



Valencia's City of Arts and Sciences

by **Engr. Chin Mee Poon**, FIEM, P. Eng.

VALENCIA is Spain's third largest city. It is situated on the east coast of Spain facing the Mediterranean Sea.

To give the city a new lease of life and attract tourists, the city authorities embarked on an ambitious project in 1991 to build what would eventually become Europe's largest cultural complex on a strip of land south of the city centre that was once a river.

This futuristic development is known as the City of Arts and Sciences. Its principal architect is world-renowned Santiago Calatrava, a Valencian. His eye-catching architectural masterpieces reflect the trend of Valencia's future development.

The old city of Valencia was once encircled by the Turia River. This river, however, was not very tame and it breached its banks and caused a severe flood in the city in 1956, damaging many properties. The river was subsequently diverted and the dried river bed has since been converted into parks, cycle paths, walking trails and football fields. Part of the river bed is now the site of the City of Arts and Sciences.

I visited the City of Arts and Sciences twice. My wife and I boarded a No. 35 bus at a bus stop on the periphery of the City Square and, in about 20 minutes, we were at our

destination. It was 21:00 hrs, the sun had just set and building lights had been switched on – perfect timing for night photography of the built environments. We spent about an hour and a half in the deserted complex appreciating the colours and shadows of the buildings from different angles. We caught the last bus back to the City Square.

We were back in the City of Arts and Sciences again the following morning, spending the whole day visiting the science centre, watching a documentary in the IMAX theatre, and coming face to face with many denizens of the deep in the vast oceanarium, one of the world's largest aquariums.

The City of Arts and Sciences is still not fully completed. Under construction is the Palace of Arts, a spectacular pistachio nut-shaped building sandwiched between the cable-stayed road bridge and the Oceanographic Park. All the buildings that make up the complex are spectacular, including the car park, known as L'Umbracle, whose flat roof is planted with palm trees and Mediterranean scrubs.

The most interesting building of the lot is probably the Hemisphere which houses the IMAX theatre. Under the right lighting conditions and when the air is still, hence the shallow pool adjoining the building is perfectly calm, the Hemisphere together with its reflection in the water looks

just like a giant human eye complete with an eyeball and lashes!

The adjacent building, the colossal Museum of Sciences with its many externally inclined props, looks somewhat like the skeleton of a weird animal after most of its body tissues have rotten away. Separated by a beautiful arch bridge from the Hemisphere is the Concert Hall, a building that resembles a gladiator's helmet.

Valencia's City of Arts and Sciences has certainly become a major tourist attraction of Spain, perhaps more for its architectural novelty than for its exhibits and performances. ■

