

The Importance of Planning: A City in a Garden

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Images as credited

Introduction

Setting land aside for parks might seem like a luxury for land-scarce Singapore, especially when compared to using it for residential, commercial or industrial purposes to meet the demands of housing and provision of jobs. However, in any healthy and liveable city, the provision of well designed parks and green open spaces is just as important as any other land use. In fact, it is especially critical to the well-being of a highly urbanised city like Singapore. The denser our city develops over time, the more important parks become in providing a healthy relief for our residents. The Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore (URA) plans and facilitates Singapore's physical development in partnership with other agencies and the community, to create a vibrant and sustainable city of distinction.

Forms of Parks in Singapore

Park spaces in Singapore take many forms. With slightly different focuses in mind, they range from biodiversity-rich nature parks (e.g., Labrador Park and Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve), to regional, town and neighbourhood parks, which serve as social gathering and recreational spaces for the local community.

Beyond zoning selected plots of land as parks, innovative measures to create more park spaces have also been implemented. As early as in the 1960s when Singapore was beginning to industrialise rapidly, then Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew started a tree planting campaign and called for Singapore to be developed into a "Garden City" through intensive landscaping. There was active planting along all roads, vacant plots and new development sites, capitalising on every opportunity to green our city as we develop. Today, roadside planting has become part and parcel of our streetscape, providing lush boulevards and shady sidewalks. Since then, park connectors have also been planned and implemented around the island to connect as many housing communities as possible to nearby regional, town or neighbourhood parks. Park connectors are creative ways of making use

of our land. These are linkages created alongside canals and roads running through towns, to improve accessibility between parks. Park connectors make it possible for people to stroll, jog or cycle from park to park and coast to coast, bringing parks closer to homes. These well-planted linear open spaces give residents easy access to a nearby park and a sense of being near a park. Beyond parks in the public realm, URA has also put in place multiple incentive and regulatory schemes, such as the LUSH (Landscaping for Urban Spaces and High-rises) programme to encourage the provision of skyrise and urban greenery in private developments. Since LUSH was launched in April 2009, more than 100 developments have proposed skyrise greenery features in their development proposals. These new sky terraces, balconies and communal planter boxes provide spaces of relief and greenery and create a distinctive image of the city in the tropical climate.

Hence, parks in Singapore are not simply green open spaces for visual and physical relief; they typically serve multiple functions from environment to social aspects, such as carbon sequestration, enriching the city's biodiversity, and serving as social gathering, recreational and events spaces. Like any other land use in Singapore, park land is also planned with optimisation in mind, by being easily accessible to ensure good use and programmed to engage the people. Parks thus play an essential role in enhancing the liveability of our city.

Nature Appreciation

Parks in Singapore allow Singaporeans opportunities to be close to two major natural assets - tropical plants and the sea - and create awareness and appreciation of our unique natural assets. Careful planning and thought are put in place to both safeguard our natural assets, such as the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, the hilly ridges along the Southern waterfront and our dynamic coast lines, and to allow public easy access to these parks to be close to our natural flora and fauna.

In 2002, URA and National Parks Board (NParks) drew up the Parks and Waterbodies Plan to guide the development of our Parks for the next ten to fifteen years. The Plan looked at bringing Singaporeans closer to green spaces and waterfront areas on an island-wide basis. Extensive consultations were also carried out with the local grassroots and community on the plans.



ABOVE Parks and Waterbodies Plan (Source: URA).



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Forest Walk; Visitor Centre and Boardwalk; Henderson Waves (Source: URA).



As a result, new recreation destinations were created with the transformation of green spaces in Singapore. One example would be the Southern Ridges, a nine-kilometre chain of green and open spaces spanning Mount Faber Park, Telok Blangah Hill Park, Kent Ridge Park and West Coast Park. Previously separated by major arterial roads and dense vegetation, all the hill parks are now seamlessly connected by two elevated bridges (Henderson Waves and Alexandra Arch) and an elevated walkway (Forest Walk).

In October 2010, URA was conferred the prestigious Urban Land Institute (ULI) Global Awards for Excellence 2010 for its transformation and development of the Southern Ridges. The jury lauded the Southern Ridges project, touting it as “a pinnacle in models for design and quality.” The Southern Ridges was noted as “a very seductive project that is done with both elegance and beauty,” and is a “first-rate example of how to connect open space in order to create continuity between other opportunities for redevelopment.”

The elevated boardwalks, bridges and trails in the Southern Ridges house fascinating varieties of flora and fauna. Visited by more than a million people since its opening, the Southern Ridges offer a rare contiguous recreational space in densely populated Singapore and panoramic views of the city. Such innovative land use strategies have transformed the Southern Ridges into a soothing sanctuary of greenery, enabling visitors to experience our natural scenery from a great vantage point on bridges with unique designs.

In addition, the development of the Southern Ridges also provides access through our protected Nature Areas – Mount Faber, Telok Blangah Hill Park and Kent Ridge Park, allowing the public to gain access to areas within the parks that was previously not accessible. This adds to the variety of parks and open spaces

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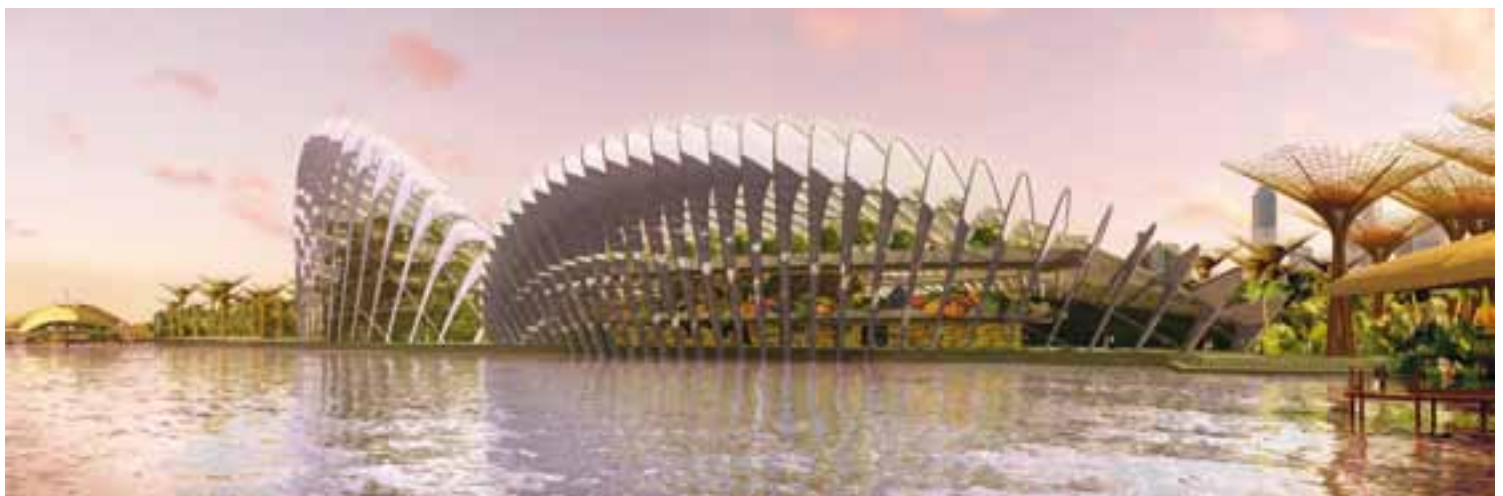
Another example would be the sustainable visitor management facilities at Chek Jawa, a unique natural wetlands area with rich biodiversity. The facilities included a boardwalk reaching into the mangrove, a viewing tower with panoramic views of Chek Jawa and the conversion of a former British Cottage into a visitor centre to educate the public on the types of plant and animal species that could be found in Chek Jawa Wetlands. These facilities enable visitors to get up close with the natural flora and fauna found in our natural coastal areas while carefully protecting our natural assets.



Enhancing the Value of the City Centre

Sitting on prime waterfront land right in the heart of the city, the Gardens by the Bay will be the exciting centrepiece of Marina Bay, offering an entirely new quality experience for Singaporeans and visitors to live, work and play close to water and surrounded by lush greenery. It was a bold planning decision, considering the scale of the park on such prime real estate land. However, in such a dense urban environment, it is important to create areas of green relief for recreation. Setting the land aside for the Gardens by the Bay would not be an opportunity loss. Instead, it augments the overall real estate value of the area by enhancing the overall quality of the Marina Bay environment. The Gardens are an integral part of Singapore's "City in a Garden" vision, a huge project dedicated to Singaporeans as their own space — a beautiful public place where they can participate in meaningful and memorable activities.

With such high hopes to create the most magnificent gardens possible befitting of this area, NParks, the agency behind Gardens by the Bay, launched an international design competition in 2006 to secure the best plans and designs for these gardens. The first phase of the Gardens by the Bay is already well underway. It will feature two cooled conservatories, which will feature an uncommon range of flowers and plants that would not have otherwise survived in Singapore's tropical climate. Gardens by the Bay is all set to become a destination attraction for all Singaporeans and overseas visitors to enjoy.



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Parks as Events Spaces

Fort Canning Hill is a tranquil green oasis in the Civic District with a history that goes back over 700 years. Once believed to be the seat of royalty for rulers of Temasek (or “Sea Town,” an old name for Singapore), it was also known as “Forbidden Hill.” During the colonial period, Singapore’s colonial leaders made their residence there and the hill became a military base during the Second World War. As part of the Master Plan 2003 study to improve the accessibility of Fort Canning Hill Park to the surrounding uses, escalators have been put in place for pedestrians to access the hill.

Besides being a historical site, Fort Canning Hill Park is also a popular scenic spot for photo taking and a popular venue for staging large-scale events such as concerts, screening of outdoor movies and many more. Just recently in 2010, more than 30,000 people visited Fort Canning Park for the F1 Rocks Concerts.

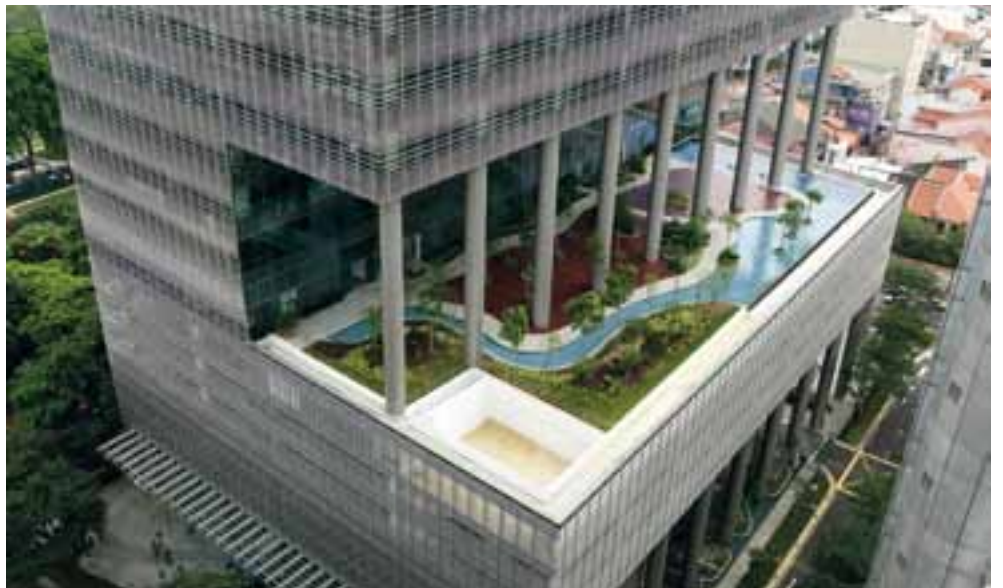
On other days, it provides a quiet retreat space for workers and residents in the area.

In Marina Bay, a series of linear parks and the continuous waterfront promenade along the Bay are planned to provide focal areas for activities and events in the city centre and provide a space for physical relief in the business district. The waterfront promenade with the Central Promontory and the first of the linear parks that was planned — known as the Lawn — has been completed. Marina Bay now provides a perfect setting to stage and enjoy large-scale cultural and community events, water-based sports and celebrations, set against the signature city skyline. Event organisers will be guided by the Marina Bay Development Agency on the use of public spaces at Marina Bay so that a balance is maintained between the vibrancy of events and activities and maintaining the character of each individual site.

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM Artist impression of the future Gardens by the Bay (Source: URA); Artist impressions of the SuperTrees and Cooled Conservatories (Sources: National Parks Board, Singapore).

BELOW, COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Events at the Central Promontory (Source: URA).
BELOW, RIGHT Events at Fort Canning Park (Source: National Parks Board, Singapore).





Setting the Historical Context of a Place

Recognised for its strong heritage value and distinctive old world charm, Balestier was identified as one of Singapore's identity nodes under the Identity Plan in 2002. The area is rich in history, home to an interesting mix of conserved shophouses built in the 1840s and monuments such as the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. When the hotel site at Balestier was sold in 2008, the sales conditions included requirements for a 0.46-hectare public park named "Zhongshan Park," which will provide the entrance foreground for the historical Sun Yat-Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (Wan Qing Yuan 晚晴園). Besides being a unique garden setting for hotel guests and visitors to WanQingYuan, the unique hotel-park development synergises with the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and the surrounding heritage shophouses, adding to the vibrancy and enhancement of the environmental quality of the greater Balestier area.

To achieve a desired quality outcome for the development, URA set up a Design Advisory Panel (DAP) to work with the successful tenderer. The DAP provided guidance to the developer to design the park with Wan Qing Yuan as the focal point. A public event space is planned within the park to stage public events and activities, while outdoor refreshment areas within the park will inject greater vibrancy into surrounding areas. The construction of the Zhongshan Park is now in progress and will be opened to the public in October 2011 to coincide with the centenary celebration of the Xin Hai Revolution (辛亥革命).

OPPOSITE, TOP An artist impression of Zhongshan Park (Source: DP Architects).

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT Newton Suites (Source: WOHA and Patrick Bingham-Hall); One George Street (Source: DCA Architects and Mori Hidetaka).

Extensive greenery at such high-rise levels serve the dual purpose of optimising land while creating more green open spaces closer to homes. They also help to create an attractive and unique image of a tropical city skyline.

Parks in the Sky

Parks in Singapore are not just limited to the ground. Sky parks and sky gardens, in both public housing estates and private developments, are becoming more prevalent in Singapore. Extensive greenery at such high-rise levels serve the dual purpose of optimising land while creating more green open spaces closer to homes. They also help to create an attractive and unique image of a tropical city skyline.

URA has been encouraging the provision of sky parks within private developments through various incentive and mandatory schemes. Two significant schemes under the LUSH programme are the Sky Terrace GFA Exemption Scheme and the Landscape Replacement Policy for selected areas within Singapore. The earlier scheme allows private developments to provide externalised sky parks to serve the building occupants, which are then areas exempted from GFA computation. Some of the developments that have benefited from this scheme include both Newton Suites and One George, where the building occupants are able to enjoy park spaces with great views of the city. The latter scheme requires all new developments within Marina Bay, Jurong Gateway and Kallang Riverside to provide landscape areas within the development that are equivalent to the development site area. These landscape areas could take the form of roof gardens, sky terraces, first-storey communal landscape area and communal planters. Even as we continue to embark on intensive developments in our city, URA has consciously set in place policies to ensure that our green open spaces continue to increase.

Conclusion

Planning for parks in Singapore is not just about setting aside green open spaces. Being a land scarce city-state, much effort goes into multi-agency partnerships in the planning, design and programming of our parks, to ensure that our parks are attractive, engaging and multi-functional. We plan for green spaces which are integrated into the cityscape, so that Singapore truly becomes a City in a Garden. This is part of the URA's vision to continually enhance the quality of our living environment and to make Singapore a great city to live, work and play in. 