

design was close to that of ‘the city as a megablock shopping centre’, possibly influenced by Victor Gruen’s designs of downtown urban forms generated by the concept of ‘simultaneous movement systems’ with separated multi-modal pedestrian and transportation circulation (Loukaitou and Banerjee, 1998).

The urban design principles behind the 1996 New Downtown proposal went beyond the traditional form and function of office-oriented development of Shenton Way CBD in many aspects (Figure 9.4). First, the ‘live–work–play’ mixed-use development included 26,000 new homes with high accessibility to the workplaces and was evenly distributed across the overall area in the waterfront, downtown centre and the surrounding urban parks. Second, the injection of entertainment and recreational facilities was intended to change the nature of working environment. The live–work–play combination was meant to transform the daytime office downtown to a 24-hour ‘New Downtown’. Third, some emerging technologies were implemented in infrastructure planning and building design, such as a district cooling system, high-speed lifts with artificial intelligence control systems, central computer-based building automation systems and common services tunnels. These urban design principles aimed to achieve the new objective of the island to create a ‘global business hub’. The proposal represented another ‘non-stop’ government policy initiative to keep track of Singapore’s economic progress in the global marketplace.

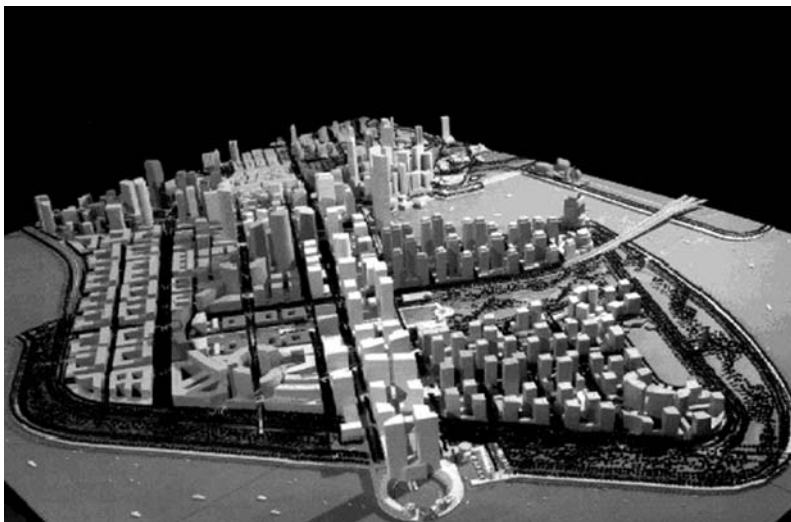


Figure 9.4
The urban design of Singapore
New Downtown, 1996. (Source:
Singapore URA urban model.)

Reflections on downtown urban form

The transition of Singapore's downtown design concepts from the 1970s Shenton Way to the 1990s New Downtown is significant but also problematic. The New Downtown proposal indicates an innovative form of corporate space intended to integrate living, working and recreational activities. The ideas seem 'too good to be true': the multi-level pedestrian and vehicular movements, parking systems and public transports provide an environment with almost 'zero-friction' circulation. Urban design formulae such as tree-lined boulevards, waterfront promenades, urban parks and plazas are ubiquitous across the whole area, and were illustrated through a few images of Western cities. Although western design formulae aspire to a certain quality of urban life, ironically, the New Downtown design transmits a strong sense of placelessness.

The 1996 New Downtown proposal in fact expresses the ultimate form of functional planning, surprisingly akin to the principles of Shenton Way's downtown urban design of the 1970s. Unlike the mono-functional design of Shenton Way, the New Downtown is designed with multiple uses, but this is not only for corporate profitability, but also for tourism and consumption. Like many precedents in Singapore planning and urban design, the urban environment and experience cut across all boundaries of geography, culture and ideology, where urban form is built without reference to history and geography. It is hard to detect any social differences, cultural distinctions or confrontation points in this new urban vision because they seem to have disappeared or, as Marshall Berman's comments on modernity and the experience of contemporary urban life, 'melted into air' (Berman, 1992).

In 2003, Singapore URA announced a revised New Downtown plan. Based on a similar development projection, 6 million m² of floor area, the propositions of the 1996 New Downtown plan were largely followed by the 2003 revised plan: a pedestrian-friendly environment with at, above or below ground level connections, state-of-the-art infrastructure and multi-functional mixed-use design, which aimed for 'a distinctive and global location for business and for living, working and leisure, around-the-clock'.

There were only minor differences between the two downtown plans in terms of physical design (Figure 9.5). A new 75-m wide and 700m long linear urban park was created and