



Figure 9.5
The comparison of 1996
(above) and 2003 (below) New
Downtown master plans.

oriented towards the Marina Bay. Within the 100 ha of the New Downtown core area, the open space ratio was increased from 6% to 12%. The average block size was reduced from 1.6 to less than 1 ha. A regular block system provided a spatial framework which would 'allow room for expansion, subdivision and phasing of developments to suit changing market need' (Singapore URA, 2003). The smaller block design and flexible grid system reflected the more conservative position adopted by the 2003 revised plan due to the difficulties faced by the government in attracting real estate investment to the new area.

The critique of the 1996 and 2003 designs gives rise to two fundamental questions. To what extent can the downtown urban space be designed and planned? Beyond the functional aspects, what are the alternative design and development strategies, which could contribute to the particular quality of downtown urban space? The first question seems obvious if we accept Koolhaas's analogy that Singapore is a mega-shopping centre (Chung *et al.*, 2001), or that the city is a huge lounge of Changi International Airport. The issue of 'privatized public space' in Western cities does not exist, because the whole city has in almost all respects privatized public space through government land acquisition, delicate planning and careful management, resulting in neat and organized streets, parks, underground and open spaces in the city centre and at the fringes. As a consequence, the downtown urban space, even the whole city, has become a designable object.

Unexpectedly, the first question in designing downtown is now becoming increasingly difficult to answer. The global economic downturn since 2001 slowed down the speed of development of the New Downtown. It led to uncertainty about how economic growth could be sustained, especially in office and commercial development. If the office development in Shenton Way and the commercial development in Orchard Road could not maintain or guarantee its profitability, 'How could the planning of another 6 million m² in New Downtown be viable?' Under these new and unanticipated circumstances, a second question is now timely: What new design and development strategies could help stimulate downtown liveability and sustainability?

An urban design studio

In 2001, Singapore URA (2001b) published a new concept plan. It 'stressed the importance of taking into account the changing global trend in living and working patterns, sustainability and energy-saving strategies, variation in identity of urban neighbourhood and the strong sense of islandness'. The key proposals included a global business centre, high-rise city living, an extensive rail network and focus on identity. The URA appointed an International Panel of Architects and Urban Planners, including Peter Hall and Fumihiko Maki, to review the draft of the 2001 Concept Plan. In the central city area, the panel suggested a strong linkage between the successful commercial boulevard Orchard Road and the historical