



A Landscape Architect's Vision for Singapore's City Centre

Orchard Central Park

Text by Joerg Rekitke
Images as credited

“Shop until you drop”—Without a doubt, this mantra has been internalised by most Singaporeans, as well as visiting tourists, and shopping has become an axiomatic element of Singaporean quotidian culture. The cardinal temple of the pursuit of this interest is Orchard Road. Spanning almost 2.2 kilometres, Orchard Road is a one-way street flanked by shopping malls on both sides of the road, offering retail, dining and entertainment opportunities. The shopping belt around Orchard Road comprises nearly 800,000 square metres of stores and restaurants, from designer brands to fast fashion, from upscale restaurants to food courts. “Still, what makes our street truly great is that it is constantly being refreshed and rejuvenated; the most recent being the government’s expenditure of 40 million dollars to spruce up the infrastructure along Orchard Road. Setting the stage for this shopping belt to become the country’s most unique events arena, this initiative saw the widening of pedestrian malls and the installation of new cool street lamps, street furniture, flowers totems and urban green rooms” (Orchard Road Business Association, 2010).

Zooming out, Orchard Road reveals many more qualities than just being a designed and managed street of shopping malls. It is a large linear urban landscape element, which connects the famous Botanic Gardens, the Istana, Fort Canning Park and the future Gardens by the Bay, currently under construction at Marina Bay. Situated at the bottom of a topographical valley, it is a natural catchment area. The discipline of urban landscape architecture is particularly interested in this kind of urban space, with its fair share of potential and challenges. Therefore the Master of Landscape Architecture programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS) committed a design studio project for Orchard Road. The students were asked to develop a landscape architectural vision predicated on the fusion of the indoor worlds of the shopping malls and the outdoor character of a tropical public park. We baptised this envisaged Singapore-style super-project “Orchard Central Park.”



OPPOSITE Impressions of Orchard Central Park (Design: Toh Chong Ji, Nur Syafiqah Bte Nahadi, Neha Mehta, Tan Yi Wei, 2010).

BELOW Time is money: People Movers in Orchard Central Park (Design: Sng En Ai Rebecca, 2010).

The biggest problems of the iconic shopping street and district, seen from a landscape designer’s perspective, are related to outdoor life. While malls are private property, widely self-centred, perfectly managed by professional experts, totally controlled and regulated by technical marvels, the street space is still rightly public, has numerous infrastructural functions and represents a piece of outdoor and earth-bound, nature-related territory. Currently, this space is mainly used for vehicular traffic and occasional public events and promotion.

Outdoor Orchard Road is the unbeaten, most effective and most popular connector between the many shopping malls of the district, which strongly relies on synergy effects with the neighbouring competitors. In this regard, Orchard Road features interesting potential for improvement, a challenge which the students dedicated themselves to in this design project.

At the academic studio at NUS, we declared everything as being thinkable—nothing had been predetermined. In order to avoid any mental

block, we acted on the assumption that this time, not just millions of dollars would be available, but rather billions. We asked the students to think about some basic questions. Should the road traffic be relocated underground or be rerouted? Should the space between the shopping malls of Orchard Road be completely dedicated to pedestrians? Should the existent vehicular traffic be combined with an efficient and high-frequency two-way public shuttle bus service, other innovative people movers or free rental bikes? We suggest that Orchard Road be transformed into an Orchard Central Park—embodying a vast linear urban tropical garden, green, lush, shady and lively. Thus, an ideal mall connector and public cat-walk should be generated, three-dimensional but barrier-free, avoiding conflicts and stress. A new urban park icon should be brought into being, contributing to maximised sales figures in the malls and becoming a mega-active urban jungle. Orchard Central Park should point out the importance of Orchard Road as a higher-ranking park connector between Singapore Botanic Gardens, the Istana, Fort Canning Park and Gardens by the



ABOVE, TOP & BOTTOM Vision of Orchard Central Park (Designs: Toh Chong Ji, 2010).



Bay, an investment which would pay off in many respects should it become a reality. Singapore is targeting to be a "City in a Garden", one that strives for ecological exemplariness and sustainability. According to a public survey concerning sustainability, identity and quality of life (Straits Times, August 2010), people wanted more pedestrian havens, more room for cyclists and more iconic spaces. We thought Orchard Central Park could be an answer to this call.

The first step of our work was a collective field trip, starting from the middle of the primary rainforest patch in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. After being immersed in the wonderful sights, fragrances and sounds of the age-old forest, it appears elusive that Orchard Road is just a stone's throw away from this paradise. It is interesting to recall that before urbanisation, a monkey could cross the island in the canopy without touching the ground. If a large tropical city would allow the same, it would find its way into the ecological hall of fame. A living city can't become a primary forest again, but if growth of natural vegetation be allowed and accepted wherever it finds space, soil and nutrients, the final variety and size of plants, as well as the general extent of urban biodiversity, would be overwhelming. Thus, ultimate touch-stones of a "sustainable" approach in urban development would be established. The more buildings are erected in large cities, the bigger the need and desire for every "piece of nature" grows. "Biodiversity is one of our future life insurances, its territory starts in the remote nature reserve and ends in the dense city core. If we preach the importance of biodiversity for the future of our planet and the survival of coming generations, we have to leave no stone unturned" (Rekittke, 2010).


After we left the forest patch in the Singapore Botanic Gardens, we arrived in Orchard Road, experiencing the considerably higher levels of heat, noise, and pollution of the shopping

strip. We embarked on the second working step - to develop a personal vision of a perfect Orchard Central Park, without yet having done any detailed fieldwork. Allowing fantasy and emotions to run free led to surprising results, and it helped to tackle a project which had to meet the three-dimensional complexity of Orchard Road. The initial artwork, illustrated here, is not yet design. The students showed that the marriage of the large-scale shopping mall architecture and an exuberant tropical central park would be stunningly beautiful and virtually logical. The beauty of their images demonstrated how much potential could be opened up within Orchard Road.

In the third step, students had to conduct thorough fieldwork in and around Orchard Road. In the subsequent design process, it became evident that vehicular traffic did not have to be completely banned from Orchard Road to allow a significant central park. It would be wonderful if the most prominent part of the street, between the ION Orchard and Orchard Central malls - spanning from Paterson/Scotts Road to Killiney/Koek Road - could become car-free. This solution would avoid the decoupling of the important arterial roads of Scotts and Paterson, at the same time it would break clear the true heart of Orchard Road and allow the incorporation of a large central park. A park that would be a barrier-free, above-ground connector of the most prominent mall-systems: a central oasis of relaxed urban outdoor life. The direct and fast access to all adjacent malls would cross pollinate business and bring comfort to the patrons. Orchard Central Park would be the place to be for all those who love the urban life and yet seek to be free from a conglomerate of concrete, granite and asphalt. The new park would sit perfectly between the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where plant and picnic lovers go to, and the future Gardens at the Bay, where leisure and enjoyment will be the main thing on the schedule. Orchard Central Park on its part

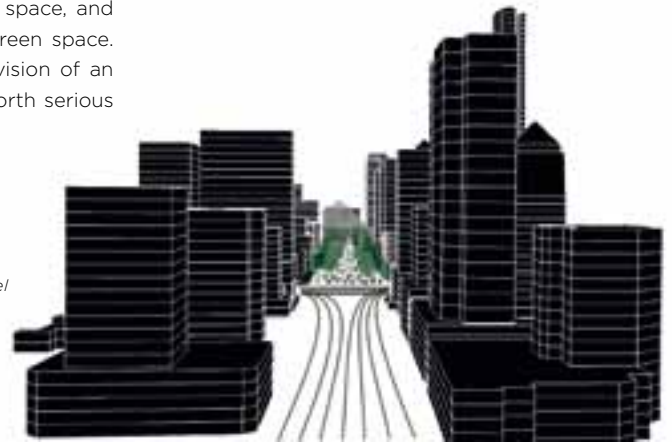
would crest the temples of commerce, offering enticing alternatives to the indoor air-conditioned climate and framing attractive locations for alfresco cafes, bars and more. When night falls, this is where the urbanites will take out their new shoes, clothes and haircuts – and continue to spend their money.

Orchard Central Park would emblemise a win-win situation: an iconic place, a tranquil pedestrian haven with lush vegetation and a concept that boosts the business activities as well as the real estate market in and around Orchard Road. The park vision constitutes a serious effort to show an alternative to the typical outcomes of the recent building boom in Singapore, the city that avails itself of being A City in a Garden. When then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had his personal vision of turning

Singapore – which was rapidly becoming urbanised in almost the same manner as today – into an attractive place to live, he emphasised on green. Today, Singapore is without doubt a green city – it took decades to reach this desired status and it needs large new park projects everywhere in the city to keep the equilibrium between new office and apartment space, and between street infrastructure and green space. In conclusion, we believe that this vision of an Orchard Central Park is definitely worth serious consideration. 

References:

Rekittke, J., (2010). Bottom-up Landscape versus Top-down City. In Singapore Institute of Architects (Ed.), *1000 Singapore: A Model of the Compact City* (p.157-167). Singapore: Singapore Institute of Architects.



OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM Concept of partial pedestrianisation of Orchard Road (Image: Nur Syafiqah Bte Nahadi, 2010).

Impressions of Orchard Central Park (Design: Toh Chong Ji, Nur Syafiqah Bte Nahadi, Neha Mehta and Tan Yi Wei, 2010).

THIS PAGE, TOP & BOTTOM Using a grid and cube system to create Orchard Central Park (Images: Teo Hui Yi Rachel, Lin Shengwei Ervine, Nur Syuhada Bte Limat and Alice Fiserova, 2010).

