On Track Singapore:
Many Architectures, One City

by

Eunike

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Carlos Jiménez, Professor of Architecture,
Thesis Director

Scott Colman, Senior Lecturer, Thesis Coordinator

Gordon Wittenberg, Professor of Architecture,
Director of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

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The scholarly interest is the sway singular architectures can have on the collective aesthetic of a generic city: How to exploit this capacity and better orchestrate an impact?

The obsession is with Singapore — a city Rem Koolhaas describes as “all foreground and no background,” without geometry, fabric or legible urban form that physically defines the city’s aesthetics. Singapore is necessarily a sum of its architectures, and is still waiting for a greater aesthetic to emerge from its heterogeneous collection.

The initiative: to revitalize the former Malayan rail lands, a site spanning the full width of the country. The plan follows Singapore’s recent practice: building distinct, free-style architectures on shifting sands — only this time anchored by a formless, yet permanent and straightforward high-speed axis that induces continuity and reinforces the island’s status as a singular, cohesive entity.

Only extreme differentiation, held in tension by the thinnest infrastructural line, can induce a forthright sense of direction in a capitalist city that must necessarily adopt multiple architectural solutions.
Carlos Jiménez, for staying so calm the entire ride; secretly watchful, gentle and swift to maneuver each time massive derailment was imminent.

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And the one and only: Dr. Scott Colman,

Because he won’t buy it if it ain’t hardcore.
For the small city with big ambitions,
On Track Singapore

MANY ARCHITECTURES, ONE CITY
The past decade has shown a marked change in the architectural sensibility of the generic city: from one that is dominantly fabric, to one that is dominantly iconic. The race towards ever-differentiated, large and highly-visible architectures prevails in many cities today. One might attribute this trend to the prevalent “bottom-up” model of development that is necessarily multifarious and spontaneous, without much coordination on behalf of the greater planning authorities. But Singapore's case calls for special attention because the city is absolutely, responsibly and thoroughly planned.
0.1 Contained Chaos

“Singapore is a product of pure intention. If there’s chaos, it is authored chaos, if there’s ugliness it is designed ugliness, if there’s absurdity it is willed absurdity.” — Rem Koolhaas

At an exacting, intermediate size of 710 km², Singapore is all at once a city, an island and a nation-state. Singapore is one rapidly developing city; albeit one with a severely limited territory that necessitates extensive foresight and judicious, top-down planning in order to sustain growth. This extreme caution and deliberation in planning, plus the fact that Singapore is its own island with a finite (yet stretchable) perimeter, produces a city that is always complete: practically seamless as a working whole and analogously one, especially in comparison to less thoroughly planned, sprawling cities.

One could reasonably offer a reading of Singapore as a well-planned, coherent city; but it is hard to ignore its uncanny, unresolved landscape of architectures, apparently set in stone with absolute purposiveness. One ought to suspect, in all earnestness, that “ugliness” and “absurdity” were not quite the intended effects of Singapore’s heavily-regimented urban plan.

1 Rem Koolhaas, Singapore Songlines, 1011
Singapore’s planning is rather unique in that it excludes geometry. No grid or axis dominates the ground plane. Roads, even major streets, never stay straight beyond a few miles, always finding the path of least resistance in the unpredictable terrain. Yet no natural barrier can impose a limit indefinitely: swamps have been transformed into new towns and airports, the hills into flatlands. Coastlines were offset every so often, so there’s never a shortage of new water-front sites. Singapore’s approach to urbanism warrants itself an ultimate freedom: to “plan” without committing to any one formal strategy.

Such formless planning is passive, if not unhelpful in defining the city’s aesthetics. The city lacks a legible underlying urban structure: a stabilizing geometry\(^1\) that provides inert direction, if not a sense of discretion to its future development. All foreground and no background, Singapore is too easily a sum of its architectures, anxiously awaiting a greater aesthetic to emerge from its heterogeneous collection.

\(^1\) Rem Koolhaas, Singapore Songlines, 1011
Singapore's Architectural Songlines

Singapore attempts to address an aesthetic dimension to planning through a two-fold strategy involving the Master Plan as a derivative of the Concept Plan. The Master Plan as a legal document regulates development through detailed specifications of land use, plot ratio, etc. The Concept Plan, on the other hand, is non-statutory. It operates through the declaration of broad vision statements and slogans, reviewed every ten years to loosely define the leitmotif for each revision of the Master Plan. As a piece of text, the Concept Plan again makes no commitment to any explicit, tangible form. The last two Concept Plan mantras, “Towards a Tropical City of Excellence” and “Towards a Thriving World Class City in the 21st Century,” suggest little beyond the image of a generic metropolis.

By contrast, the publicity banners that follow after the fact are highly specific in their tone. They are effective because they work alongside explicit images of built matter. In their extreme particularities (and peculiarities), the architectures of the city retroactively provide high-resolution vignettes of the city’s present state and possible future. Simply said, Singapore’s urban vision plays out best through its architectures.

"Realising the Vision of Housing in a Park," Housing Development Board
"YourSingapore," Singapore Tourism Board
"Singapore, Capital City for Vertical Green," in A+U Magazine
Charting the Urban Safari

SINGAPORE’S ARCHITECTURAL SONGLINES (1922-2012)
The following chapter traces the evolution of the city through a survey of its architectures, extracting the key buildings that defined Singapore’s changing urban sensibility and reshaped its planning agenda. Over the short period of 80 years, Singapore has passed through a number of aesthetic regimes: from the modest, part-rural-part-westernized colony, to the modern, almost dystopian generic city, to the postmodern conservative nation-state and, finally, to the forever-new and vibrant metropolitan today. It’s all in the architecture.
Singapore's population was still less than a million, most of its lands covered by mangrove swamps with fishing villages populating the coastlines.

The fragrance of the rural tropics dominated the island as it waited for the tide of westernization to wash its oldness away.
1959
Singapore gains self-governance with Lee Kuan Yew as prime minister.

1960
Functional Family Units
Housing Development Board (HDB) was formed to spearhead Singapore’s public housing project. Five-Year Plans were introduced to build as much low-cost housing as possible.

Below, the facade of prudence: modernism sans the corner strip window.

1961
Total area: 581 km².

1962
Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia.

United Nations Program of Technical Assistance suggested a Ring City model for Singapore, comprising of a belt of high-density satellite towns surrounding the central water catchment area.

1964
Tabula rasa I: squatters cleared out for the construction of the second satellite new town, Toa Payoh.

1963
Blessed Sacrament Church

1965
Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR) by William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon: a formation against the proliferation of the modernist housing blocks – not much response was elicited.

1969
Race Riots (May 13 - July 31)

1970
Jurong Town Hall, Architects Team 3

Hilton Hotel Singapore, BEP Akitek
1972 Modern Housing for the Nation

Pruitt-Igoe goes down: death of modern architecture.

Meanwhile HDB had built a total of 100,000 flats to house 35% of its population and continued unfazed, building more slab blocks with skip-stop elevators, because it works.

Long live HDB architecture.

1973

People’s Park Complex, William Lim. Singapore’s immediate investment into Japan’s Metabolism, showing her diehard pursuit for the latest and most advanced.

Golden Mile Complex, William Lim. Another Metabolist inspired building realized on the same year.

Haw Par Industrial Building, Ho Kwong Yew and Sons

1974

Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) was established as an independent agent from HDB that focuses on the urban design plan for the central commercial area.

Telok Blangah Electrical Substation, Kumpulan Akitek

1975

Toa Payoh Town Centre, HDB

DBS Building, Architects Team 3

1971

1975 Building Heritage from Scratch

The Chinese Garden and Japanese Garden combo: a man-made, quasi-historic landmark and immediate remedy to the tabula rasa operations in the all-new Industrial District of Jurong.
Garden in the airport: Singapore welcomes you into a shopping and culinary heaven, amidst luxurious beds of orchids and other tropical foliages. Then, you only wish transit time was longer.
1988  **Paper Architecture Come True**

Paul Rudolph’s unrealized design for the Graphic Arts Center of Manhattan, inspired by the economy of prefabrication technology, was poured in place into a luxury condominium in Singapore — an architectural dream made possible with the right clientele.
1993
Life in the Atrium

City life at its peak blossom: well-incubated with prolonged daylight and optimal temperature.

1995
Rem Koolhaas publishes “Singapore Songlines,” criticizing while at the same time admiring the successful and thorough realization of its masterplan to produce a city of “pure intention.” (Koolhaas, 1011)

URA focused on the criticisms on sterility, switched gears and combed through the island for remaining “heritage” sites.

1997

Millenia Tower, DP Architects + Kevin Roche, John Burgee & Phillip Johnson.
Bedok Market Place, Tang Guan Bee.
Temasek Polytechnic, DP Architects + James Stirling Michael Wilford.
SAFTI Military Institute, DP Architects + Mitchell Giurgola Thorpe Architects.
East Point Mall, Tang Guan Bee.
The Bay Shore, DP Architects + Team Design Architects.
Total area: 650 km².
1997

Cineleisure Orchard, Architects 61 + MGT

1998

Far East Square, DP Architects
Capital Square, Architects 61

Tuas Checkpoint, CPG
Asian financial crisis

1999

The Paterson Edge, W Architects. A single lane, infinity lap-pool on the 7th floor: a humble prelude to the Marina Bay Sands in 2010.

One Raffles Link, Aedas Pte Ltd + Kohn Pederson Fox

Camden Centre, DP Architects + Richard Meier & Partners

1997 Post-Post-Colonial Architecture

Bugis Junction, glass covered, air-conditioned shopping “streets,” a nostalgic architectural setup with shophouses and narrow walkways.
2000 The Millenium

The subway station gateway near Singapore EXPO, the largest convention venue in the country — ushering in the new millennium with drama and sensation.

1999
One Raffles Link, Aedas Pte Ltd + Kohn Pederson Fox

Marina Parade Community Centre, William Lim Associates
River Place, DP Architects Pte Ltd

5 Gemmil Lane, LOOK Architects
30 Hill St, Aedas Pte Ltd + Kohn Pederson Fox
Coronation Road West House, SCDA

City Link Mall

2001

URA organizes an international design competition for a new public housing, Duxton Plan, replacing two classic ten-storey HDB blocks (built in 1963) in the Tanjong Pagar area. A total of 227 firms from 32 countries took part.

Expo MRT Station, CPG + Foster & Partners
2002

ARC Studio was named the winner for the Duxton Plain project.

“Architecture Art Identity in Singapore: Is There Life After Tabula Rasa?,” William Lim

Lim criticizes Singapore: “A manufactured, over-regulated, glossy and tidy image of the city [...] stripped bare of vitality, complexity and chaos, qualities which make neighboring Asian cities like Bangkok, Tokyo and Shanghai much more vibrant and interesting.”

2003

“Beyond Description, Singapore Space Historicity,” Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, Wei-Wei Yeo

SARS outbreak

Singapore signed free-trade deal with USA

SMRT North East Line and Sengkang East Loop Light Rail opens

1 Moulmein Rise, WOHA

Lincoln Modern, SCDA

2004

Lee Hsien Loong becomes prime minister

Casino legalized

The Redemption Monastery, Richard Ho

Assyafaah Mosque, Forum Architects

CCK Crematorium, CPG

ITE College East Campus, RSP

2002 Vibrant Waterfront

The beginning of a decade of diversity:

The Esplanade Theatres on the Bay a.k.a. the Durian, the first not-so-square public building that initially elicited much criticism from the public. It became the defining landmark for Singapore’s waterfront...

But not for long. The race for the most spectacular had just begun.
2005 The Most Coveted Public Housing

Construction for Pinnacle at Duxton, HDB’s milestone public housing project, begins. Seven distinctly patterned, 50-storey tall blocks, connected by two sky-bridges, the Pinnacle at Duxton asserts HDB’s presence, once again, as the forefront agent for state-of-the-art living.

2005 URA organizes “Singapore 1:1” — an exhibition of Singapore’s history of architecture. Selected works included towers, institutional buildings, some apartments and one HDB housing project, all of which confirm the sterility and banality of the urban landscape, but also began to form one coherent history of Singapore’s urban production.

2006 Vivo City, Toyo Ito

Clarke Quay, Will Alsop

NTU SADM, CPG Architects

The New Supreme Court, CPG + Foster and Partners
The Site We’ve Been Waiting for
THE FORMER MALAYAN RAILWAY AS A GREEN CORRIDOR
A perfect slice through Singapore, the former transnational Malayan Railway is an exceptional site recently made available with the discontinuation of the train services within Singapore. The site’s bilateral nature, relative antiquity and sheer size generated a surge of interest that culminated with an ideas competition: the Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA’s) effort to openly speculate on the future development of the rail lands. But the campaign stalled soon after. No decisive step has been made as yet.
2.1 An Intricate Territorial Overlap: The History of the Former Malayan Railway

The former Malayan transnational railway land had long been a contested site, running strategically (thus inconveniently) across the full-width of Singapore. The railway was built in the 1930s, serving as the most direct route from downtown Singapore to Johor Bahru. After Singapore’s independence, the railway lands remains leased to the Malayan Railway Authority for the railway operations of the Kretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM). The checkpoint for train commuters was thus situated at the southern terminus (Tanjong Pagar station), all the way into the edge of downtown Singapore. Commuters traveling in coaches and private vehicles, on the other hand, undergo customs near the geographic border at Woodlands Checkpoint.

An agreement was signed in 1990 between the two countries to relocate the train customs services from Tanjong Pagar Station to Woodlands Checkpoint. There were unresolved disputes, nonetheless, over the subsequent ownership and joint-development of the railway lands. The Malaysian customs thus declined to move out of the Tanjong Pagar station, resulting in an abnormal territorial overlap. As such, a train commuter traveling from Malaysia to Singapore would have officially entered Singapore at the Woodlands station, but have not officially left Malaysia until one reaches the Tanjong Pagar Station, and vice versa.

“In recent decades the railway line has come to be viewed as politically divisive and a thorny barrier to efficient land use planning.”
— The Green Corridor, A Proposal to Keep the Railway Lands
Peak Enthusiasm

“The Rail Corridor project has garnered widespread public interest [...] In order to create the window of opportunity for all to participate in this project, the URA is conducting the Ideas Competition [...]”
— URA, Nov 30th, 2011

2.2 Public Commotion: The Return of the Rail Lands and Its Optimistic Repercussions

On May 24th, 2010, a new agreement was signed to resolve the two-decade long stalemate. The railway lands are finally returned to Singapore, along with the cessation of train services to Tanjong Pagar Station on July 1st, 2011. The Woodlands Checkpoint becomes the new terminus for the train where both Immigration Authorities are located, setting a definitive boundary between the two countries. Everything south of the checkpoint was henceforth Singapore’s sovereign territory.

A site that had been lost and forgotten for decades, the rail lands possess an aura of rawness: a virgin site, distinct and detached from its sophisticated surroundings. This garnered much attention and opinion from the public mostly laden with a subconscious to “protect” the rail lands from being developed. The URA engaged these concerns with positive actions. A special committee was organized to guide the redevelopment of the rail corridor. A proper farewell was made on June 30th, 2011 with the “last train ceremony,” followed by “open days” during which one may visit the old train station and select portions of the rail tracks. An exhibition and public workshop, “Re-imagining the Rail Corridor” was held in October and an ideas competition, “Journey of Possibilities” was launched soon after in November to openly envision the future of the rail lands.

1 The initial agreement calls for the joint development (on a 60-40 basis, with Malaysia holding the larger stake) of the three major land parcels that became available with the train’s dissolution. But these were quickly swapped the following month for six land parcels in the downtown area, four in the all new Marina South and two in the historic Ophir-Rochor area — a fair but rather costly exchange, one must say. But the rail lands had to be absolutely and irrevocably Singapore’s.
2.3 Task I: Historic Preservation

One of the main themes driving the Ideas Competition was “Heritage.” The Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, one of the few buildings built in the 1930s still remaining in Singapore, was immediately pronounced a National Monument. The less significant but equally precious rail relics, the Bukit Timah Railway Station and the two iron rail bridges nearby, were also put under conservation.

Preservation at All Cost

“Can it be designed to be “all inclusive” and not compromise on the rustic feel we have today?”

— Rail Corridor Ideas Competition Prompt B
Singapore’s Own Railway-Turn-Park

“In a country searching desperately for genuine icons it would be a tragedy to destroy this potent symbol of connectivity and inclusive progress.”
— The Green Corridor, A Proposal to Keep the Railway Lands

2.4

Task II: Nurtured Nature (and Its Extensive Socio-Economic Benefits)

The URA specifically quoted the High Line and the Promenade Plantee as similar projects that successfully integrate greenery and heritage structure with new development.¹ The framework for the Ideas Competition aspires to the all-inclusive goodness of these green corridor projects, placing equal emphasis on heritage, bio-diversity and sense of community.²

¹ The Rail Corridor, URA
² The unobjectionable themes to the Ideas Competition include: “Bio-diversity and sensitive development,” “Inclusiveness, accessibility and resolving conflicts,” “Community ownership, pride and sense of well-being,” “Heritage” and “Great Ideas for a Public Space.”
2.5 Check I: Scale Mismatch

The High Line and the Promenade Plantee serve well as exemplary approaches in revitalizing an obsolete piece of infrastructure, but they cannot be directly implemented as a comprehensive solution to Singapore’s rail corridor. Spanning across 15 miles with 115.9 ha of land coverage, Singapore’s rail corridor far exceeds the practical, traversable size of an urban park.

The Master Plan 2008 and the Parks and Waterbodies Plan had clearly recognized this scale mismatch. The plans eliminated almost all traces of the former railway except for the 1.6-mile segment that skirts the edge of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve: a stretch of convenient size and proximity to nature, easily transformable into an urban park to follow the New York/Paris model. The government plans had not promised to keep the remaining 13.4-mile portion untouched.

“The possibility of marrying development and greenery […] to maintain a continuous green link along the rail corridor without affecting the development potential of the lands.”
— URA, July 11th, 2011

115.9 ha of Speculations
(Ab)normally Green

“The National Parks Board has completed 200 km of park connectors so far. Over the next 5 years, we plan to build another 100 km of park connectors and 20 new parks.”
— Dr Teo Ho Pin, Minister for National Development, Jan 2012

2.6
Check II: Green Depreciation

The prospect of a 15-mile long park may seem to be substantially sensational that it could be worth the venture. But a closer look at Singapore’s Parks and Waterbodies Plan reveals an extensive park network already in place, with many more linear “park connectors” to come. There is no limit to how much park one should have, but to absorb the rail lands as a fraction of a greater green aggregate would cut this special site short of its real potential. The preservation of the full-length of the rail corridor as a linear park cannot justify itself, nor could piecemeal developments satisfy the high aspirations outlined in the Ideas Competition.
2.7 Future Tentative

The Ideas Competition and the subsequent conclusions for the rail corridor linger within the preservationist and environmentalist narratives, unable to escape the heavy responsibilities and tepid conservatism this approach implicates. Thus far, interventions have been modest, involving the sporadic use of the Tanjong Pagar Train station for fashion shows and traveling exhibitions, as well as organized hikes and runs along select portions of the rail corridor. A year has passed since its closure. The future of the rail corridor remains unspoken: unknown, unquestioned, slow-moving, lukewarm.

“Don’t rush into doing things [...] Let’s take our time to study the possibilities.” — President Tony Tan Keng Yam urged the government to not rush plans for the Rail Corridor.
3 Beyond the Green Corridor
REVISITING THE PLANS FOR THE RAIL LANDS
It is time to up the ambition of the plan for the rail lands. The project ought to fulfill the preservationist, environmentalist and social causes specified in the previous competition brief. But banking on these as the ultimate source of inspiration (or as a cause for campaign) simply dilutes the potency of this extraordinary site. The plan for the rail lands needs to be much more aggressive: bold, explicit and decisively less idealistic in order to sketch out more vividly the extreme and lucrative possibilities of the site.
The rail corridor should, first of all, be liberated from its physical definition in order to facilitate its development in smaller land parcels according to the land use designated in the Master Plan 2008. Divisible, expandable and shrinkable to the point of disappearance, the rail corridor must sacrifice its uninterrupted continuity and geographic fidelity to be made easily suitable for all kinds and scales of development.

3.1 Planned Fracture

The rail corridor should, first of all, be liberated from its physical definition in order to facilitate its development in smaller land parcels according to the land use designated in the Master Plan 2008. Divisible, expandable and shrinkable to the point of disappearance, the rail corridor must sacrifice its uninterrupted continuity and geographic fidelity to be made easily suitable for all kinds and scales of development.
3.2 Foreground: Five Free-Standing Architectural Initiatives

Five undeveloped lots adjacent to the rail line were selected as viable sites for high-profile, large-scale interventions of dissimilar architectures. The selected sites are evenly spread throughout the length of the railway, allowing each architectural piece to remain distinct and dominant within its own locality. The amplified polarities of the five architectures promote differences among the sites — super-architectures that foreground and endorse their own local territory as the unique context.
A new local high-speed transit system will be installed as a means to perpetually reinforce an experiential, fleeting continuity along the fifteen mile stretch: the one train ride that unites the urban safari. An infrastructural line that is inherently formless, the new train line is free to run above or below ground, to snake around or slip itself into a building.

3.3 Invisible Background: A New High Speed Line

A new local high-speed transit system will be installed as a means to perpetually reinforce an experiential, fleeting continuity along the fifteen mile stretch: the one train ride that unites the urban safari. An infrastructural line that is inherently formless, the new train line is free to run above or below ground, to snake around or slip itself into a building.
3.4 Unity via Proximity

The effective proximity generated by the train, literally no more than three minutes away from one site to the next, casually structures the occupation of multiple environments as one whole (dis)continuous landscape—a system similar to the elevator-emancipated skyscraper with its dissociated floor plates, but this time generating a synergy along a greater urban shaft. A physically deformable yet perfectly straightforward entity, the high-speed line makes an ideal, amenably resistant background that anchors Singapore’s vibrant architectures.
The Essential Everyday Train

The existing North-South line of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) System loops around the center of the island; there is no direct path between the central northern region and downtown. The new high-speed line completes this missing link. Well-integrated into the MRT system, the new high-speed line coincides with three existing interchange stations—an advantageous, indispensable alternative route that will significantly reduce a daily commuter’s travel time.

Two upcoming MRT lines have been planned to partially supplement this lack: the Downtown line (due 2013) and the Thomson line (due 2019). These were, nonetheless, planned prior to the return of the rail lands. These two lines may sense, given the presence of the Malayan railway, that perhaps the future plans for the MRT network should be readjusted to exploit this newly recovered axis.
3.6 On Track Singapore as an Urban Identity Project

The proposal for the five new architectural icons and the high-speed line will be packaged and promoted as one comprehensive, national project: On Track Singapore, or, in short, OTS. (It is common practice in Singapore to nickname complicated entities with more endearing three-letter abbreviations). The OTS advocates itself as Singapore’s most extensive and wholesome master-development project: one that is compatible and easily profitable given today’s capitalist development model, but, more importantly, it is able to implicate a larger, more definitive statement regarding Singapore’s future as one thoroughly envisioned urban enterprise.
Particularly and Peculiarly Singapore

FIVE AS-FOUND SOLUTIONS FOR THE ISLAND
A generic, yet extremely fertile test bed for architectural explorations, Singapore hosts an extensive collection of architectural types and styles: each specimen a full-blown, wholehearted investment into the latest and most advanced. The resulting accumulation of these highly-specific environments forms an inscrutable stock of urban matter that is, nevertheless, quite charming and unique to Singapore.

OTS proposes for a purposive redeployment of these existing models: to reconsider and celebrate these hyper-architectures as a collection replete, in concert with Singapore’s most recent vision statements (captured in Concept Plan 2001, last revised in 2006 and the Master Plan 2008). Each a contingent and propitious furtherance of Singapore’s extreme urban tendencies, the architectures of OTS reinforce and complete one another — a self-fulfilling proposition for the most vibrant and resolute Singapore.
A whole new Singapore experience with OTS

Many architectures. One ride. One city.
A Fresh Start for the Next Lap: Marina Bay

A smoothly outlined, 360-ha piece of reclaimed land, the Marina Bay provides much “blank” space for the future expansion of downtown Singapore: a fresh context, separated by the bay, away from the existing urban mass. This relatively independent appendage holds the possibility, as a compositional piece, to foreground and anchor into cohesion the rest of the competing architectures behind.
Sculpting a 3D Skyline (Marina Bay, slogan)

Super-bold intervention in the same historic district, the right thing-to-do in the 2000s.

The brand new, ageless, neo-palladian Parliament Complex, completed in 1999.

The Esplanade Theatres by the Bay, the icon of Singapore in the early 2000s.

An early plan for Marina South in 1983. The prime site was then set in stone.

The resplendent Gardens by the Bay.

Marina Square and the series of hotels that characterized the Bay before MBS.

The Singapore River elevation: historic shophouses at the forefront, towers behind, in harmonious coexistence.

Glass-roof: Light-handed intervention on traditional shophouses at the historic Bugis area, a 1990s sensibility.

The Old Parliament House, completed in 1827, now an Arts House and a national monument.


Crown of the All-Vibrant Downtown

The new construction at Marina Bay, each building a distinct object with strong characteristics, quickly became the defining feature of Singapore’s skyline — the city’s ultimate icon, symbol and masterpiece that consummated the past decade’s race for the most spectacular.
1. The infinity pool at the 53rd storey of the MBS hotel and casino provides views into the bay and the old downtown Singapore.

2. The shopping mall and the ArtScience museum sits across the MBS, all of them moored onto the new Bayfront MRT Station.

3. A pedestrian bridge connects the mall, the tower and the gardens beyond.

4. Super Trees: 25-50m tall vertical gardens that host a variety of plants and photovoltaic cells. These form a distinct and indispensable entourage in the Bay diorama.

5. Empty reclaimed land.


**OBSESSION 0:**

**Objective View**

A vantage point at the other side of the bay, at a sufficient distance away from the urban jungle: a surreal yet completely objective view of downtown Singapore.
A crisp, clean-cut horizon for the lushest of skylines
OTS Memorial Center
To strike a fine balance between protecting our built heritage & meeting development needs

SITE 1:
The Lesser Prime Land:
The Former Tanjong Pagar Rail Station and Its Vicinity

One of the few buildings in Singapore that has stood longer than eighty years, the old rail station was immediately gazetted as a national monument at its closure in June 2010. The plan was to convert the station into some sort of cultural center. But its location, at the southernmost corner of downtown, directly next to the expressway and the entrance to the container port, does not translate well into a cultural hub.
Restoration of historic areas add variety to our streetscape, creating visual contrast & excitement

Persistent Urban Artefacts

A site which borders the edge of downtown, the area surrounding the former rail station is a special mix of second-class material: buildings that are not as sleek as the ones in downtown, but charming and significant enough to maintain and justify their presence at the outer fringes of the city center.
An adaptive reuse of the old Tanjong Pagar Rail Station as a cultural center, with an OTS station integrated at basement level; plus a new office tower to finance the future operations and maintenance of the cultural center.
Uplifting the historic landmark

A bolder approach to preservation: the cloning and procreation, 16 times, of the southern train platform and its ornamental friezes, to form a long, linear tower that bestows the train station with the monumental visibility it had once lost.
Infinite possibilities on the train platform
The tour begins at the **OTS** Memorial Tower
Singapolis Club
SITE 2: Themed Town: One-North Science & Research Park

This 200ha science and research park is an on-going project of Jurong Town Corporation (JTC), the developer responsible for the development and success of Jurong Industrial Estate and many other keystone national projects. The plan includes research facilities, business centers, residences and a park to create "a work-live-play-learn environment conducive for creative minds to excel and where innovation reigns."
A city that’s dynamic, distinctive, delightful (Concept Plan 2001)

Outside the One-North precinct, public housing as usual.

In contrast to the preserved, untouched part of One-North: the colonial bungalows of Nepal Hill and its rural surround.

“Star Vista” (Star Performing Arts Center): Injection of culture into the otherwise sterile laboratory environment.

The East-West MRT line intersects here. The Buona Vista MRT interchange is a few seconds away.

One-North Park: a difficult sell given the sweltering heat of a site located one degree north of the equator.

New construction captures the contemporary spirit of One-North.

Biopolis, the biomedical research campus.

Holland Village: comfortingly kitschy, popular 24hr food center that is almost always full and occupied.

Holland Village by night: the ultimate cultural center.

Solaris (Fusionopolis Phase II), the powerhouse coalition between Infocomm Technology, Media, Physical Sciences and Engineering Industries

PROMPT 2:
Serious Play

One-North takes on the theme of science and technology with serious optimism — each building an evidence of cutting-edge design and innovation, thoughtfully named with a specific set of nomenclature that sets the mood for progress.
URA promises more fun! There will be something for everyone with more recreational choices round the clock.

PROPOSAL 2: Mega Community Center

A community center that represents One-North district’s quest for the most advanced: the largest, best equipped sports and recreation center in the nation.

1. Void deck (with bbq facility)
2. Swimming (indoors)
3. Basketball (outdoors)
4. Machine rooms
5. Ping-pong (indoors)
6. Ultimate ping-pong ring
7. Badminton (indoors)
8. Tennis (indoors)
9. Tennis (outdoors)
10. Bleachers
11. Catwalk
12. Mini-beach
13. Man made lake
14. Commonwealth Ave
15. East-West MRT line
16. Biopolis
The largest, best equipped community center in the nation

1. One of the three tennis courts: open to the sky and exposed to the city. Other ball courts and the swimming pool are similarly situated in the section for display to Commonwealth Ave and commuters in the MRT.

2. The East-West MRT line runs above Commonwealth Ave. The train slows down in this particular section as it approaches Buona Vista MRT station.

3. Amphitheatre

4. A 500m long catwalk/runway provides spectacular views to Biopolis.

5. An artificial lake provides open space between the club and Biopolis, serving also as a heat mass to keep its surroundings cool for outdoor use.

6. Passages underneath the building provide a short-cut access from Commonwealth Ave to the lake and Biopolis.

OBSESSION 2: Display

An extroverted addition to the series of introverted buildings in One-North: display tanks of 24-hr live sports and action.
L-R: Sandcrawler, Solaris, Peranakan Bungalow, Fusionopolis, Neurs, Immunos, Nanos, MOE HQ, Star Vista & the Metropolis
Eternal sunshine in the tropics
Fort Commerce
Integrate significant landmarks and natural elements as part of new developments (Concept Plan 2001)

SITE 3: The Urban-Rural Divide: Bukit Timah Nature Reserve

A site that lends itself as a green zone, this particular segment of the rail along the edges of Bukit Timah Nature Reserve was officially designated for use as “park” in the Parks and Waterbodies Plan. Everything east of the railway is mostly “untouched,” with the exception of the Rail Mall, some houses and a few apartment blocks.
Maintaining environmental quality (Master Plan 2008)

The Singapore Quarry, one of the highlights in the nature reserve. The conserved rail relics include the two iron rail bridges and the old Bukit Timah station (and the tracks near the station).

Nature enthusiasts on an organized railway hikes. Wilder jungles within.

The old and charming strip mall by the foot of the mountain: the Rail Mall is an indispensable part of the railway's story.

Private condominiums make up the bulk of built substance.

The Old Ford Factory, a historic keepsake with educational exhibit, another protected relic from the past in the neighborhood.

Bukit Timah Plaza: a thriving mall at one of the busiest road intersection.

Surrounding the nature reserve are the most ordinary and the least intrusive elements that make up a residential precinct — seemingly disinterested, if not oblivious of their extraordinary geography.

PROMPT 3: Mediocre Urban Matter and Super-Nature

The Old Ford Factory, a historic keepsake with educational exhibit, another protected relic from the past in the neighborhood.

An aerial view of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and its surroundings.

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PROPOSAL 3:
Urban-Park-cum-Strip-Mall

A 1.2-mile long strip mall in the form of sublime glass architecture, built into the very edge of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve to establish the outermost frontier of development: a capital empowered, protective belt in the interest of both nature and profit.
The ultimate urban-park-cum-strip-mall

1. The entire length of the roof will be dedicated as a voyeuristic urban park, fulfilling Singapore’s desire for its own railway-turned-park project, alluding to Paris and New York. Only this time with the option, instead of walking, to glide on the OTS, oscillating between the city and the nature reserve.

2. The best businesses at ground level standing shoulder-to-shoulder: an invincible stronghold hoarding the Nature Reserve.

3. Extension of the retail space below, with generous spans of aperture into the wilderness beyond.

4. 100% nature starts here.

OBSESSION 3:
100% Nature

The “ecological” as a delicate balance between the urban and rural has been practiced into perfection in Singapore. Her pursuit today must be for a more lucrative win-win scenario: one that is 100% human and 100% natural.
Protective belt in the interest of both nature and profit
The best of both worlds
SITE 4: Confluence: Ten Mile Junction

The Ten Mile Junction is a mall located at the 10-mile mark of the railway, sited at one of the corner of a major road intersection. It also happens to be at the kissing point between two satellite towns, making it a convenient base location for the Light Rapid Transit (LRT) line that circles the two neighborhoods. The upcoming Downtown MRT line will also coincide here, adding to the centrality of this key location.
Creating mixed-use destinations that inject vibrancy and foster rejuvenation (Master Plan 2008)

The old mall is currently undergoing renovation and expansion into an apartment-mall hybrid: a reason to linger longer in the mall.

The railway runs along the Pang Sua Canal/Park Connector

The old post office and the once famous Sin-Wah Theater were located here.

The railway runs along the Pang Sua Canal/Park Connector

Rows of potted plants along the railway, owned by Prince Garden Center, a landscape/plant supplier located nearby.

The community center by the Pang Sua Pond, overlooking HDB housing blocks.

The Pang Sua Pond by night: the heart of the Bukit Panjang neighborhood.

The Ten Mile Junction: a mall that also houses the Bukit Panjang LRT Depot.

PROMPT 4:
Point of Departure

A strategic location at the intersection of two major roads, the light rail and an upcoming MRT line warrants the Ten Mile Junction its continued relevance as a center piece. But its status had gradually changed over the years: from a point of destination into that of departure. Unable to retain and benefit from the high influx of commuters that filters through it, the mall is in need of a major revamp.

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Sufficient green space to enjoy and create the feel of a city in a garden (Concept Plan 2001)

PROPOSAL 4: Market/Garden/Interchange

A proposal in lieu of "Junction 10:” a new center hosting a confluence of public transit, sustained by an open market and a food court, topped with a “garden” of potted plants and one spectacular, iconic roof.

1. OTS stop
2. Garden of potted plants at ground level
3. Open market/Food Court
4. LRT boarding platform
5. MRT Downtown Line
6. Upper Bukit Timah Rd
7. Choa Chu Kang Rd
8. Feature roof
OBSESSION 4: Super-Enclosure

The ultimate urban interior where man, machines and nature coexist in perfect harmony: one roof to cover them all.

2. The typical Singaporean open market and food court below: a seemingly haphazard environment that is nonetheless highly systematized; with conveyor belts and hi-tech gadgetries behind the cheap, tiled counters.
3. LRT boarding platform. The LRT loops around the Bukit Panjang and Choa Chu Kang neighborhoods, bringing in a fresh batch of consumers once every 20 minutes.
4. Direct access into the new Downtown line MRT station.
5. The region-defining roof: its design left to the discretion of the best-qualified architect.

Singapore-style open market, in the garden, in air-conditioned comfort.
Mother earth unveils the hypermart
Singapore's first Gehry is here
5 Kadut Coast Town
SITE 5: Two Sides of the Same Channel: The Straits of Johor

At the end of the OTS line: the Sungei Kadut Industrial Estate, the turf club, the water reclamation plant, the Woodlands Checkpoint, the residential town of Woodlands and much waters (a significant portion already marked out for future reclamation). On the other side: the city center of Johor Bahru — its royal gardens, monuments and skyscrapers. Singapore’s backwater is Johor Bahru’s waterfront.
Keeping rustic areas  (Concept Plan 2001)

View of downtown Johor Bahru from Singapore: the skyline shot.

View of Singapore from Johor Bahru: housing blocks.

Woodlands Waterpark: the recreational hub for the residential district.

Low-tech industries at Sungei Kadut Industrial Estate.

Woodlands Checkpoint

The Singapore Turf Club

Kranji Water Reclamation Plant.

A few high-tech industries, this particular one manufactures dialysis machines.

The Kranji World War Memorial.

The former railway at Kranji with its tracks removed.

PROMPT 5:
Blithe and Expansive Landscape

A subordinate and peripheral site, the region near the checkpoint has not been as aggressively developed as the southern and central regions of Singapore — an urbanized territory with lapses of agrarian emptiness.
PROPOSAL 5: Public Housing by the Coast

Classic HDB-style modernist housing blocks, built on reclaimed land next to the Sungei Kadut Industrial estate—a blissful, radiant new town to accent the territorial front.
After the pavement: Beach

**OBSESSION 5: Peak Nothingness**

A strategy for moderate density as an average sum of extremities: peak density side by side with absolute nothingness.

1. 18-storey tall housing slabs that are efficient in layout but generous and pampering — a machine for idyllic living.

2. 2-storey tall plinth of parking space, convenient stores, miscellaneous amenities and a roof garden.

3. The beach: peak nothingness with the capacity for the most intense of activities.
Reclaiming the future home
Because nothing beats living by the coast
Siloso Beach, a reclaimed beach on Sentosa island, Singapore
The hope is that the OTS can be useful as a means to rethink the notion of planning — to incept an aesthetic foresight, if not hesitation, in an enterprising city such as Singapore that knows no limits nor resistance. Then again, it is only one of the many strategies Singapore can implement to refine its near perfect science of planning; knowing that reaching perfection only ends the game.

So it must continue, in sure steps and sensational leaps that are always pre-meditated, into an unknown but promising future.
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