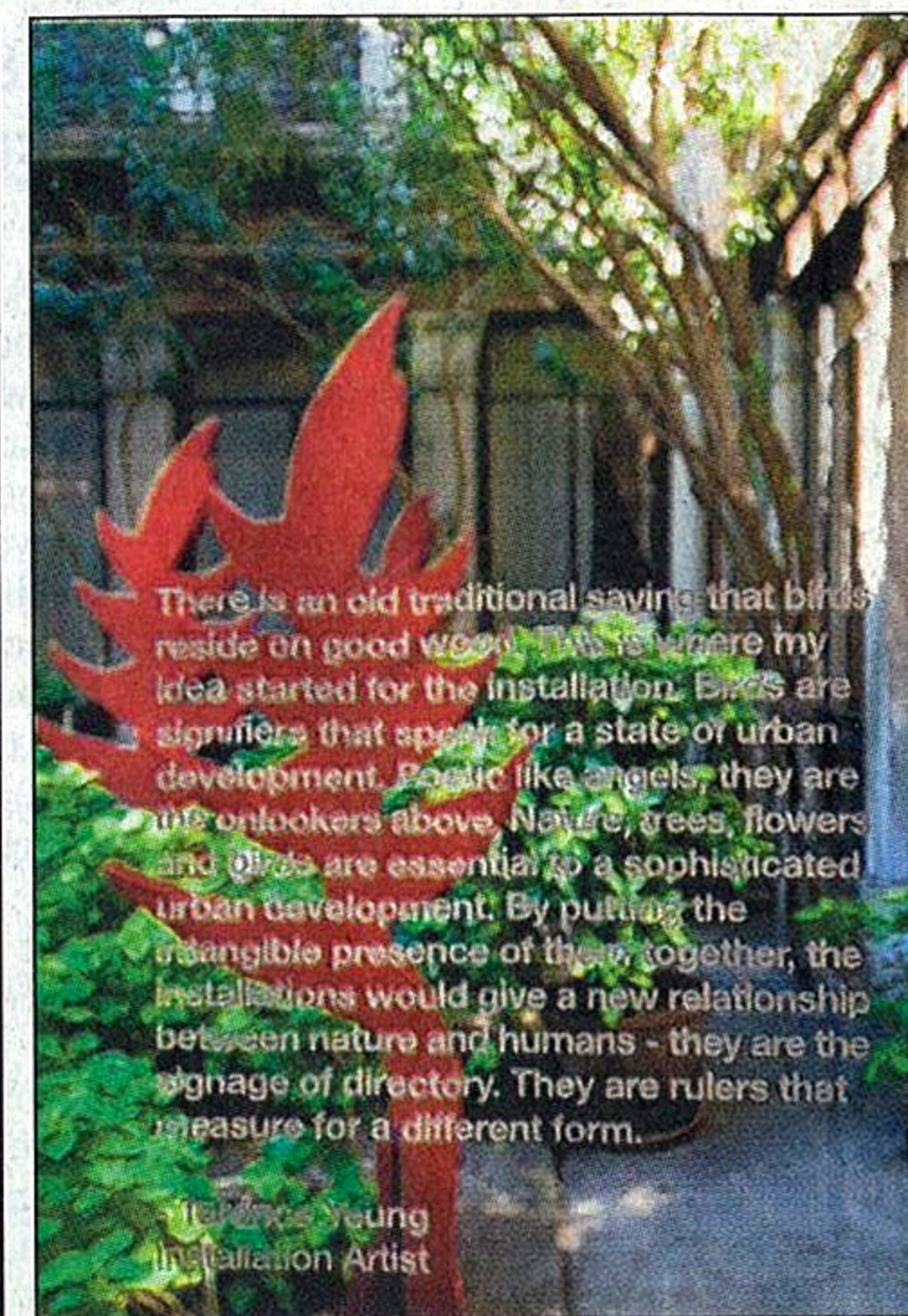
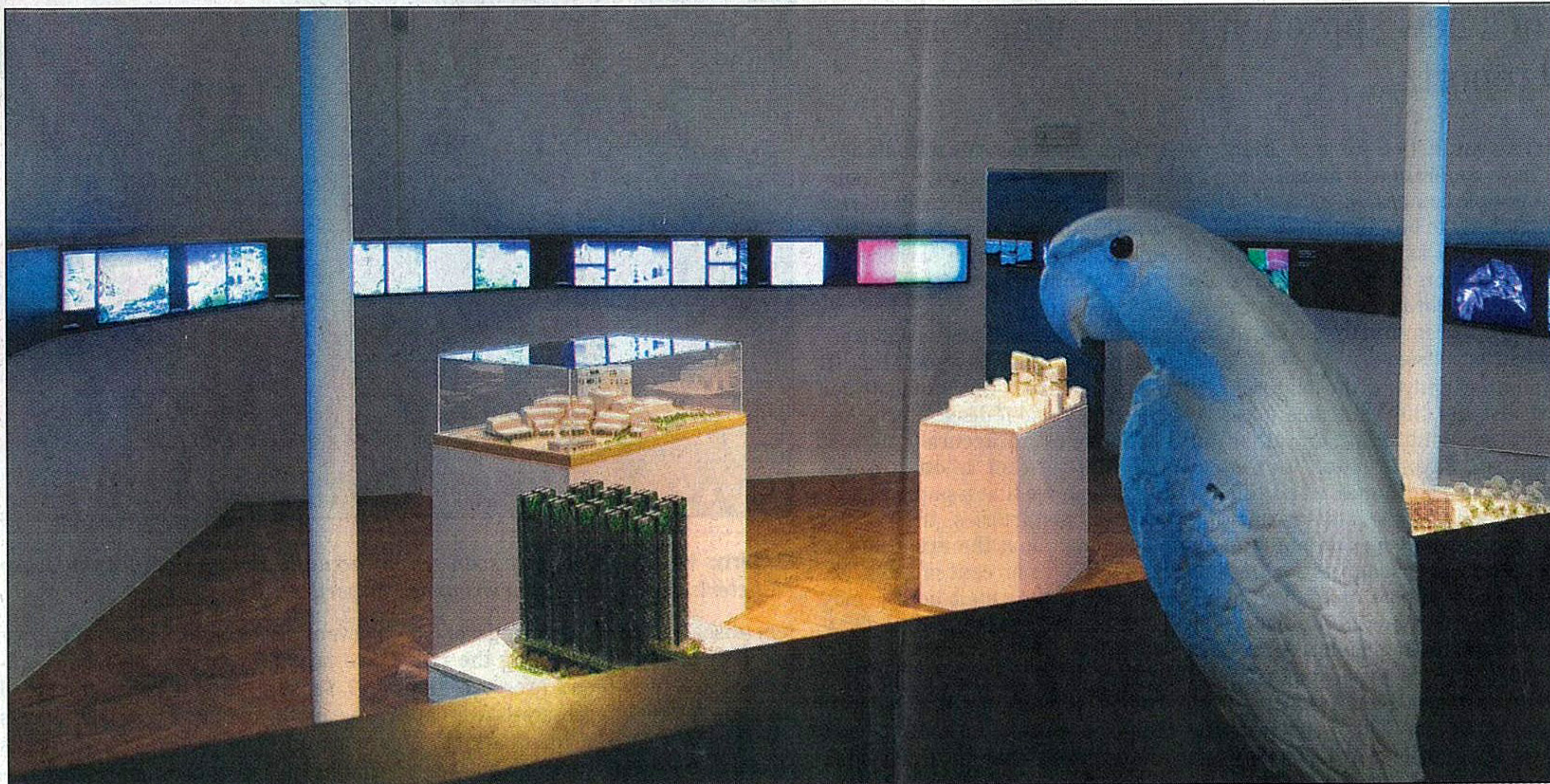


**GEOFFREY EU** checks out the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and finds out how S'pore architecture stacks up against the world



**The Singapore Pavilion:** Titled *Singapore Built & Unbuilt*, it has plenty of foreign talent on display

## A distinctive showcase

**T**HERE was glamour to burn in Venice last week, with an impressive selection of mega yachts docked alongside the city's main drag, A-list sightings all over town and Bellinis (which are to Venetians what Singapore Slings are to us) flowing freely at Harry's Bar. Just about the only thing higher than the star index was the astronomical rate of a mediocre hotel room — but then who's complaining?

The legions of lurking paparazzi may have been training their telephotos on the goings-on at the annual Venice Film Festival,



**Eye-catching:** The Danish Pavilion (above) and Spanish Pavilion (right)

but even as Golden Lion awards were being handed out to the film world, heavyweights from the world of architecture, including Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas, were congregating at an event just as significant as its cinematic counterpart — the 10th International Architecture Exhibition.

About 50 nations — including Singapore — are taking part in the exhibition, a prestigious biennial showcase for architects and their designs and which alternates with the 110-year-old Venice Art Biennale and runs until Nov 19. This year's exhibition is titled *Cities, Architecture and Society*. It explores key issues faced by large metropolitan areas, including city planning, urban infrastructure and social dynamics, and was curated by Richard Burdett, an authority on urbanisation at the London School of Economics.

The Singapore Pavilion, tucked away

on the third floor of a former orphanage away from the main show venues but conveniently closer to the heart of Venice, is called *Singapore Built & Unbuilt*, a reference to recently built, soon-to-be built and unbuilt projects in three different growth areas of Singapore, representing winning as well as finalist (or unbuilt) entries from recent high-profile competitions.

Unlike other national pavilions, the primary feature of the Singapore exhibition, designed as an 80-metre-long installation comprising a single ribbon of light boxes running along the walls of several rooms, shows works from leading local architects as well as projects by international firms with brand name cachet. The featured projects reinforce the oft-repeated notion that Singapore is open to recruiting creative talent from all over the world in order to create a world-class city.

When Singapore took part in the Biennale for the first time in 2004, its pavilion featured a diverse range of private and public sector works, almost all by local architects. This time around, however, there is plenty of foreign talent on display. Two obvious examples are the proposed Marina Bay Integrated Resort by the US-based architect Moshe Safdie and the One-North Master Plan by UK architect Zaha Hadid.

Among the 31 projects featured are alternate proposals for the Singapore Arts School, a condominium @ one-north and Duxton Plain Public Housing. The MRT station at the Singapore Art Museum includes the winning design by WOHA Architects as well as unbuilt proposals by Geoff Malone International and H.U.A.Y Architects. Several other projects on display at the pavilion show both the winning and finalist designs.

"By sharing these proposals, we hope to inform and provoke a debate on the way the future of an urban city like Singapore is shaped," said Edmund Cheng, chairman of DesignSingapore Council, at the official launch of the Singapore Pavilion last Saturday. "The Singapore Pavilion is an expression of Singapore's inclusive approach to architecture."

Visitors to the pavilion are surprised at what's happening in Singapore, says Milton Tan, commissioner for the Singapore Pavilion and director of DesignSingapore Council, which is the design development arm of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts. "They didn't expect to see the pace, the quality of design and the participation of international architects at our pavilion," he says.

"We almost take it for granted ourselves — looking for excellence in any area, we must tap the world's talents. In condensed form like this, it becomes so much more obvious, but what was an obvious move on our part turns out to be an exceptional one as seen by outsiders." He adds: "Singapore is built more on innovation and ideas than steel and concrete."

More than anything else, the works shown in the Singapore Pavilion are an expression of an open approach to architecture, as manifested by having international competitions for important projects, says Dr Tan. "Almost without trying, the people involved in many of our projects are like a who's who of global architecture."

As for how local architects perceive this development, it's all about enlarging the pie by collaborating with international firms, he says. "Although in real terms local architects may be getting a smaller percentage of works, the size of the pie is bigger in absolute terms."

He adds: "Connected to that is the fact that we're raising the bar for quality works — it puts pressure on our architects to do a high level of work because they are competing against the best."

### Global nature of architecture

In addition, the global nature of architecture these days means that local architects also need to compete for foreign projects. There's just not enough work in Singapore to support a large design sector," he says. "The world is our market-place so we can't have double standards." In an effort to create a more dynamic exhibition, a new design competition was launched at the Singapore Pavilion. Designers around the world were invited to submit innovative designs for seats in trains on the country's new Circle Line, set to open in 2010.

Since the law of averages dictates that it isn't possible to win every competition they enter, architects who compete regularly will have a significant body of unbuilt works in their portfolios. In a lighthearted moment, the Japanese architect Toyo Ito, who is special adviser to the Singapore Pavilion, says he first mooted the idea of a pavilion featuring unbuilt projects because he had been unsuccessful at several competitions — in Singapore and elsewhere — in the past. "Some of my best works are unbuilt," he says.

Mr Ito was speaking at a forum in the Singapore Pavilion to discuss the ways in which design competitions help to trans-

form a city. "Why didn't my design win? Maybe it was too conceptual and something ahead of its time," he says. "But the importance of unbuilt works remains significant."

Another speaker at the forum was Zaha Hadid, who had pipped Mr Ito to the post in winning the competition for the One-North master plan for the Buona Vista district. Ms Hadid, the reigning diva of the architecture world and a Pritzker Prize winner whose early designs never made it past the competition stage, says her projects were destined to be resurrected some day in one form another.

"We had a good time doing all those projects — I always believed that there would be a time when they would be done," she says. "That period of 'research' makes it easier for us now — it allows us to work on many projects simultaneously."

She adds: "People think architects should do it for love — for many years, we did do it that way and I would not have discovered so many things if I hadn't gone through all that. We have to decide to open the door instead of staying inside the room. If you open the door, some good things come in and some bad things come in, but it is sure to be exciting."

Singapore architects speaking at the forum were Richard Hassell of WOHA and Rita Soh, president of the Singapore Institute of Architects, while Tai Lee Siang of DP Architects acted as moderator. "As an architect, I find the Singapore Pavilion interesting because of the wide variety of architecture and the solutions it offers for the city," says Mr Tai.

He adds: "My criticism is that — with Singapore having been a successful city — we should be brave and help the world to look for larger solutions. I think Singapore can offer more in the next Biennale by telling the world what we have and letting it be in the forefront. Singapore architecture can be a lot more impactful."

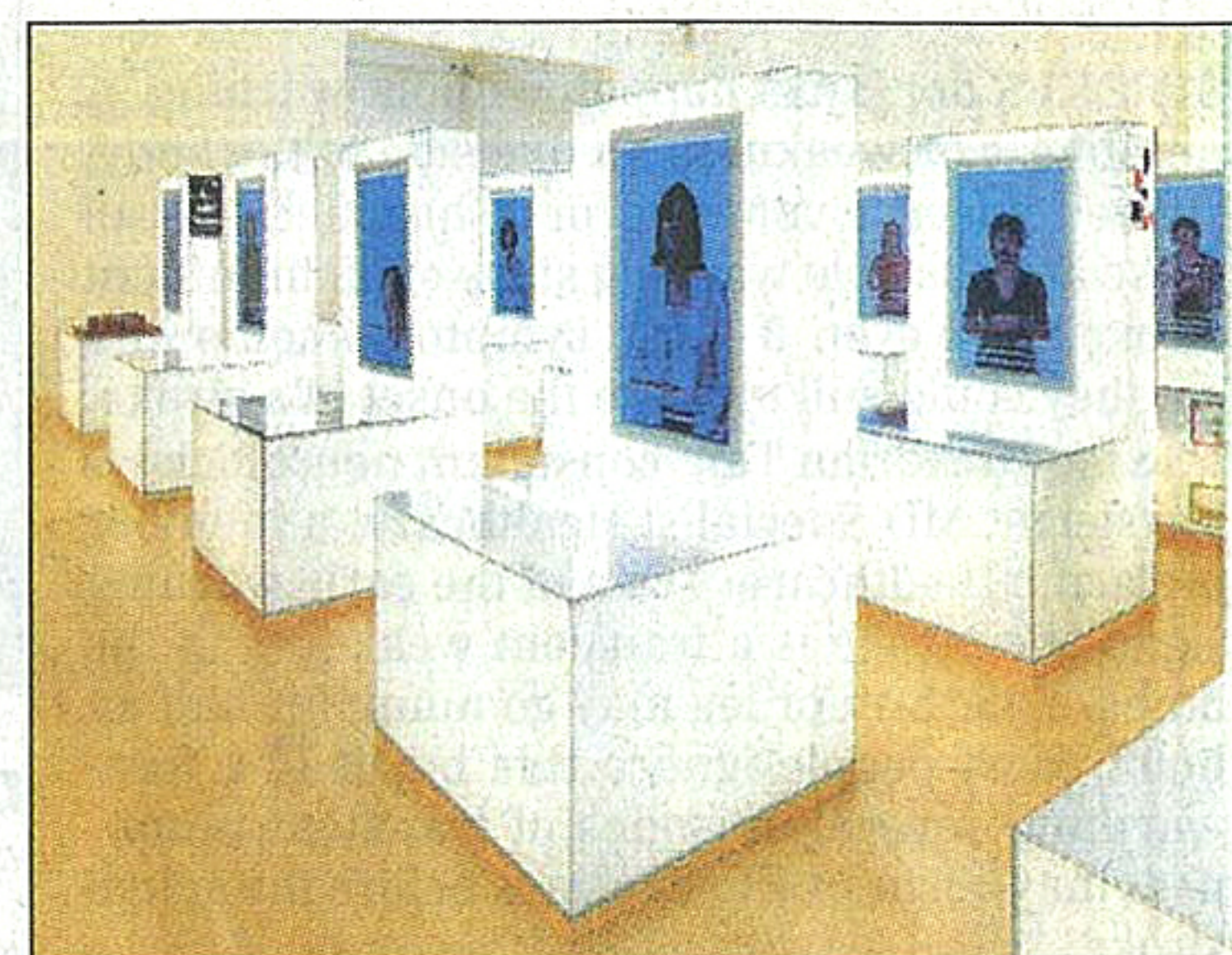
The main exhibition is housed in two large spaces near the eastern end of Venice. A detailed study of the development issues facing 16 major cities is featured in the Corderie dell'Arsenale, a former naval shipyard that dates back over 700 years. Meanwhile, the permanent national pavilions for some 22 countries are scattered over the expansive grounds of the Giardini — or gardens.

One of the individual country exhibitions that caught the eye was the Spanish Pavilion, which features a large installa-

tion comprising a grid of 55 video screens featuring interviews with Spanish citizens — all of them female — from various cultural backgrounds. "They represent the protagonists of the city, those who live in it, build it, manage it and design it," says curator Manuel Blanco.

The Danish Pavilion was also notable for its subject matter — a collaborative effort featuring, oddly enough, projects on sustainable urban development in four different Chinese cities. Architectural teams from Denmark spent six months in the cities working with Chinese universities on developing workable solutions to urban problems. For example, Danish firm COBE and Chongqing University jointly proposed *Magic Mountains*, an urban design for a new "green" CBD of "inhabitable mountains" that resemble the natural landscape around the city.

The Japan Pavilion features architecture that is closely related to nature while the China Pavilion, located in an outdoor



space in the Arsenale, showcases a giant garden installation made from over 60,000 recycled roof tiles, with a bamboo bridge that allows visitors to walk on one section of it.

"What's nice (about the Venice Biennale) is the sense of carnival where even though it's a serious event, there is an atmosphere of innocence mixed with idealism," says Sim Boon Yang of Eco.Id, who designed the Singapore Pavilion. He adds: "The Biennale is the place where people try to be a lot more alternative and where the mood is unadulterated by commercialism and the difficulties of the profession."

*The writer was a member of the commissioning panel for the Singapore Pavilion.*