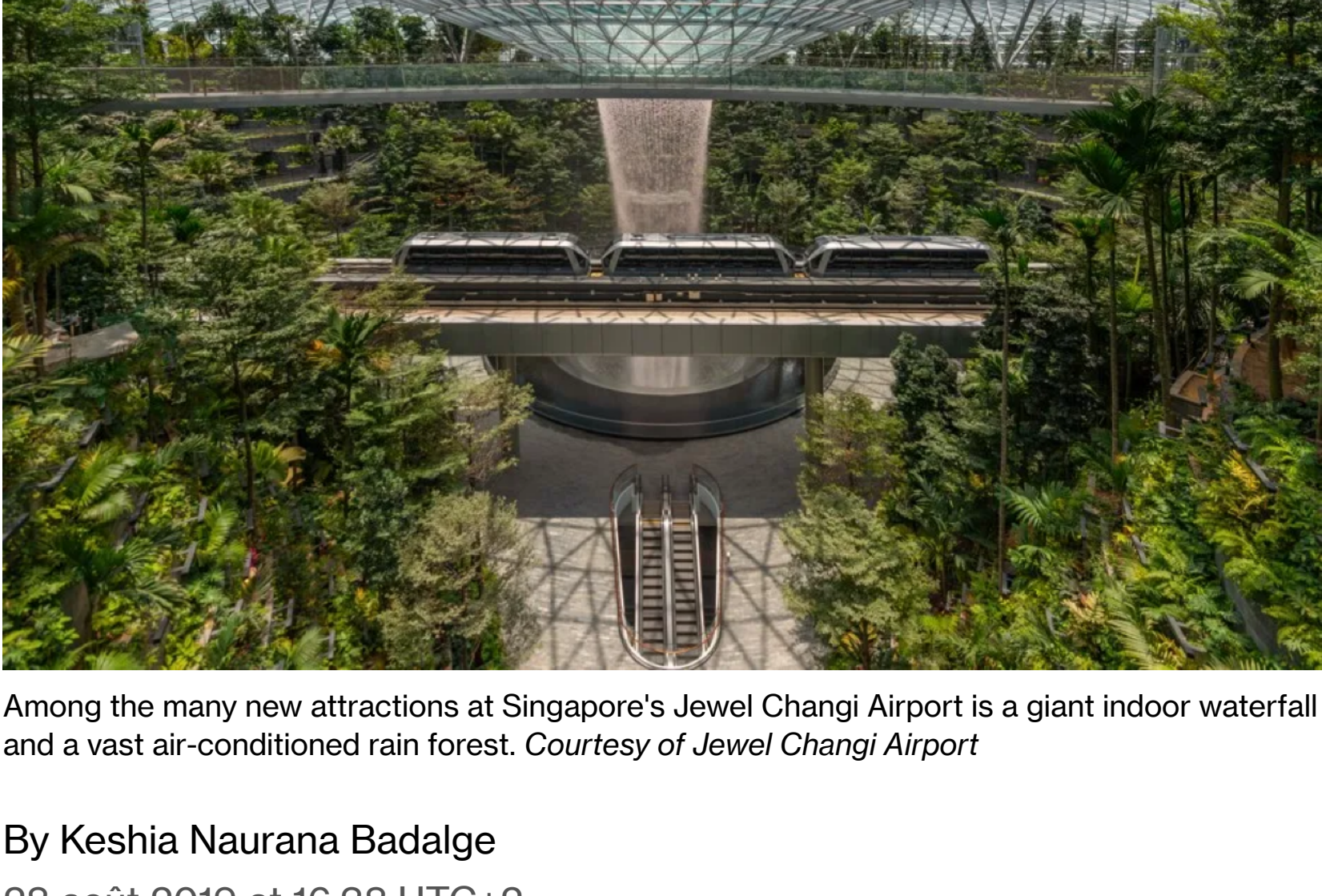


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# Why Singaporeans Really Love Their Airport

The Moshe Safdie-designed addition to Changi Airport allows even more Singaporeans to do their favorite thing: Hang out at the airport.



Among the many new attractions at Singapore's Jewel Changi Airport is a giant indoor waterfall and a vast air-conditioned rain forest. Courtesy of Jewel Changi Airport

By Keshia Naurana Badalge

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As a child, my grandmother and I would often spend the day at Changi Airport in Singapore. We weren't going anywhere; we'd just sit at the head of the Skytrain with a bag of french fries from McDonalds at Terminal 3 between our knees, shuttling from one terminal to the next. It felt like a vacation.

We might go to Terminal 1 to watch planes touch down, or visit the secret staff canteen at the basement of Terminal 2, behind an unlabeled door, where we could get *chendol* and *char kway teow* at local-hawker prices.

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Later, in junior college, my classmates and I escaped our small, stuffy apartments to come to the airport and study for the national GCSE A Level Examinations, splaying out our textbooks in restaurants and benches and cafes. I celebrated my 18th birthday there with my best friend, Sujin, at the basement Coffee Club at the end of an all-night study session. How many other airports draw crowds of locals to eat, play, and just hang out?



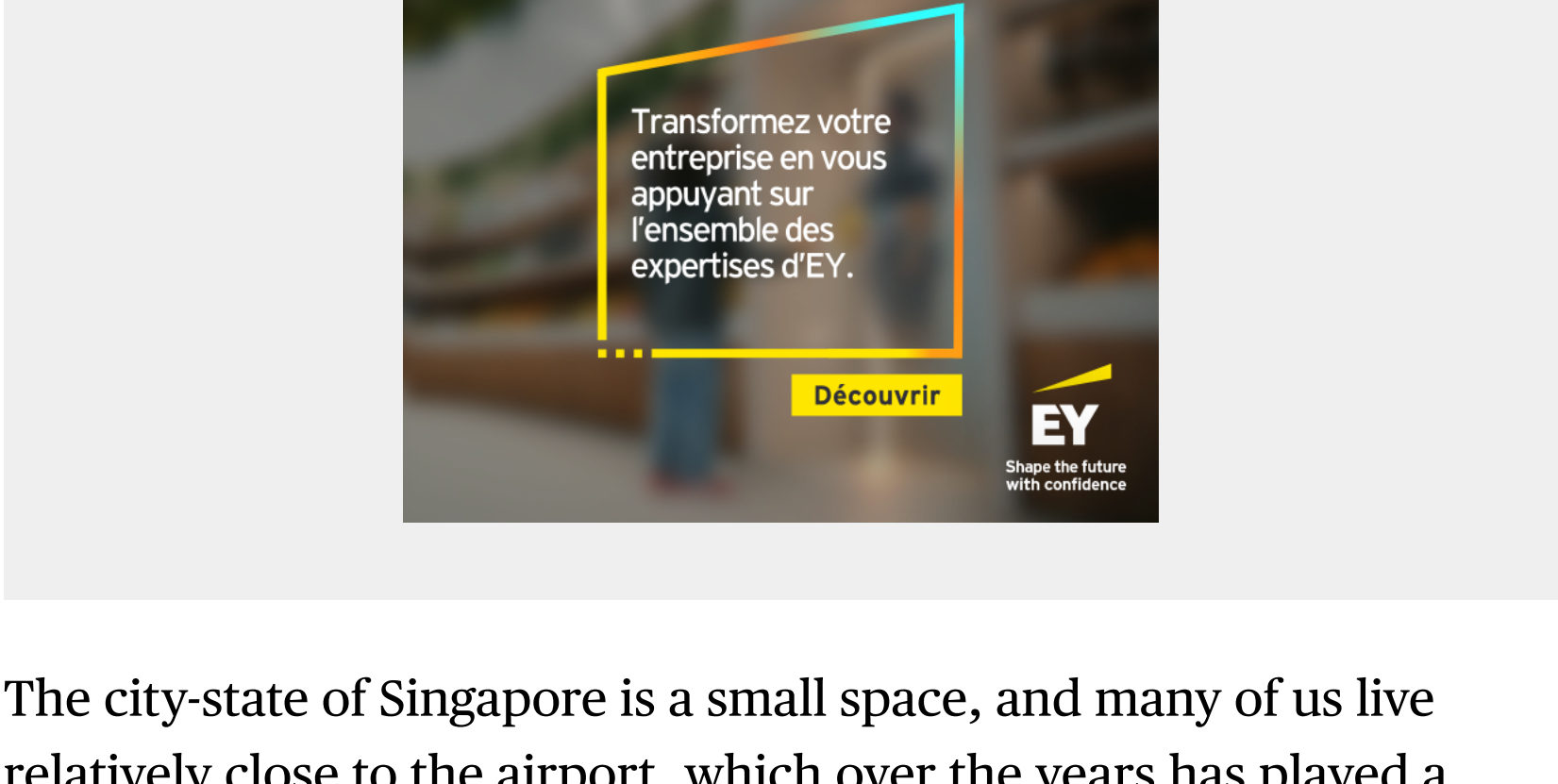
But Changi is no ordinary airport. For seven consecutive years, Skytrax has rated it the best airport in the world. And with the recent opening of a new extension to the facility, an elaborate Narnia-like facility called Jewel Changi Airport, the Singapore airport experience is reaching for even greater heights. Designed by Moshe Safdie and his team at Safdie Architects, the 1.5 million-square-foot dome offers a typical airport-mall mix of retail, hotel, and dining options. But it also boasts a range of eye-popping amenities designed to lure both travelers and locals.

Inside, a lush four-story rainforest called the Forest Valley thrives, with seating areas for visitors dispersed among approximately 2,000 trees and 100,000 shrubs.\* The central attraction is a seven-story Rain Vortex, the tallest indoor waterfall in the world, which thunders down from a central oculus in the roof. The falling water recirculates rainwater and moderates temperatures, so it always feels cool and airy inside this man-made forested oasis. At night, the cascade serves as a canvas for performances and light shows. On the topmost level, the Canopy Park adds a host of over-the-top attractions, including a glass-bottomed bridge, a Hedge Maze with motion-sensor-triggered flowers that bloom as you walk through, and bouncing "Skynets" that allow visitors to literally hang out above ground and stretch their flight-weary legs.



The top level of the Jewel's Canopy Park features giant bouncing "Skynets" for visitors. Courtesy of Jewel Changi Airport

But what can't be seen in photos—and what makes this airport even more meaningful to Singaporeans like me—is this: Unlike other airports around the world that exist mainly to channel people to their transportation vessels, Changi Airport has always been a place built for local pleasure as well. The Jewel is the result of Safdie Architects' dedicated study of the very Singaporean tradition of hanging out at the airport, and the result is a building that seems to perfectly serve and support this practice.



The city-state of Singapore is a small space, and many of us live relatively close to the airport, which over the years has played a unique role in our lives as an open-all-night, free-to-all air-conditioned public amenity. Accessibility helps: By train or bus, it takes 30 minutes to get from the Central Business District or downtown shopping area to the airport by train or bus. It's cheap, too. From my home in the northeast of the country, public transportation to the airport costs just \$1.84 Singapore dollars (about \$1.32 USD). There are no extra airport entrance fees or the kind of additional AirTrain tickets that JFK passengers may be acquainted with.

Even before the Jewel opened, the airport had a lot to offer: Its four existing terminals, which hosted 65.6 million travelers last year, feature a rooftop swimming pool, a movie theatre, Kinetic art installations, a sunflower garden, a giant slide (the world's tallest in an airport), a butterfly garden, and an amazing food court. The entire airport mood is relaxed, familial, jovial. Families have reunion dinners, birthday celebrations, and gatherings at Changi Airport. Couples go on dates here. Years later, they come back to hold their weddings at the airport's Crowne Plaza Hotel.

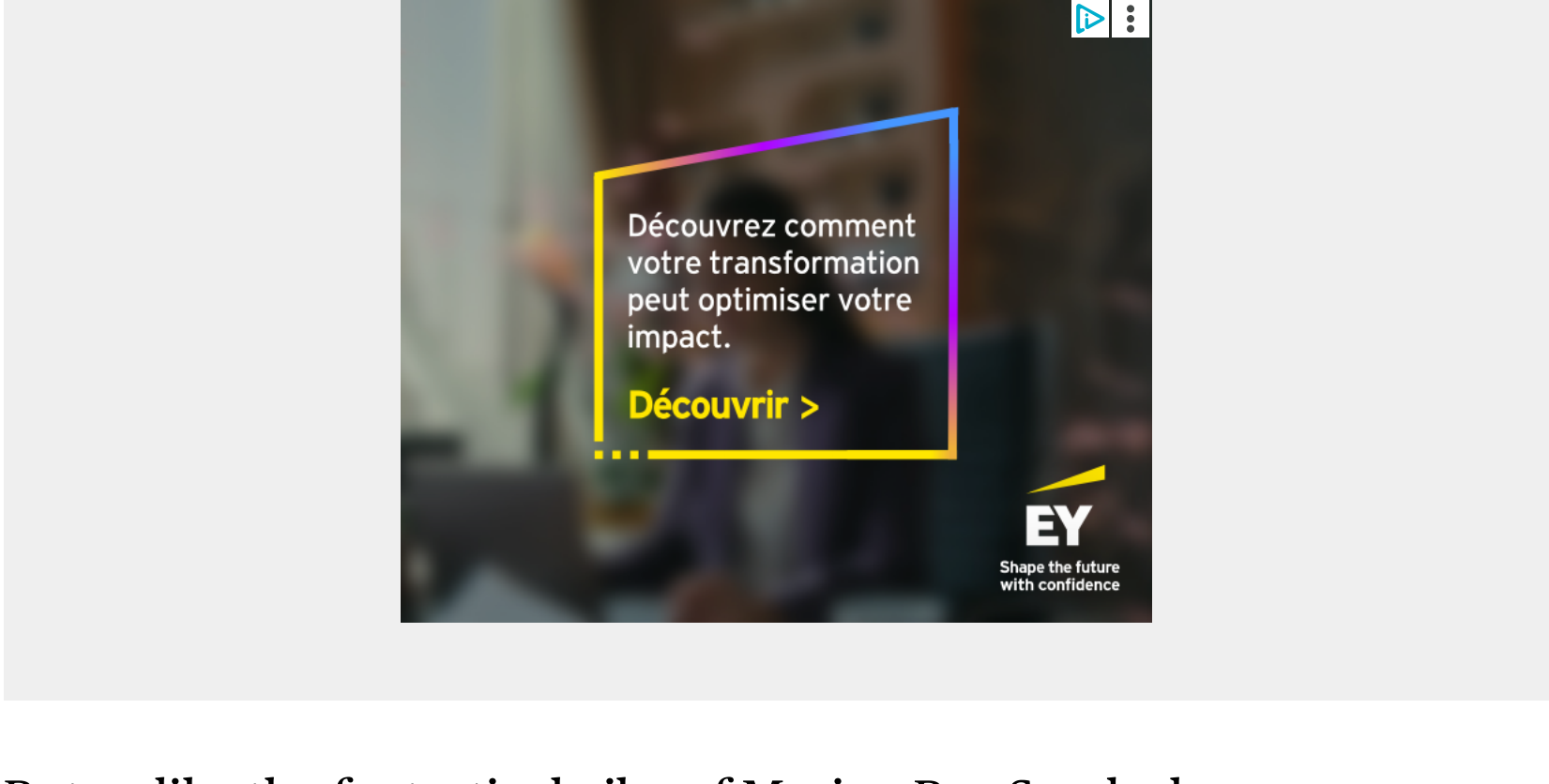
"There is more to life than being afraid of airports."

Safdie Architects saw all of this and built the Jewel to accommodate the airport's outsized influence on the lives of locals. "Singaporeans have such an affinity for the airport," Moshe Safdie says. "I think it probably began with the fact that it was available over long hours, it was accessible by transit, and it was air-conditioned. It's a tradition that held on."

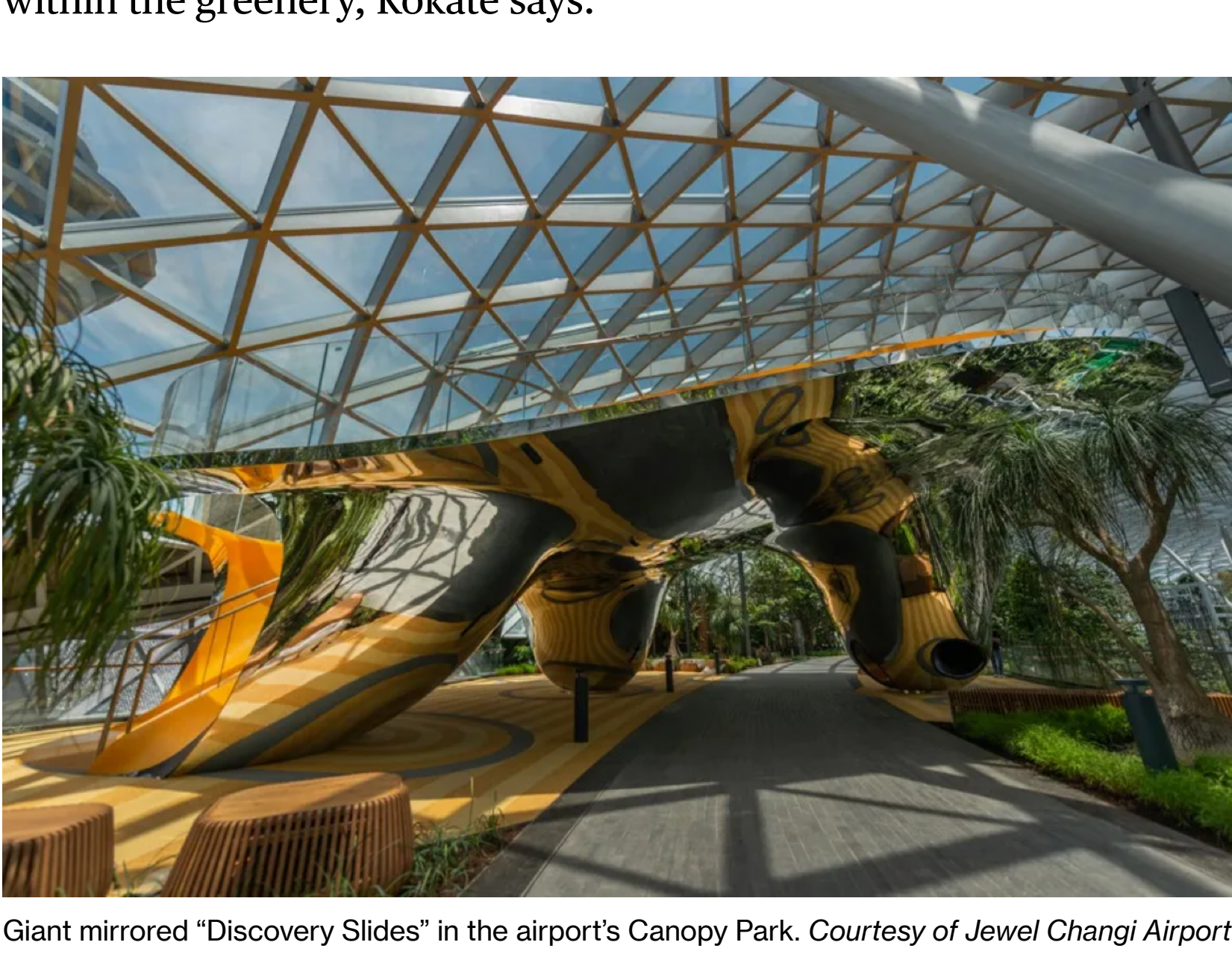
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Safdie's firm has a Singapore office and several local projects under its belt, including the much-lauded Marina Bay Sands hotel complex, famed for its sci-fi "Supertree Grove." They knew that the airport addition needed plenty of large, cool, open spaces so that local families could continue to hang out. An island situated one degree north of the equator, Singapore gets little reprieve from the sun. For many residents, especially those who live in small apartments, the airport serves as the city's de facto indoor Central Park. "It's hot; it's raining outside every day," says Charu Kokate, principal at Safdie Architects in Singapore. "The scale had to be big for people to enjoy it."



But unlike the fantastical vibe of Marina Bay Sands, here Singaporeans should feel more at home. On the Jewel's fifth-floor park, for example, visitors can wander amid trees chosen to feel familiar to residents. The Rain Vortex, meanwhile, is located on the first floor, to make it easier for wheelchair users to visit and linger within the greenery, Kokate says.

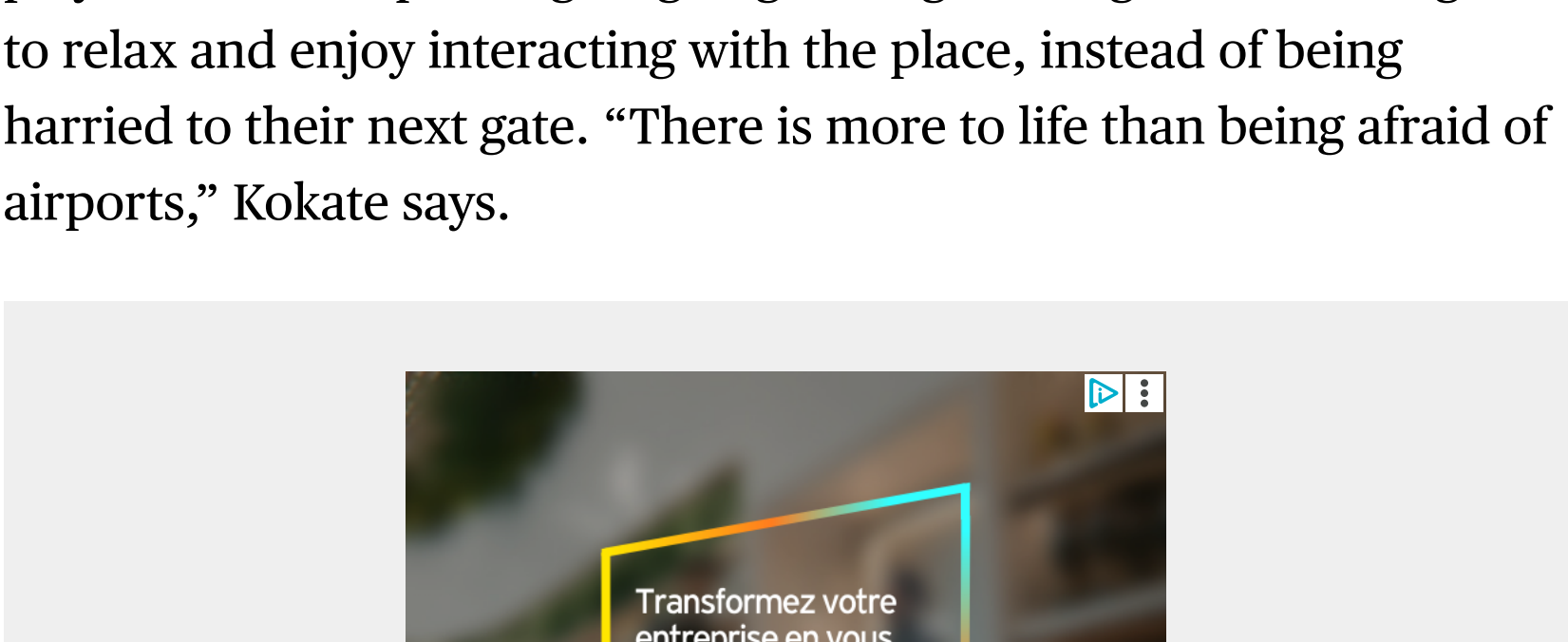


Giant mirrored "Discovery Slides" in the airport's Canopy Park. Courtesy of Jewel Changi Airport

Besides the architectural splendor of the space, there's another reason why so many people in Changi Airport seem to be enjoying themselves. Unlike U.S. airports, where passengers are funneled through large security screening lines, in Singapore security checks take place at individual boarding gates prior to take off—the short security line only consists of you and the passengers getting on your plane. That also allows passengers to mingle with the general public in the large common areas within the terminals. Add to that the fact that Singapore has relatively lax visa policies, and it's possible even for fliers with brief layovers to get out of security and see the Jewel.

"The power of the airport is that it is, by design, a meeting place between visitor and citizen. That's a new idea: that you create something that actually creates a connection between the airline passenger and the residents of Singapore," Safdie says.

The notion that an airport can be a social interface between locals and tourists is something unusual in the post-9/11 world of air travel, which has seen the airport experience become ever more stressful and enervating. By dispersing security lines and increasing areas for play in between, passengers going through Changi are encouraged to relax and enjoy interacting with the place, instead of being harried to their next gate. "There is more to life than being afraid of airports," Kokate says.



The first week that it opened, more than half a million Singaporeans turned out to visit the Jewel. The Skytrain my grandmother and I used to ride now cuts right through the new dome, teasing passengers with glimpses of the glowing Rain Vortex. To Safdie, those crowds of locals serve as proof of the space's enduring, and unique, attraction. "Family after family—whole families from the grandparents to the babies—marveling in the place," he says. "There's a real pleasure that people are having."

*\*CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story used an inaccurate figure for the number of trees and shrubs inside the park.*

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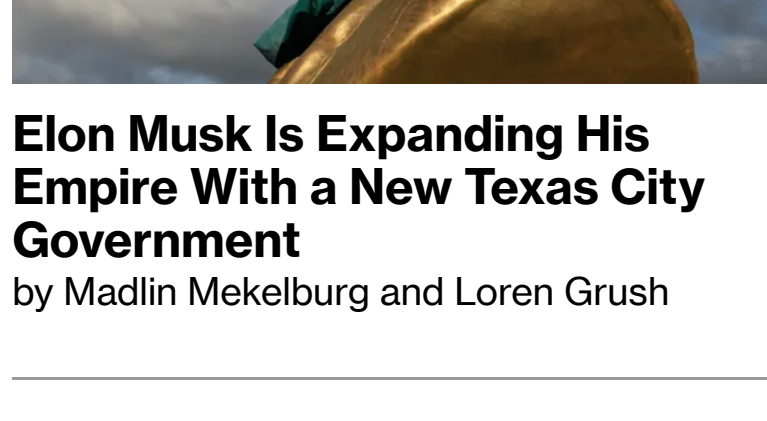
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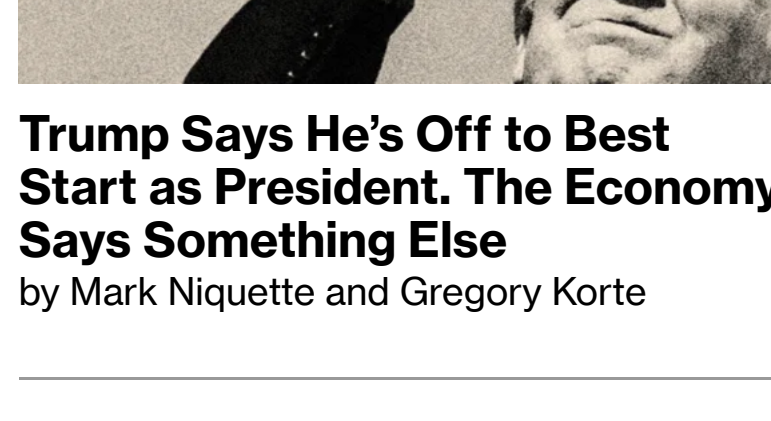
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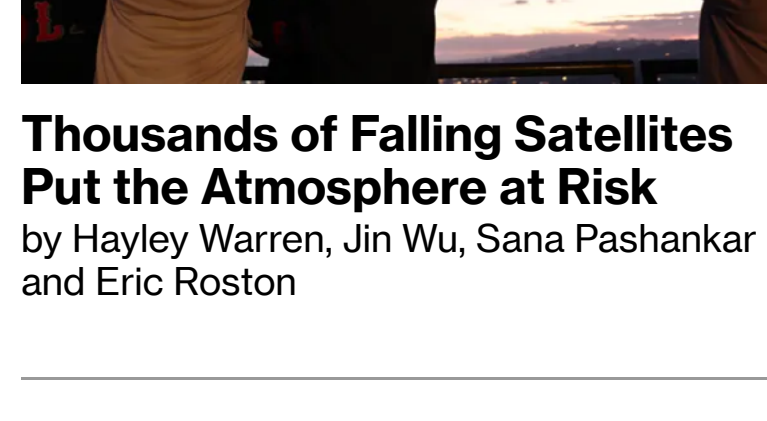
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