

# The Good, the Bad, and the Utilitarian: Singapore's Schizophrenic Urbanism

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Any attempts to characterize Singapore's unique conditions stem from *Western* oriented appropriations: "Virtual City"<sup>1</sup> and "Disneyland with a Death Penalty"<sup>2</sup> are simply tongue-in-cheek punch-lines that do neither the city nor the critics justice. This city is, as it describes itself, *Uniquely Singapore*.<sup>3</sup> Singapore lives in fear – in fear of the lack of natural resources, in fear of its infinitely larger neighboring states, in fear of being the only secular state in the region, in fear of being forgotten by the potential investors as international attention focuses on India and China as the emerging Far East market, and in fear of being seen as a Third World ex-colony. As these fears drive the state, the state drives the nation with fears. In fact, it is by this incredibly intense urge to emancipate itself from its Third World colonial past and to make itself a First World country that results in the Singaporean dream of creating a society as a seamless operating system of constant economical growth with a life-long subscription to efficiency – hence, *Singapore Inc.*, a Singapore dream: a truly First World Singapore with all its citizens as employees. Economic well-being and urban transformation are seen as vital goals of being a part of the First World; total control is seen as the only way to achieve these goals. Therefore, a social agreement was accorded whereby the citizens give up their political participation in exchange for the government's promise of security and prosperity. Armed with this Singaporean dream and an authoritarian power, the state begins master-planning social upgrades, *urban renewal*, and economic growth. Singapore Inc. is in fact a true Taylorist operation with every aspect of the society having a specific function. Everything that one can or cannot imagine is orchestrated, planned, and designed, "managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Deyan Sudjic, "Virtual City," in *Blueprint* (Feb 1994).

<sup>2</sup> William Gibson, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty," in *Wired* (Sept 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Singapore Tourism Board's marketing slogan for Singapore.

<sup>4</sup> Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, (Monacelli Press 1995).

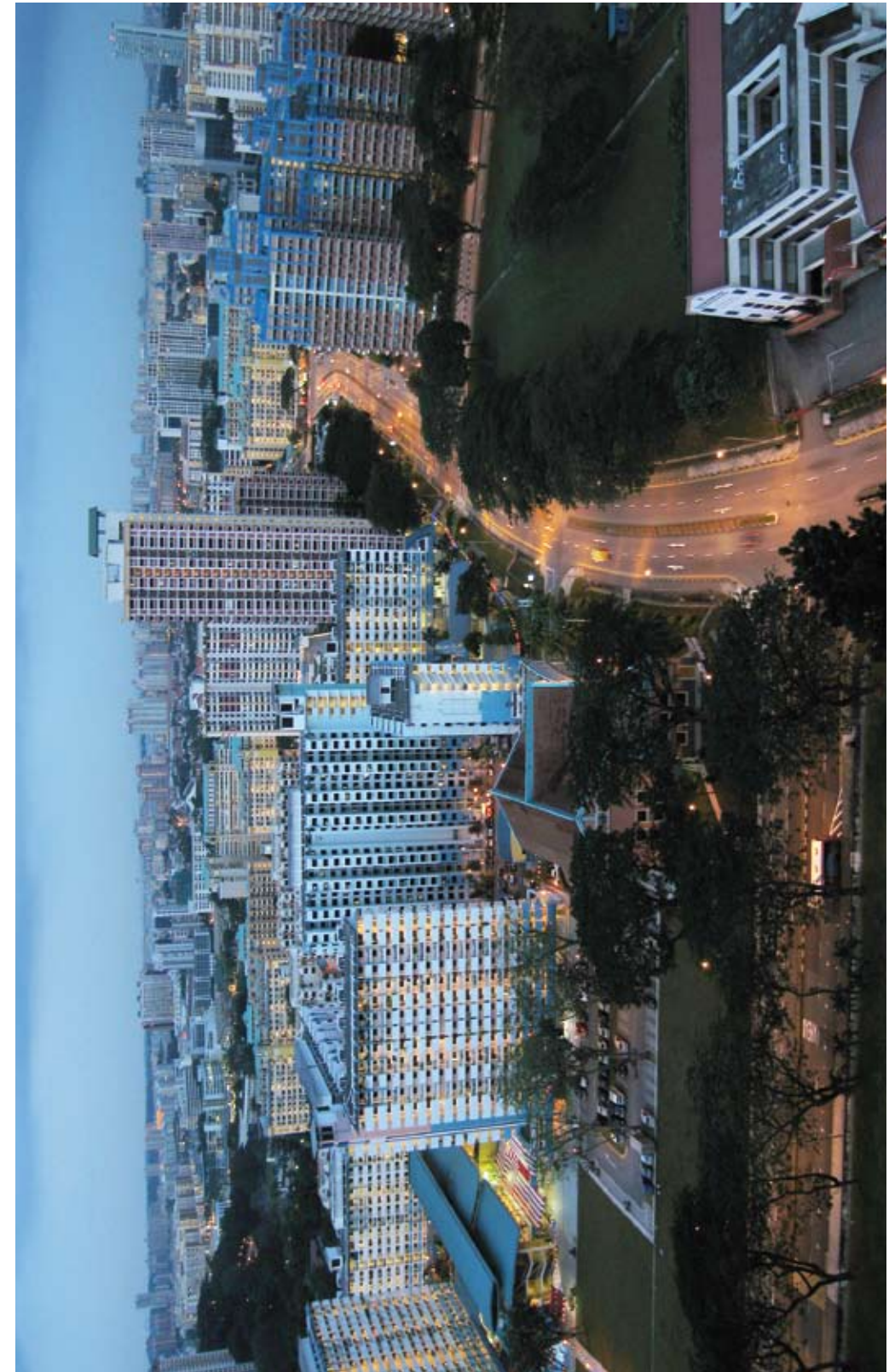


Fig. 1: Toa Payoh housing estate at night: Le Corbusier's dream come true. A blend of tower blocks and flatted blocks. Pitched roof of a Food Court on the left, a public school and the green land earmarked for further housing construction on the right. The main street cutting across the housing project gives access to the expressway nearby.