



Singapore Green Spray A Metropolitan Exhibition Park

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Urban Nostalgia

A large part of our cities is still based on an idea of urban efficiency that had its heyday in the 60s: individual works of architecture have to adapt to a bigger vision (a.k.a. the city/the context), developing within a certain set of rules. *That* Urban Design—once perhaps a powerful force in step with politics and the economy, forward-looking, design-driven, scientific—would undergo a process of gentrification, becoming a blind Letraset®—based mantra lacking ambition and autonomy, the domain of reference and repetition.

Moreover, its byproduct, context, would become a nostalgic yardstick for judging the success of urban development, referring more to (presumably absent) classical order and proportions than to contemporary ingredients such as density or infrastructure. Context has often been associated with an Eldorado of urbanism, the preservation of the urban status quo and human scale, whereas its heirs do not necessarily imply such tangible qualities but form a flexible mesh allowing the city to evolve within given rules.

Aldo Rossi well describes context with nausea and disappointment:

It is hardly surprising that this concept of context is espoused and applied by those who pretend to preserve the historical cities by retaining their ancient façades or reconstructing them in such a way as to maintain their silhouettes and colors and other such things; but what do we find after these operations when they are actually realized? An empty, often repugnant stage. One of the ugliest things I have seen is the reconstruction of a small part of Frankfurt on the principle of maintaining Gothic volumes alongside pseudo-modern or pseudo-antique architecture. (Rossi 1982, 123)

Spray Painting

For real-estate developers, however, context is still something to be bandied about in marketing brochures. Renderings often rely on contextualization as a selling tool, even if what they show as contextual space (roads, paths, entertainment, parks, public squares) is merely a generic representation that will shift around, adapt to building codes to generate extra cubic meters of housing, offices, shops, halls, balconies etc. A more precise term for this varnish would be ambience, or atmosphere, since context is used as a spray paint that covers spaces framed by gates or CCTV devices. Rossi adds that context “seems strangely bound up with illusion, with illusionism. As such it has nothing to do with the architecture of the city, but rather with the making of a scene, and as a scene it demands to be sustained directly in relation to its functions” (Rossi 1982, 123).

That said, it is also true that the contemporary metropolis, for a variety of reasons—the scale of buildings it is made of, the overwhelming presence of technology, the lack of ideas or the ambiguity of the political debate—is apparently unable to create context a plausible urban frame that lasts longer than buildings themselves and that, independently from architectural forms, guarantees public space. If nothing else, context allowed a more “democratic” distribution of the in-between spaces of the city. So, what could be a convincing alternative to context in our increasingly urbanized times (times when only around 2% of global building production relies on architects, possibly because we’re incapable of theorizing a new, programmatically undetermined but visually convincing milieu in which to squeeze our projects)?

Context and Public Space 1 – Large Buildings

Refraining from theoretical onanism and using the word context in its etymological sense of woven together (*con-textus*), we can speak about a generator of (public) space in which there are no choices (but an infinite number of possibilities for non-choice), in contrast to real-estate ambience, where the options are endless yet the deck to pick up from, is extremely conventional.

This definition makes it even more clear that context is not a place, as in Rossi’s complaints, but is rather a relationship between wefts, knots, and warps that creates conditions, like kilim patterns or the lines of a Beni Ourain rug. Looking to the root of this abused word allows us to understand why large structures necessarily take over urban structure and why a juxtaposition of

large buildings makes spaces indeterminate and inherently instable. In his seminal text, *Singapore Songlines*, Rem Koolhaas refers to batik, a formless sum of presences, as a new metaphor for city-planning.

What public space is then allowed in the terrains (*vagues*) left over by large objects?

Context and Public Space 2 – MVAC Buildings

Self-referential, over-technified architectures, self-sufficient buildings, advanced buildings, passive buildings, inherently resistant to interaction, behave in a similar way to large objects, trying to secure for themselves the best view, exposure, air, while avoiding heat islands, etc.

Look at Singapore, which from the early stage of its development has engaged technology in design to mitigate extreme climatic conditions and guarantee a certain degree of comfort. High-tech solutions provide conditioning, ventilation, and solar shading while ensuring a “sustainable” approach by implementing innovative energy-savings systems, for example, or monitoring the carbon dioxide emissions of a building. But in seeking efficiency and control, technology applied to buildings very rarely creates interaction. Buildings stand for themselves, heedless of urban spaces and connected only by electrical networks, sensors, and conduits for sewage and fiber-optics.

What Koolhaas did not see coming some twenty-odd years ago was that Singapore would become the field of an unexpected shift in the relationship between technology and nature. To contain the effects of its exponential urban densification, the city has adopted ever more sophisticated technological solutions that go beyond the domestication of environmental and natural conditions, strengthening the synergy between nature and human intervention and urging a new connection with nature. Boosted by eco-mimetic buildings, the “tropical trap” (Koolhaas 1995) is encouraging the proliferation of new ecosystems in a preexisting artificial environment. One side effect of a technological nature and eco-mimetic architecture is that greenery, once part of public spaces, becomes green spray paint, flying on top of skyscrapers or flipped to become vertical (and inaccessible to city users, in any case).

Context and Public Space 3 – Social Media

Adding to the confusion generated by bigness and technology, the politics of today are short-termist, based on social media polls, whereas that city-making ought to be an anticyclical discipline that generates stable and

permanent chunks of urban matter. Where politics are not free (from following trending topics), an open city fabric, mostly corresponding to public space, can hardly be conceived, leading to a reduction in sites for free gathering and individual expression.

Machine buildings and large blocks tend to eliminate the interface (a.k.a. the ground level) between the city, architecture, and landscape, limiting its value as a canvas for social protest (graffiti, tags, and posters) while permitting its more easy-to-control uses as manifestos for short-lived architectural styles or as technological devices to control climate, access, or the aura and status of buildings.

Singapore

The buildings of Singapore are constantly renewed with no apparent desire to claim an allure that will last longer than two decades—a product that the marketing department of the city has recently taken to branding in various schizophrenic ways, from “Uniquely Singapore” to “Your Singapore.”

In this constant redefinition of identity, propelled by the addition of hyper-structures as the epitome of urban designlessness, in-between space becomes a more and more fragmented entity, unable to define any function other than mere services and circulation. Politically, Singapore “is managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness: even its nature is entirely remade. It is pure intention: if there is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity” (Koolhaas 1995, 1011).

A “tabula rasa, . . . where tests are made in architecture and urban design,” (Koolhaas 1995) Singapore has pushed the absence of urban structure to the point where the atmosphere of the city is now pixelized in a cloud of plants. The traditional relationship—urban structures as warp and architecture as knots—is flipped and a batik of freestanding elements sits in a soup of trees and shrubs: the fractal of nature used as contemporary hyper-marketable context (Poli 2009).

If Koolhaas saw the city of the 90s as “an imperfect collage: all foreground, no background,” we can say that today Singapore represents a unique ecology of the contemporary where the background is formless architecture and the foreground is total green.

The Green Solution

In contemporary Singapore, the perception of space deviates from the usual stereometrics associated with human artifacts, relying instead on our

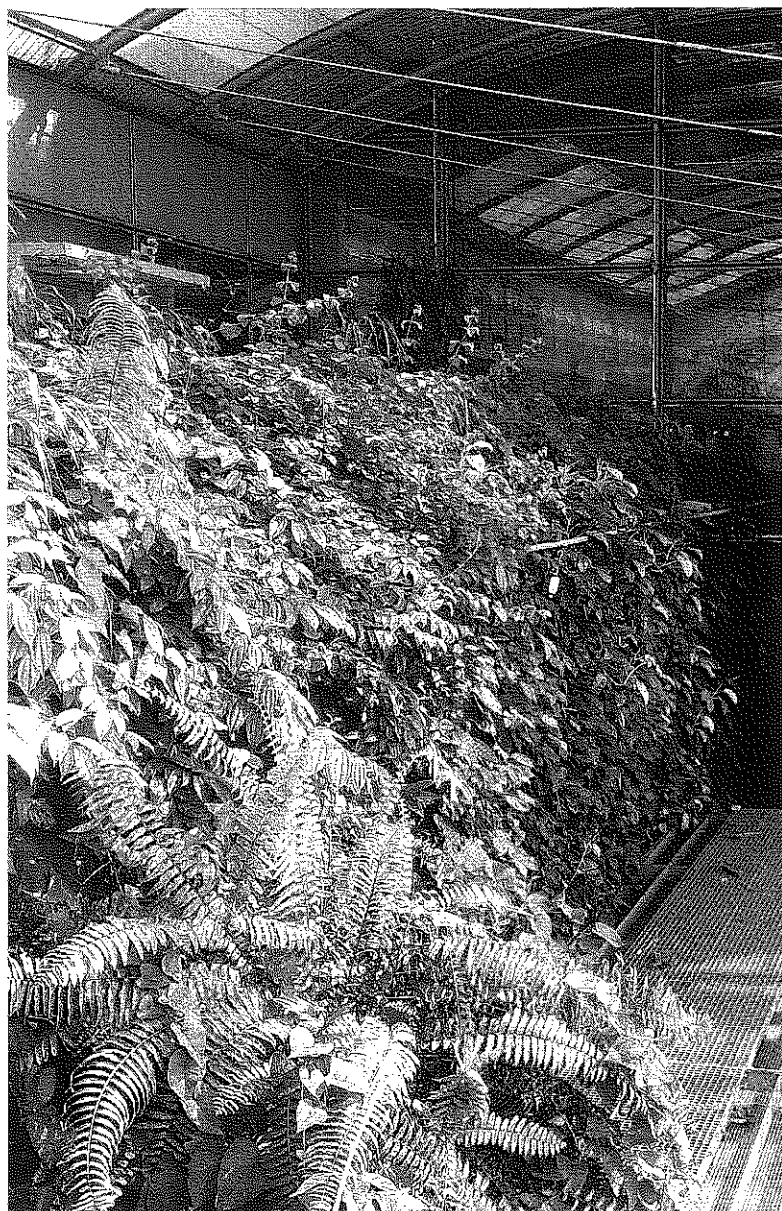
unconscious ancestral capacities (we see green more than other colors). In this way, we navigate a new artificial environment led by leaves and soft surfaces. If naked, buildings would be perceived as autonomous vertical elements without any arrangement, but in their green nuances they appear familiar and somehow acceptable. Geometric stability is absent, planning is formless, order is lost, urban fabric is eroded, connectivity is unraveled, but still we are comforted by the atmosphere that plants generate. On the one hand, the absence of structure and the overwhelming increase in density, on the other the gold rush to propose an alluring long-lasting identity, to see architecture founder and to be submerged under green design. Often the use of technology is intensified to push the anatomy of buildings to simulate natural systems, allowing these structures to perform as a living organism.

Supertrees (2012) are vertical gardens located in Gardens by the Bay, designed by UK landscape architects Grant Associates. Complex structures between 25 m and 50 m high, they have a cylindrical precast concrete core covered by a steel-weave skin that provides support for the climbing vegetation that wraps the whole building. A canopy at the top casts shadows, as in a natural tree. Supertrees are certainly the most interesting symptom of the new relationship between design and a context expressed by a completely artificial nature. In place of the natural mechanism of photosynthesis, they are equipped with photovoltaic solar panels along with rainwater-harvesting devices that can be used in irrigation displays. What is hidden beneath the apparently gentle green mantle is the bulky precast concrete structure that hosts a complex engineering system for cooling and shading. Architecture becomes pure infrastructure for vegetation and machinery, and parks become thematized exhibition arenas.

Vertical Nature as Political Manifesto

A building can be sympathetic to its environment, especially if that environment is retroactive or posthumous. Nature, in the words of the first prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, represents the next stage in the tree-planting policy of the nation: “Singapore now becomes a wild idyll . . . Not ‘under the pavement, beach’ but ‘after the pavement, beach’” (Koolhaas 1995, 1085). Since the 60s, then, Singapore has not only had a tabula rasa policy for architecture but a strange fascination for nature as the backdrop for growth.

If nature remained for some years a horizontal phenomenon, a shift has happened in the last decade, with nature becoming a skin for buildings and for roofs: technology has begun to allow plants to enter the buildings and reach their top, but especially to cover their façades.



At the same time this vertical greenery has an iconic power—more visible, controlled, and efficient than the public parks that are part of a Western approach to cities.

While nature is not a context, and Koolhaas shrewdly links *tabula rasa* and nature, vertical greenery is contextual, in the terms of the real-estate definition discussed a few lines above. Nature is where humans are not, or else it is called landscape (Roger 1998). Vertical greenery is an ecological human artifact that competes with nature, forming a new condensation of urbanism, landscape, and architecture able to deal with scale and the politics that oversimplify each field of operation.

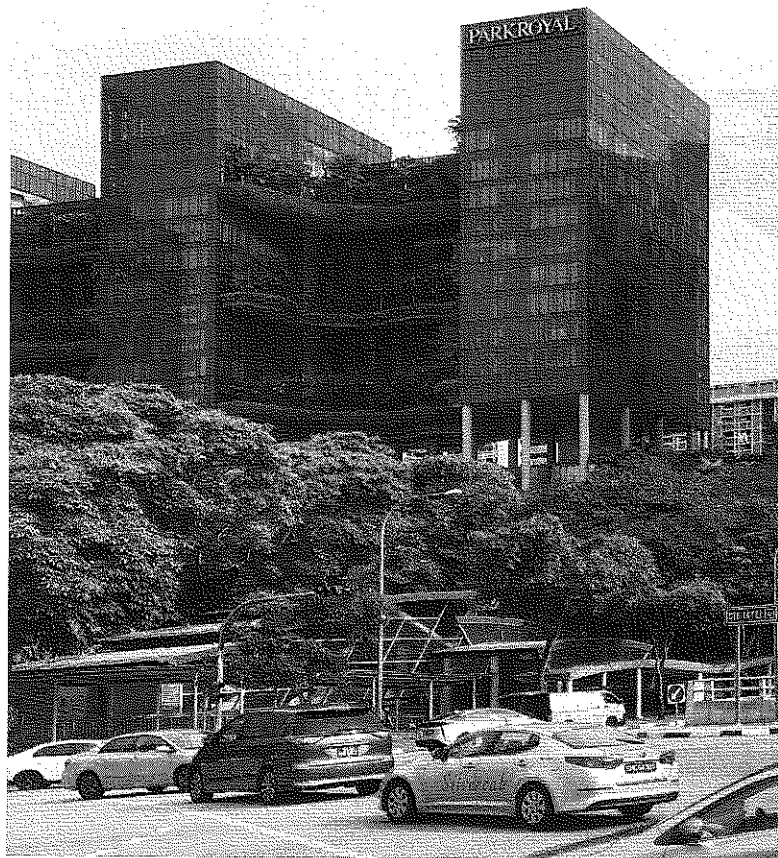
In order to mitigate the effect of density and the lack of quality and character of spaces, vegetation goes up. Oasia Hotel Downtown (2016) is a biophilic building designed by Singaporean firm WOHA. The 190 m tower in concrete and glass has a distinctive red steel permeable second skin that, like the Supertrees system, can host a large amount of vegetation—25490 m² of it, in fact, wrapping the entire surface of the tower.

If we think of vertical greenery as an attempt to compensate for the lack of green spaces, then Oasia Hotel Downtown is a standout example of this process. The image is powerful. There are twenty-one different species of creeper along the façade, arranged according to their need for light or resilience to wind, and they attract a variety of birds and animals, creating a significant ecosystem. Yet, this surface is clearly untouchable and inaccessible.

In addition to this tropical green skin, the hotel has a large roof garden and other semipublic gathering spaces in the form of a series of openings—sky terraces—that crosscut the volume of the tower. Of variable but considerable height, the open-sided terraces allow a 360-degree view. Hosting another thirty-three species of plants and trees, they offer social and recreational programs for hotel guests while allowing ventilation and shading. There is a certain environmental comfort, but for physiological comfort, the architecture relies most of all on green design.

Eco-Mimesis for a Metropolitan Theme Park

Parkroyal on Pickering (2013) is another hospitality building designed by WOHA. Located on a narrow site in the central business district, the hotel is made of four glass towers connected by precast concrete cantilevered sky gardens layered every fourth level. A monumental green podium and ambitious system of curved high-rise terraces and balconies, pools, and



waterfalls give the building some 15000 m² of green surface and water features, recreating a “topographical architecture.” It is an artificial landscape that certainly stands out in its surroundings as an expression of contextual atmosphere, rather than an actual extension of public space, since it is for the exclusive use of hotel guests.

Urban interiors are designed to counterbalance the lack of context and the struggle to reconnect with the human scale. The green interiors of Singapore are incredibly lush; rooftops, grand sky gardens, green terraces, podiums, and variations in height allow for the creation of a complex artificial geomorphology. But this green ambience is stridently static, brooking no form of spontaneity, randomness, or unpredictability. As in a stage-set, each object is carefully preselected, neatly set out. Light is oriented and orientable, music is synchronized, every effect is consciously induced, controlled, and manageable. Interaction with actors is kept to a minimum, and in any case is premeditated.

The application of greenery in most of the above-mentioned examples is highly theatrical, aimed at amusement rather than usability. “Ambience,” here, is strictly connected to the emotional sphere, relating to a sense of experience of a space rather than the quality of it. Green is intentionally exposed and unreachable.

The Interlace, “presenting a radically new approach to contemporary living in a tropical environment,” (OMA 2013) is a colossal residential complex designed by OMA in 2013. The aim of the project was to propose a fabric of living and social spaces within the building, a 170000 m² vertical village with one thousand residential units and a variety of public amenities promoting community activities. In order to achieve this, the shape consists of stepping blocks that break up the volume and provide a number of large-scale courtyards and outdoor spaces. A green infrastructure allows for the three-dimensional interconnection of the buildings and extends the natural environment.

Public space, once accessible to city-users, becomes, through ambience, a diorama of sociological interaction, a commodity freed from relationships and connections. Green ambience plays in the city the same role that canned laughter does in sitcoms, acting as a prompt for audience participation and at the same time relieving us from the burden of having to laugh. Ambience is, not by chance, the first field of operation in entertainment parks. Ambience can be manipulated and stretched, allowing Singapore to become a metropolitan theme park, constantly changing and evolving



within a flexible coherence. Theme parks are impermanent, secure, and with atmosphere. Having evolved through different urban stages, Singapore is now a perfect example of the content of a city being overtaken by its image. The city becomes a huge thematized theme park, where green is the *passé-partout* for every urban condition.

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