Singapore’s Orchard Road as Conduit: Between Nostalgia and Authenticity

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Through the frame of reference of a conduit or “flowing channel” (both literal and figurative), this article shows how Orchard Road juxtaposes many elements emblematic of Singapore’s post-traditional environment — its colonial legacy, present patterns of mass consumption, fascination with artificial spectacle, the symbolic economy, youth culture, Singaporean national identity, flows of global workers and tourists, locally historic architectural and landscape forms, underlying geography, and enlivening spatial practices. The construction of Orchard Road as the main public space of the nation through a montage of these erstwhile or embedded elements provides insights to Singapore’s postglobal moment. Three related issues focus the examination. First is the collision of history, values, contemporary culture, and the symbolic economy — how are these represented or embodied in space? Second is the division of space between global and local actors (and the formal and informal economy) — how do these groups come together? Third is the disjuncture of fragmented personal experience and memory with mass urban phenomena — what is the nature of nostalgia within the post-traditional environment, and how does this affect the sense of Orchard Road’s authenticity?

Orchard Road is the East’s answer to New York’s famed Fifth Avenue, Paris’s Champs Elysée, London’s Mayfair and Sloane Square and New Delhi’s Janpath, all rolled into one. The only competition it may face in the very near future could be from Nanjing Road in Shanghai or the ultra-modern and fast and dazzling developing eastern end of Jianguo Avenue in busy, bustling Beijing.

— Alex Abraham
At first sight, Singapore’s 2.4-kilometer-long Orchard Road may seem little more than another glitzy shopping street within the rising tide of global consumerism. One author even recently commented, “Orchard Road is the prototype for a new shopping typology that is becoming more prevalent in Asia: the urban linear mall. This type of mall rescales the plan of the traditional mall . . . to one that amasses the spaces of the city.”

Such commentaries, however, fail to take proper account of Orchard Road’s spatial and social complexity, its layered histories, or the nature of post-traditional urbanism. In this article, I argue for an understanding of Orchard Road that goes beyond the popular but essentialist view that it as simply another global shopping street. I will try to show its role as an authentic urban space of great relevance to Singaporeans. Furthermore, as a space whose past continues to be both selectively reimagined and reconstructed, Orchard Road provides a portal to understanding the types of new identities of place typical of post-traditional urbanism.

Since the 1860s the space of Orchard Road has undergone vast transformations as entire networks of places, times and bodies have supplanted each other. Today it serves as the main street of a nation, a teeming “ethnoscape” of residents, tourists and workers. The quintessential urban public space, Orchard Road is where different groups are channeled into proximity with one another. Actors in global epistemic communities, globe-trotting flâneurs, urban nomads, middle-class Singaporeans, and foreign domestic guestworkers all share the spaces strung together to create Orchard Road. Sometimes a “space of appearances,” it is also a “space of friction.”

MONTAGES AND FRAMES

Local historical and urban contexts make it difficult to offer direct comparisons between Orchard Road and other world-renowned streets. Thinking about Orchard Road alongside some other models may, however, reveal what it is not, and help define what it is. For example, Orchard Road is not a linear urban mall like City Walk at Universal City, California. That space was conceived for wholly commercial purposes as a piece of retail-based connective tissue predicated on a limited consumption-induced urbanity.

Like the “brick-street” Ginza district of nineteenth-century Tokyo, however, Orchard Road was developed as a tourist-oriented shopping street due to its proximity to expatriate communities. Pre-World War II Ginza was a hangout for fashionable mogas and mobos (modern girls and boys), and Orchard Road, too, lures youthful crowds with the latest fashions and with movies, discoteques, cafes, and food from around the world. However, Orchard Road is not comparable with the scale and complexity of Ginza today, with its large-scale interior environments of dépats.

Of a more similar scale would be Berlin’s Kurfürstendamm (or Ku’damm). This stretches for 3.5 kilometers and was built in the late nineteenth century to emulate (albeit on a more modest scale) the Champs-Elysées of Paris. Like the modern international showcase of the Ku’damm, once touted as “das größte Caféhaus Europas,” Orchard Road boasts fine hotels, department stores, restaurants, cinemas, and art galleries. It is similarly served by two subway stations, thrives despite heavy vehicle traffic, and is sometimes closed to traffic and transformed for carnivals, festivals and parades.

Unlike the Ku’damm, however, Orchard Road was not conceived and rebuilt as a coherent shopping and entertainment street, but grew piecemeal over time. Neither is Orchard Road dominated by storefronts; rather, it is lined by disparate buildings with deep interiors, joined by a pedestrian mall — which, interestingly, was built in the 1970s in anticipation of the many new buildings that line it today.

Such lack of uniformity gives Orchard Road a different character than many European shopping streets. In terms of urban space, Orchard Road offers a wide variety of sectional profiles, creating an array of spaces with different scales and relationships to each other. It also engenders a secondary economy of street-side kiosks and an informal economy of vendors — from ice cream to on-the-spot caricatured portraits. This involves a plethora of structures for display — pushcarts, kiosks, mobile food trucks, temporary sidewalk stalls, product-promotion marquees, and even temporary stages for street performances. Unlike the controlled interior of a mall, there are a range of spaces one can inhabit — interior, exterior, and in-between — and a variety of activities one can engage in.

Within this manmade world, the verdant green of the erstwhile tropical landscape reemerges now and then in startling bits, providing a reminder of Singapore’s location one degree north of the Equator. One particularly emblematic feature of Orchard Road is its stately fringe of historic angsana trees. But other pools of greenery along Orchard’s lower stretches offer a sense of languid tropical calm that contrasts with the harder edge of its more built-up areas. And, or course, when it rains on Orchard Road, it may take the form of a real tropical torrent.

Unlike the self-contained experience inside a shopping mall, the conglomeration of spaces called Orchard Road is more than the sum of its parts. It is this, in essence, that defines a street. As a public space, Orchard Road is made up of all these structures, visible and invisible, as well as its changing narrative of use through time.

To understand these spaces, my approach here follows a visual rather than a linear logic, in the sense of the montage as suggested by Walter Benjamin. The methods through which data were collected — and especially represented — have made use of different media, such as photographs, news clippings, personal Internet diaries (blogs), archived materials, and narratives. These were then pieced together within “frames,” dynamic montages compressed in time to express certain themes in spatial practices, supplemented by textual materials. Without reducing the images and textual
materials to essentialized forms, the intention is to use this material as concentrated information, compressed in time, framed and juxtaposed to bring out meanings and themes which would otherwise be hidden.

Within this overall strategy, a particularly useful organizing concept has been the analogy and actual geography of Orchard Road as a cleavage in the topography. Orchard Road began its life as a kind of trough that ran through a hilly area of colonial plantations, collecting the agricultural produce from the plots that flanked it. As it developed as a vehicular artery, it also came to provide space for a drainage canal to alleviate flooding in the area.

A more pronounced topography began to appear along Orchard Road in the 1960s and 70s, as its profile as an indentation between gentle hills was deepened by the construction of tall buildings to either side. At that time, it also began to exhibit its new role as a concentrator and distributor of commerce and consumers. By the 1980s and 90s, it had already come to reflect the tastes of a new middle-class Singaporean consumer for high-end goods, sophisticated environments, speed (fast food, rapid transit), and a caffeinated lifestyle stretching well into the night. Today, Orchard Road is the primary conduit transmitting the energy and pulse of the city, linking networks of air-conditioned atria and public open spaces, both above ground and through the subterranean world of the city’s mass rapid transit (MRT) system.

In much the same way Benjamin once perceived trajectories in the elements of the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, Orchard Road projects the urban future of Singapore — allowing one to reassemble, and at the same time relate to each other, the disparate elements embodied within. Such elements are like Internet hypertexts, projecting one into whole realms of possible future discourse. In the case of Orchard Road, these might include shopping, mass transport, tourism, entertainment, fast food, globalization, urban renewal, state control, youth culture, and real estate speculation. Orchard Road acts like a portal into the future, concentrating and connecting otherwise disparate urban discourses within a constructed urban public space.

Materially, this post-traditional present is one where architectural substance has shifted from solid building forms and shapes, such as the old Mandarin Hotel and C.K. Tang Building, to new typologies predicated on surfaces, such as video walls, seasonal facades, and even morphing walkway paving, in a constant updating of images. This new physical ephemeralism and instability is also concomitant with the displacement of bodies — a changing clientele of flâneurs, a dynamic ethnoscope, and shifts in affinities to spaces — sometimes by choice, sometimes not. Even the forms by which Orchard Road is represented have changed, as traditional figure-ground maps and photographs have given way to abstract graphs depicting real estate and rental values (peaking around the Scotts-Orchard intersection and falling in the middle); demographic patterns (age-groups of consumers, shopping preferences, petty-crime statistics); and scopes of remote surveillance (as cameras record activities in atriums, MRT stations, sidewalk ATMs, and the prominent Electronic Road-Pricing gantry).

The post-traditional condition of Singapore, as offered by these constructions, is not based on a history of progress or even a progression of history, but rather on a compression of moments, images, places, people, and scales of phenomena.

ORCHARD ROAD — A BRIEF HISTORY

Early settlers of Singapore used the hilly areas near present-day Orchard Road to grow gambier, which was used for tanning, as a natural red dye, and as a component of betel nut chewing, a favorite pastime of field workers. However, by the 1840s these areas were given over to colonial merchants to cultivate cash crops, principally nutmeg.

By 1846, when the Plan of Singapore Town was drawn up by J.T. Thomson, the first government surveyor, the hitherto unnamed path through the area had acquired the name Orchard Road. The hills flanking it had also been named after the estate owners, such as Oxley Rise, Claymore Hill, Cairnhill Hill, Mount Sophia, Mount Elizabeth, and so forth. Disaster struck in the 1850s, however, as an unknown disease largely wiped out the nutmeg crop, ending the agricultural ambitions of landowners there. Eventually, the plantations were sold and divided into smaller residential plots, and Orchard Road became an area of airy colonial bungalows.

Although the area remained largely rural, by the 1880s Koek’s Market and the first shophouses were built there. The shops were of utilitarian types — sundry-goods stores, and later, motor vehicle workshops. Horse-drawn carriages and jinrickshas remained the common modes of transport in the 1920s. But this changed dramatically to automobile traffic by the 1940s.

With the addition of more shops and three supermarkets in the 1950s, Orchard Road began to take on the mantle of a small-scale shopping street. A milestone was reached when C.K. Tang, an enterprising local merchant, set up the first department store there in 1958. However, Orchard Road continued to be flood-prone until the building of the Stamford Canal in the 1960s. And it was not till the 1970s that it replaced High Street as the city’s main shopping street.

With the opening of Lido Cinema, Orchard Theater, Raffles Village, and Jackie’s Bowl in the 1960s and 70s Orchard Road also developed into a local entertainment strip. Across the street from Cold Storage Supermarket, a car park by day served as a popular nighttime open-air food court. In 1973 the Mandarin became the first large-scale modern hotel on Orchard Road, but the pace of development stepped up in 1974 with the opening of Plaza Singapura, the city’s largest shopping center at the time. The Orchard Road Pedestrian Walkways, a state-implemented project begun in 1976, pro-
vided wide sidewalks for shoppers, adding to its upscale image.\(^8\) Then, in 1979, Singapore’s first MacDonald’s opened at the junction of Scotts and Orchard Roads, heralding the arrival of fast-food culture.

During the 1980s a number of significant new developments continued to change the face of Orchard Road, including the construction of the iconic, if somewhat eclectic, Dynasty Hotel (now the Marriott) at the prime junction with Scotts Road. Its podium floors comprised Tang Plaza, which replaced older commercial space in the landmark C.K Tang building. Other towering buildings soon replaced many of the two-story shophouses along the street. And the opening of three Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations along Orchard in 1987 spurred further a growth of retail activity, which planners anticipated would ultimately stretch all the way south to Marina City.

By the 1990s, Orchard Road had become a busy hotel, entertainment and shopping street, with high-class residential areas to its north and south. Large, self-contained malls like Ngee Ann City not only offered space for shops, restaurants and department stores, but for public functions including a public library, post office, and a “civic plaza.” At the turn of the twenty-first century, Orchard Road had acquired all the standard components (and brand labels) typical of globalized shopping street. Its image was further defined by bright lights, large-screen video walls, and a cosmopolitan crowd at its al-fresco curbside cafes.

Such physical change began to be paralleled in the 1980s by the staging of mass spectacles such as the colorful Chingay Procession during Chinese New Year. The first-ever large-scale street party, Swing Singapore, was held there in 1988, with a turnout of about 250,000 people.\(^9\) The annual Orchard Road Christmas light-up also began in the 1980s, during which the entire street is transformed into a simulated Winter Wonderland.

Ad-hoc events have also taken place, such as exercise sessions led by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as part of the Healthy Lifestyle Campaign of 1997. But the culmination of Orchard Road’s rise as an event space and Main Street of the nation came during the Millennium Countdown Party, televised worldwide, when it was shown in the same take as Tiananmen Square in Beijing and New York’s Times Square.

In the public mind, Orchard Road is also today synonymous with youth culture. In the 1990s such buildings as The Heeren and Cathay Cineleisure Orchard were built specifically to cater to young consumers, and the Youth Park adjacent to the National Youth Center offers a venue for youth recreational and social activities. Another important group that has changed the character of Orchard Road — at least on Sundays — are Filipina domestic guestworkers who gather at certain spaces there on their day off.

The fully urban character of Orchard Road today is a far cry from its rural appearance during the colonial plantation era, or during its early-twentieth-century incarnation as a local commercial street. Today its cosmopolitan orientation produces the sense of a concentrated edge, where differences become apparent, and where one is acutely aware of Singapore’s place in a global age.

**ORCHARD ROAD AS A COMPRESSION OF TIME AND IMAGES**

As the above discussion makes clear, Orchard Road’s character has grown up over time. It should not be surprising then that the spatial moments that animate it embody historical responses to its underlying topography (FIG.1).

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**FIGURE 1.** Orchard Road timeline. The birth of an urban shopping street.
Indeed, it is this history that to a large part determines its nuances as an archipelago of public spaces. Such nodes of activity float amid the currents of an urban sea, in reverse of traditional figure-ground conceptions.

Starting at its west end, one finds the first such node just outside Orchard Towers (1975). Within a stretch of new or refurbished hotels and upscale malls, this complex is somewhat of a relic. A motley crowd of foreign workers gathers there each work day to visit the employment agencies within. Meanwhile, at night and on weekends crowds of foreigners, especially sailors from the ships that berth Singapore’s busy harbors, frequent its bars and euphemistically named escort agencies. In fact, Orchard Towers is a “Designated Red-Light Area,” meaning it has been legalized for prostitution. However, nothing on its public facade suggests this, and a little further down the street, the Thai embassy sits within a fenced compound, surrounded by serene greenery.

Next comes the prime real estate junction with Scotts Road. Several large commercial buildings dominate here, namely the eclectic Tang Plaza and Marriott Hotel (1982), Shaw House (1993), and Wheelock Place (1994). Major brand labels literally festoon these buildings, an effect accentuated by the large video wall on Shaw House. In true global fashion, the buildings reveal their insides on the outside. Shoppers can
further enjoy being seen under the yellow umbrellas of Borders, sipping coffee at Starbucks, or just hanging out at the Civic Plaza fountain of Ngee Ann City (1993).

In terms of pedestrian activity, this is one of the busiest districts along Orchard Road. The exit/entrance to the Orchard MRT Station (1987) is located here. Lush, old angsana trees still provide delicious shade along its sections of pedestrian mall. The public spaces at the Ngee Ann Civic Plaza and Shaw House are also popular. And on weekends white marquees here provide a setting for product promotions or special events such as Lion Dance performances.

The next nodal point is the domain of the young and trendy. They spill out of the Somerset MRT Station and head straight for The Heeren, which contains a major record store and annex dedicated to youth fashion, and in whose atrium teen music idols often make appearances. The arcade and promenade outside The Heeren is also a favorite rendezvous point for youngsters.

A little down Grange Road (a side road leading off Orchard) one also finds Cineleisure Orchard. And right across the street is the Youth Skate Park, which draws a constant flow of youngsters. The youthscape of Orchard is a temporal state that comes alive particularly on Friday nights.

The Istana Park and Istana Gate further down the road take on a completely different character. The Istana building and grounds have been here since 1869, when it served the British colonial government as a headquarters, then known as Government House. This remains an iconographic space today, emblazoned with general emblems of statehood and the Singapore flag in particular. Otherwise, Istana Park embodies the tranquility of mature trees, pools of water, and sleepy pavilions. On national holidays, crowds of Singaporeans who do not normally visit Orchard Road queue up for rare visits to its gardens.

A look at the vintages of these buildings and open spaces should already provide a hint at Orchard Road’s asynchronous development. They embody many different plans and visions, including the colonial master plan, the CTD commercial development of the 1950s and 60s, the URA Development Guide Plan for Orchard of 1994, and the 2001 Singapore Tourist Board master plan for “Making Orchard More Happening.” Thus, even as Orchard Road has hardly developed in a “natural” fashion, neither has it developed according to a single blueprint. Over time, many ideas have been discarded, modified, or augmented to reflect changing conditions.

Far from a homogenous manufactured reality, then, the milieu of Orchard Road is best understood as having been constantly repositioned to meet the challenges of each new moment. Its importance thus lies not so much in the specific identity of the structures alongside it as in the role it has played in the larger “geography” of the city. As a channel or conduit through different urban moments, the street itself has been able to provide a narrative that strings together a series of temporally disjunctured pieces, conflating their images and projecting them into the present. The forces at work here — history, planning ideology, real estate speculation, popular culture, changing tastes and habits, and political regulation — sometimes work synergistically. But more often they are antagonistic, and the end product is more negotiated than planned.

Amid these conflicts, the desire by agencies such as the Singapore Tourist Board (STB) to bring Orchard Road onto the world stage by creating the imagery of a “global city of the twenty-first century” create enthusiasm for such events as its “twinning” in the 1990s with the Ginza in Tokyo or the Champs-Elysées in Paris. During these weeklong celebrations, fashion shows, tea ceremonies, wine festivals, and other events have brought the culture of such foreign locales to Orchard Road, while the culture of Orchard has been reproduced elsewhere. Orchard Road is thus made a conduit that beams Singapore across the world.

Within this arena of manufactured consumerist spectacle, the ultimate simulation must be the hyperreal re-creation over the Christmas and New Year season of a Winter Wonderland, replete with snow-laden buildings, icicles, and reindeer sleighs. Only 15 percent of Singaporeans are Christians. Yet after twenty years, the Christmas light-up has become a “new tradition.”

During this two-month period, phenomena like snow, the Northern Lights, and traditional symbols such as fir trees, angels, bells and snowmen, are writ on an urban scale, to the degree of becoming hyperreal. In effect, such displays provide only a simulacrum of a Christmas celebration. Nevertheless, because the light-up has worked its way into both collective and personal narratives, it is sustained as a public event and expression of the national collective.

**ORCHARD ROAD AS A COMPRESSION OF PEOPLE AND PLACES**

Every Sunday, several areas along Orchard Road — the segment extending from the Orchard MRT Station to Lucky Plaza, across the street at the lane next to Wisma Atria, and the green space behind the MRT station dome — are transformed into temporary social enclaves by groups of domestic workers from the Philippines. These women spend much of their weekly day off in these favorite rendezvous spots engaged in spatial practices not typical of Singaporeans in general, especially the use of open green spaces for picnics and group socializing. These acts of space appropriation, along with loud chattering and laughter, are viewed with some degree of ambivalence by Singaporean shoppers, and with amazement by some tourists.

The Sunday meetings are a distinct manifestation of the global flow of labor on which the Singapore’s economy relies. In particular, the Filipinas free Singaporean women to contribute actively to the workforce. However, because their work
is limited to the private realm, its value is not always apparent. Nevertheless, their weekly gatherings on Orchard Road bring them into the same space as workers at the other extreme of global flows — white expatriate executives, many of who live in the nearby Tanglin district or just off Orchard Road itself.

Such a scene is further complicated by the ubiquitous presence of tourists, identified less by nationality than by their slightly offbeat clothes, the variety of branded bags they carry, and their somewhat worn-out-from-shopping looks. Such populations come to make Orchard Road an embodiment of what Appadurai has termed an “ethnoscape,” a shifting human environment of tourists, immigrants, exiles, and other mobile groups. Here, on Orchard Road, in a space that almost every Singaporean is conscious of (but may not necessarily frequent), the identity of the Other — and thus also of the Singaporean — is constantly remade and redefined.

A closer look at the Orchard Road ethnoscape reveals that different groups tend to gravitate to different spaces, and define them for their own use. As already mentioned, the core gathering space for Filipina guestworkers remains the promenade outside Lucky Plaza. However, emanating from this, a number of peripheral spaces have also been occupied that are largely hidden from view. These spaces lie between buildings, have slipped through the cracks of official programming, and are rarely used by Singaporeans due to a different culture of space use.

Such factors mean that the Sunday enclaves of Filipinas are bounded in space, time, and by social distance. Indeed, groups of Filipinas generally keep a distance from Singaporeans, and seem uncomfortable when locals approach them. Yet, it is only when these workers are grouped together that they seem empowered by a sense of identity and a right to claim space for themselves in the city. By contrast, individual Filipina domestic workers tend to hang out at the margins of public space, out of sight of the busy sidewalk.

The phenomenon of the Sunday enclaves has generated debate in the press regarding issues that affect these workers. On another level, even with the apparent lack of public interaction between the Filipinas and locals, Orchard Road remains a place where such a “silent” group can appear in public. And simply the visible culture of space use by the Filipinas gives Singaporeans some degree of exposure to a culture other than their own.

Another group that inhabits Orchard Road is what the Straits Times has called the “Triangle Tribes” — adolescent youths who converge at the “Youth Triangle” defined by The Heeren, Cineleisure Orchard, Youth Park, and Skate Park. Here is how one commentator, William Gibson, has described this scene:

Rococo pagodas perch atop slippery-flanked megastructures concealing enough cubic footage of atria to make up a couple of good-sized Lagrangian-5 colonies. Along Orchard Road, the Fifth Avenue of Southeast Asia, chocka-block with multi-level shopping centers, a burgeoning middle class shops ceaselessly. Young, for the most part, and clad in computer-weathered cottons from the local Gap clone, they’re a handsome populace; they look good in their shorts and Reeboks and Matsuda shades.

In the past, the presence of groups of youngsters such as the Far East Kids and the Centrepoint Kids hanging out on Orchard Road was deemed a sign of social problems. But the Tribes there today have been embraced by retailers and sanctioned by planners. On any given Friday a number of sub-species of this group — such as the Skateboard Pack, the Heeren J-Poppers, or the Cineleisure Railing Huggers — actively fill the public areas of the Triangle. Patrolling police are wont to leave them to their devices, such as showing off their skateboarding prowess at the Orchard Road Pocket Park.

Statistics indicate that 80 percent of the 7 million tourists who visit Singapore annually make a trip to Orchard Road. Although globetrotting tourists may be found in many places along Orchard Road, a closer look reveals that white visitors generally gravitate toward Emerald Hill and Peranakan Place’s perpetually carnival-like atmosphere, while Asian tourists are more likely to be found toward the Tanglin end, near the large duty-free malls. To many expatriate residents of Singapore, Orchard Road may in fact seem like home, as their employers may furnish them with an apartment with a view of the street.

For many local Singaporeans, then, Orchard Road is where one might be most likely to meet someone with a different social, cultural or political identity. At the promenade outside Centrepoint, a student might find a representative of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) promoting a book or pamphlet. Elsewhere, a Singaporean child might for the first time meet someone with hair and eye color different from hers. A middle-aged housewife might meet a skateboarder with orange hair and a pierced tongue. A Singaporean woman might place offerings for the Hungry Ghost Festival on the side of the public promenade, while a group of student flag-sellers meets at their favorite rendezvous space.

In fact, Orchard Road is the kind of public space where one can assemble one’s own favorite a la carte menu of public spaces and encounters. Such dynamic negotiations make this a space of “friction,” where the ideas of self and other are constantly evolving. As different spheres exist in proximity at the same time, a space of possible exchange and sometimes antagonism is created. The value of such space is not so much in the sharing, let alone true “meeting” of identities, as in the simple opportunity for divergent urban proximity. An experience of otherness, of spatial practices and views other than one’s own, allows for possible “shifts of perspectives.” This is something which is often not (as proclaimed in discourses on public space) a pleasant experience — and which at times can even be disturbing or offensive.

Ultimately, Orchard Road is where the Singaporean “Heartlanders” go out to the city.
... like you, when I step out on weekends, I don’t want to
go downstairs of my block or round the corner from my
house; why stay in my backyard, I want to go OUT.

And, say what you will, out IS Orchard Road.
All the mallians I talked to yesterday were from out
of town (‘weekdays heartland, weekends Orchard’), and
they were out in force (meeting friends) and vengeance
(shopping with). All their reasons for joining the thick
and the fray boiled down to ‘fun lah!’ ‘shopping!’ ‘more
things to see and buy’. It’s not like they can’t buy the iden-
tical mobile phone accessory from their neighborhood. But
there is no frenzy, no carnival, no ‘going out’ attached to
chilling and eating and shopping in your own kampung.
Not one young person was bothered, much less aware, that
it was crowded, that you sometimes had to push and
shove, that for everything you had to queue.16

ORCHARD ROAD AS COMPRESSION OF SCALE
AND PERCEPTION

Orchard Road and its public spaces take on different
meanings when perceived from different perspectives and at
different scales. Take for example, the concept of “non-places”
used by French anthropologist Marc Augé to describe public
spaces that lack the characteristics of traditional places. He
has applied the term especially to transit spaces, or spaces we
tend to move through instead of stay in.17
From the eyes of those who actually use them, these spaces may not be as one-dimensional as they seem. Consider this case revealed through newspaper accounts and blogger diaries:

At 2.10 pm, the Singapore flash mob rode up and down the escalators near the MRT entrance three times. While going down, they shouted ‘whee’ with their hands raised, as if they were on a roller coaster. The whole thing took about three minutes. By 2.13 pm they had split up in three different directions.

‘What was that? Some uni (university) orientation is it?’ asked 25-year-old Selena Wong who was waiting for her friend at the station. She didn’t know what flash mobs were. Flash mobs do not seem to have any political or ideological agenda. They are supposed to be spontaneous, whimsical fun.18

I took the train to the Orchard Station, got out, and walked around a spot that Lily and I had agreed to meet. I heard the roar of the crowd as everybody was off from work and going about and Orchard is especially one of the busiest train stations. But then I heard some footsteps running behind me and towards me. I quickly turned around and saw a short (5’4”) Chinese girl smiling at me. Lily. “Damn! Craig — I was playing your hide-and-seek game, trying to beat you!”

“You can’t beat me babe, I invented the game,” I replied. We then embraced and kissed, and then hand-in-hand, walked off into the crowd. We walked through the train station which is of course underground, and then through connecting tunnels and hallways that lead through all kinds of connected underground shopping malls — no, I’m not kidding.

So Lily and I walked through this subterranean shoppers paradise and then popped out onto the street eventually — far away from the original train station. We walked into a small 7/11 store (yep, they even have those here), where Lily bought us both a drink — ice cold cans of “Chrysanthemum Tea,” and she also bought me a pack of Marlboro Lights ($6.70).

We then walked along the throngs of people on Orchard Road and came upon a band of Chinese Acrobats performing on the sidewalk. We sat down and watched them for a bit, commenting here and there of what we liked about their show and what not.19

The above accounts show how the non-places of the Orchard MRT Station and its surrounds may provide for quite unique, sometimes intense or novel individual experiences. The spaces described here are indeed transitory, but they are still in many ways “compressed” public spaces which act as a platform where people with all sorts of different itineraries cross paths and have a chance to spend “public time.” These spaces are often also integrated with other networks of public spaces and have the potential to become viable social spaces.

On an individual level — on the level of small, personal stories — Orchard Road, instead of the glitzy shopping street, can thus be perceived as a giant playground, a space for individual expression, or even transgression. Sometimes, events portrayed on the scale of the individual can thus ring differently than when perceived as an urban phenomenon:

A short word on this area. This is the shopping district of Singapore. There are stuff to skate but human traffic is impossible especially after 5 pm. Lotsa long rails are a temptation to great to resist! Go before 4 pm. Watch out for cops. Prime shopping area means more reason to diss out “injuring passers-by” shit.
Orchard Road is one of the best skate spots in Singapore — marble and tile as far as the eye can see. It’s got everything: rails, benches, curves, ledges, and about any kind of screwy fixture you can think of. Even though it’s awesome skating, you have to watch for the police because you’ll get busted faster than holding up a doughnut shop.20

While Orchard Road has generally been regarded as a consumption-scape par excellence, there are many who also regard it as work space. These may either be people with regular jobs there, or who fall within the informal economy. Ice cream carts — identifiable by their blue umbrellas, and run mostly by old men — are a ubiquitous feature of the Orchard Road sidewalk, and are little magnets of activity. In contrast, newspapers kiosks are invariably run by old ladies in sun hats. Street sweepers may sometimes be spotted, but more often they remain invisible.

Food vendors, mobile food-truck operators, and push-cart operators also service pedestrians along the street. Many of them have makeshift tables or stands. Caricature artists also display their work on the sidewalk or show off their skills. Some of these people are almost semi-permanent fixtures, and their absence may be felt immediately. They also serve as points of noncommittal public contact and as reference points, defining spaces such as street corners. Their presence may depend on the time of the day, or they may remain day and night, serving different crowds. Here is one account of such a street vendor:

Every afternoon the 72-year-old woman takes a slow, painful hour to trudge the 3 km distance from her one-room flat on Indus Road to the Orchard underpass beneath Scotts Road. She doesn’t take the bus — she can’t afford to. Madam Tay earns her money by selling sachets of Super coffee mix and Super chrysanthemum tea, clean towels and aunty blouses. Walk past her along the tunnel, and you will notice that unlike other hucksters or beggars, she never calls nor signals for help. What she does, is smile and hope that someone kind will buy her wares for a dollar or two.21

These anecdotes suggest that to perceive the scale of Orchard Road solely as that of urban events and phenomena misses the personal meaning, positive or negative, that attaches to it as a public space. To bring into focus such multiple perspectives of the urban, I have tried to collect, document, collage or reconstitute such personal constructions. Ultimately, however, such a reconciliation of different views of the urban intensifies and enriches the resolution of Orchard Road as a public space. It is at this scale that notions of identity and place can be fleshed out and brought to life.

By contrast, the scale and urban prominence of Orchard Road also allows for the staging of large-scale events and spectacles, often with themes like “health,” “nation” or “culture.” These spectacles have ranged from nationally televised mass events to product launches, fashion parades, and the annual Chingay Parade (marking Chinese New Year), which for a decade and a half was held on Orchard Road. Other examples were the one-off Millennium Swing Singapore street party and short-lived end-of-the-month road closures for do-it-yourself street parties.

The general lack of spontaneity involved in mass events organized by the state is well known. Such events are often played out with coordinated, mimicked movements and rehearsed steps — “following the leader” — with participants dressing and acting the same way. When these involve performances, there is usually also a strict separation between performers and audience, with a defined realm of activity bounded in space and time. In other words, sanctioned crowds are invited to watch staged actions that are without any innate content or meaning other than a reinforcing of the status quo (for example, of collectivity as a nation).

The banal unity and boundedness of these events show a degree of disemboding of cultural practices (such as dancing in the street — a concept not indigenous to Singapore) from elsewhere, without any attempt at reembedding these practices within Singapore public space.22 For example, the state-organized street parties tended to be so bounded by their allowed time slot that they verged on the bizarre:

At 9.50 pm, men and women were already sweeping the streets, weaving in and out through the dwindling crowd. And seven minutes later, police moved into groups of party revelers to tell them to end their party. The drumming stopped, the dancers stopped, the music stopped and the onlookers gradually dispersed all over Orchard Road. At 9.59 pm, with military precision, the late, late “show” began. It had hints of the closing of a parade, except this time the centerpiece escorted by a traffic policeman on his gleaming motorcycle was a mechanical sweeper. It made its grand entrance as if to show the crowd it was king of the road. Meanwhile, at the Dynasty Hotel end of Orchard Road, five other traffic policemen sitting neatly in a row on their revved-up bikes waited for their turn to wrap up the party.

It came exactly at 10.02 pm. With the five motorcyclists coming down the road, the crowd started to disperse — some into the MRT stations, some milling on the pedestrian mall. By 10.12 pm it was all over, and the motorists were back to showing the party-goers that Orchard Road belonged to them.23

However, once the road closures came to be for do-it-yourself street parties, the activity shriveled up and died completely. The reason was that Singaporeans do not have such a spatial practice ingrained in their social culture.

NARRATIVES OF LOSS

Although Orchard Road possesses a dearth of built history, it has nevertheless to attracted its own “discourses of
nostalgia.” Most of these voices seem to lament the loss of an age of innocence, of nature, and of authenticity. The most vociferous of appeals have come from a group some have called the “retrogrades.” The retrogrades complain of the loss of an authentic past, are suspicious and skeptical of planned changes, and ruefully view new schemes as careless or irresponsible toward history.

Others would prefer that places like Orchard Road be allowed to develop “naturally” — and perhaps die a natural death, rather than suffer any form of intervention. Here is an example:

_In earlier times, the area around it would have been more green and even more striated. Orchard road derives its name from the nutmeg and gambier plantations owned by colonial planters... in the middle of the 19th century. These plantations were at the edge of virgin jungle and a tiger was even spotted in 1846. Such was the mystic of Orchard. But the plantations and the jungle are gone. The only ‘tigers’ along Orchard Road these days are the ones you down alfresco at its many outdoor cafes and bars. The angsana trees are the ersatz jungle that are enjoined by more systematic green and exotic ‘landscaping’ co-opted to evoke another mystique — the garden city or the city as garden. But these too may go._

The author of the above comment, K.M. Tan, is a practicing architect in Singapore who has decried the loss of a greener, more “natural” Orchard Road, as opposed to the highly abstract and constructed environment of today. He goes on to say:

_At this very moment another narrative is being constructed. The future of Orchard Road is being plotted by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). Soon, it is rumored, the angsana trees will be gone; there is an ominous campaign of extermination of the angsana in the face of this island, because they are difficult to ‘maintain’. Instead, a re-forestation of the past may take place. And soon the orchards may perversely reappear again, if only as a theme. Apparently still not vital enough for them, the STB together with foreign consultants, local architects and planners are huddled together to conceive an immaculate rebirth of Orchard Road._

An even harsher critique is that of architect Rem Koolhaas. Although he has written of Singapore in general, his comments can just as easily be applied to Orchard Road in particular. Among other things, he has referred to “the global consumer frenzy” that “perverted Singapore’s image to one of caricature: an entire city perceived as a shopping center, an orgy of Eurasian vulgarity, a city stripped of the last vestiges of authenticity and dignity.” The reason that Singapore is “a city without qualities,” according to Koolhaas, is the “curse of the _tabula rasa._” Once applied, it proves not only previous occupancy expendable, but also each future occupancy provisional too, ultimately temporary. That makes the claim to finality — the illusion on which even the most mediocre architecture is based — impossible. It makes Architecture impossible.”

Koolhaas’s charge is that the ease with which Singapore’s built history has been erased has made it impossible for the city to have a legitimate sense of authenticity. Worse, where Tan ruminates that the colonial orchards may yet reappear on Orchard Road, albeit as a theme — a kind of “re-forestation of the past” — Koolhaas has asserted that in Singapore “colonial history... is rehabilitated, paradoxically because it is the only one recognizable as history.”

Although it is true that the colonial era gave Orchard Road a legacy of names, it is important to remember, too, that the monoculture of nutmeg trees cultivated by the colonials caused the sudden death of the plantation era. The historical lesson would seem to be that a diversity of (crop) culture would have ensured the continued vigor of the venture. Such a lesson would still seem to be applicable to contemporary plans for Orchard Road — its survival thus seen to hinge on its continued diversity of activities, architecture, culture, people, goods, public spaces, and memories.

_Nostalgia takes different forms. There are those for whom nostalgia may take a more positive turn. Thus, while wistful and sentimental about a more innocent age, they realize that those memories of Orchard Road belonged to a different time, and their loss was inevitable. Such people include the “reminders” and the “resilients,” who may recall fondly the Mont D’or and Tivoli Café (famous for cream cakes), shopping at the old C.K. Tang, or going up the first escalator in Singapore to watch movies in the old Orchard Cinema._

_Such people may still be optimistic in a pragmatic sort of way about the future of Orchard Road. Their nostalgia takes the form of memory trips to the past, associating people and places. But they do not miss the lack of good public transport or the persistent floods that plagued the area. Their view comes with the knowledge that their loss is personal, and — if they ever existed — the “golden days” of Orchard Road are a shifting ghost, which changes with each generation._

_Such people recognize that nostalgia is a luxury that can be enjoyed only because there are new frames through which to regard the old fondly — at a distance, without the accompanying grime. This is the brighter view of the discourse of nostalgia. The other extreme is a chronic, crippling nostalgia for a lost, “good-old” Orchard Road — a discourse which does not allow possibilities beyond the past, and which too often substitutes personal sentiments for critical, constructive analysis._

Whatever the case, it is clear today that nostalgia for a remembered or idealized past is not part of the present construction of Orchard Road’s history. Rather, it is a state that itself is symptomatic of the post-traditional condition. During the decade of the 1980s to 90s Singapore’s rapid growth became manifest in a rapidly changing built environment.
This was the “historical moment” when the “nation” arrived in an economic sense. But it was also a time when the city became somewhat removed from its past, and this was perceived to involve a certain intangible lack of spirit and soul.

CONSTRUCTED AUTHENTICITIES AND THEIR LEGITIMACY

If the discourses of nostalgia for a lost history are put aside, what then are the new mimetic structures of Orchard Road? What legitimizes its history, if history can be said to exist in a city described by Koolhaas as “perpetually morphed to the next state”? In other words, how can one construct a new authenticity for Orchard Road? To answer these questions, I must return to the discourse on compressions of time and images, people and places, and scales of perceptions.

The sedimented history of Orchard Road avails itself with a closer look. The past still lies buried in the names of streets and buildings; the collage of pavements of different vintages; in the course of the Stamford Canal, which runs quietly and almost invisibly; and in the angsana trees gracefully flanking its sidewalks. Refurbished exteriors of old buildings may give a new identity to Orchard Road, but there is still a layering of memory which even the newest master plan (2001) for revitalization will not fully obscure.

The dialectic of people and identities on Orchard Road also reflects a global reach and diversity that will ensure the street’s survival. Orchard Road does not cater only to the shopper or consumer; it continues to be a public space, and even a work and home space for some. The scales of encounter on Orchard Road, ranging from the solo adventures of a young skateboarder to the mass urban experiences of celebrating Christmas, reflect the variety of perspectives that may form new mimetic structures from the personalized to the spectacular.

Narratives of loss simply do not apply on Orchard Road. Instead of a systemic “erasure of history,” the mechanism at work here is more akin to the constant construction of the hyperreal — what Baudrillard has described as the creation of a model for which the original does not exist. Ask anyone what imagery comes to mind to describe Orchard Road, and more often than not people will cite the ersatz concrete and glass pagoda-like tower of the former Dynasty (now Marriott) Hotel and the curving green Chinese roofs of its Tang Plaza podium. This iconic complex is itself a reincarnation of the old C.K. Tang Building (1958), which was demolished in 1982. Now super-sized, its signature Chinese green roofs have simply been magnified and multiplied.

Considering this, it should not be surprising that studies have found that Singaporeans, “despite being aware of other highly imageable streetscapes in the world, still think that the Orchardscape is aesthetically pleasing.”

One might also note the brass-embossed plates depicting local fruits on the pedestrian mall. Whether such fruit trees ever existed on the nutmeg plantations near here is beside the point; it is the romance of fabled fruit orchards that counts. The same applies for the simulated winter scenes right from of a Hallmark Christmas card that pop up on Orchard Road every November. These definitely have no historical roots, but they are now an accepted part of the seasonal change of “weather.” Even the air-conditioned food courts in buildings on Orchard Road are hyperreal quotations of the rowdy open-air food stalls of the long-gone Orchard Road car park.

In the end, we return to the analogy of Orchard Road as a channel, or conduit through which history flows, sometimes sedimenting, sometimes eroding. What matters is that its banks are fertile because of its active life as a mover, not a stagnator. It collects: brings together, mixes the different lives which inhabit its waters, sometimes bringing into friction, at other times bringing into happy collisions. It distributes: shares, transmits, and conducts the energy, life-pulse, and yes, wealth of the city — a life line for some, an occasional thrill for others. It connects: for Orchard Road is intimately connected with the surrounding city fabric, an important thread connecting the heart of Singapore to the Marina Bay Downtown, and to the waterfront.

Orchard Road thus remains an important commercial corridor and connective tissue which links recreational, civic and cultural nodes in the city. Plans have been proposed in the past to divert vehicular traffic away from it, but these have never been found feasible, for it cannot be reduced to an isolated urban shopping space. Pedestrianization would suck out its life-blood and sound its death knell.

Orchard Road’s wide sidewalks preempted its character as a lively shopping street, just as its character as a lively shopping street now preempts efforts to “make it more happening.” Such self-conscious tinkering with what Orchard Road should entail often comes only after the fact. It has come of age somehow, and no one seems quite able to put his or her finger on what exactly makes it tick.

Although those with power to intervene seem to wield the power to determine its fate, like the conduit I have here tried to show it to be, Orchard Road seems to have a life of its own. The legitimacy of its post-traditional environment lies precisely in its ability to flow with the times and constantly reinvent itself. Orchard Road is a hyperreal environment where reference is made simultaneously to an imagined past, a real history as a commercial and entertainment center, abstracted models of great shopping streets from elsewhere around the world — and, to some extent, to the notion of the urban shopping mall.

Orchard Road’s continued relevance to the hearts and minds of Singaporeans lies precisely in its ability to morph into new, constructed authenticities — and in its capacity and potential to provide the public space of the nation.
NOTES

1. A. Abraham, Awestruck on Orchard Road, 2003.
3. The term “ethnoscape” was coined by A. Appadurai in Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
5. The Ku’damm was largely destroyed in World War II. Subsequently, however, many of its buildings rebuilt, and the framework of the street set up by Otto von Bismarck in 1875 is still discernable.
7. For example, the current proposal to redevelop the open green space above the Orchard MRT station for commercial purposes will inevitably cause the displacement of the temporary Sunday enclaves of Filipinas. These women will have to find an alternative rendezvous spots when this is developed.
8. The provision of walkways was completed in two phases — in 1976 under the Public Works Department’s “Walkway Program,” and in 1989 under its “Ten Year Walkway Masterplan.” The second program involved the aestheticization of Orchard Road with the installation of decorative street lamps, railings, seats, “pocket parks,” and embedded brass motifs of tropical fruits (the “orchard”).
9. Street closures continued on a monthly basis, but the practice of street parties fizzled out after a few years, its novelty apparently worn out.
10. Appadurai, Modernity at Large.
11. For example, that the display of workers in the shop windows of employment agencies is against the practices of a civil society.
15. The terms “Heartlanders” and “Cosmopolitans” were coined by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in one of his early National Day Rally Speeches to describe the bifurcations of Singapore society — one more home oriented, the other more globally oriented.
18. From the Newspaper, December 9, 2003, “The mob that wasn’t.”
19. From the Internet blog of “Craig,” an American expatriate living and working in Singapore.
20. From the Internet blog of “Dexter,” 17, a skate fanatic.
24. The term was used by Marshall Berman in his paper “Signs of the Times,” Dissent 44 (Fall 1997), pp.76–83.
25. I owe the credit for the use of some of the descriptive terms here, such as “retrogrades,” “reminders,” and “resilients,” to L.B. Sagalyn’s Times Square Roulette (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), pp.457–62.
29. For example, the Wisma Atria building sits on the site of the former Indonesian Embassy. The Ngee Ann City complex as well as Wisma Atria sit on land owned by Ngee Ann Kongsi, a Chinese clan, which owned the parcel of land previously known as Tai Shan Ting, a Chinese burial ground. The cemetery was cleared in 1957 and leased to the present Meritus Mandarin, Cathay Cineleisure Orchard, and the Indonesian government. See also http://www.ngeeann.com.sg/webtop/property.phtml.
32. I refer to the current plans by the Singapore Tourist Board (STB), called “Make Orchard Road More Happening!”
33. Those who wield power to change the shape of Orchard Road include the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the Singapore Tourist Board (STB), the Orchard Road Merchants’ Association, the Land Transport Authority (LTA), among other government, quasi-government, and private-interest groups.

All illustrations are by the author.