Aware of the need to continuously foster a distinctive image as a modern metropolis, Singapore is encouraging a more varied night-time cityscape. Instead of one overall lighting plan for the city-state, lighting guidelines have been incorporated into various concept plans and local masterplans.
A nyone who has found themselves lost and surrounded by a sea of darkness will be familiar with the sense of relief that comes with the appearance of light, a sure sign of human presence. In our increasingly urbanized world the extent of human habitation is often relayed by aerial images showing the spread and concentration of lights at night. In a city such as Singapore, virtually the whole island seems to twinkle when seen from the air.

Singapore is a densely populated city where four million people live and work within a heavily built-up environment. With over 80 per cent of the population living in high-rise apartment blocks, large pockets of the 700 square metre island are covered in flickering blocks of light. The island is covered by a dense network of roads to the extent that there are 4.5 kilometres of road for every square kilometre of land. The majority of the roads, from major highways to smaller access routes, are brightly lit throughout the hours of nightlife. It is inevitable that such a high density of human habitation results in a generally brightly lit urban environment.

As the city develops and becomes more affluent, more attention is being paid to design features such as lighting in both the public and private sectors. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), as the main regulatory authority for building development in the country, has been a major force in driving the push for the better design of external lighting.

Having only marked its 30th anniversary as an independent city-state in 2005, Singapore has always been conscious of the need for a distinctive image that identifies it as a modern and developed metropolis. One of the aims of development control in the city centre has been the creation of a distinctive cityscape. Thus, alongside building height regulations to create a coherent skyline around the Singapore River, skyscraper developers have been encouraged to pay particular attention to illuminating building silhouettes. Capital Tower, whose uppermost stories are illuminated by colour-changing lights, is a prominent example.

Despite the attention paid to its skyline, Singapore has over the years been criticized as a boring concrete jungle by both locals and foreigners alike. Thus, the URA started drawing up masterplans in the 1990s with particular attention paid towards creating or intensifying the character of various districts. The appropriate use of external lighting has consistently featured in many of its guidelines since.

The Civic District was the first area for which an official lighting plan was introduced in 1995. This is where a number of the country’s national monuments such as the National Museum and City Hall are concentrated. Relatively short and simple the Civic District Lighting Plan was a mix of prescriptive and descriptive guidelines. Depending on the type of building (modern high-rise or historic low rise), the lighting plan suggested technical specifications for details such as colour temperature and
Particular attention is being paid to the waterfront areas. Coloured light underscores the edge of Marina Bay and roof lighting accentuates Millenia Tower and the dome-shaped Esplanade, location of the city’s performing arts centre.
light intensity. As an overall guide, the plan also recommended that nighttime lighting should give legibility to the overall building form as well as highlighting roofs or other relevant architectural details. As all proposals for buildings located on major roads in the Civic District are subject to design reviews by the Architectural Design Panel set up by the URA, developments in the district have largely adhered to the plan. Conserved historic buildings such as the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilisation Museum are thoughtfully illuminated by warm washes of light, playing up architectural features like intricately detailed columns and roofs. However, newer buildings in the area such as the recently completed Singapore Management University, whilst satisfying the descriptive criteria for lighting of the overall architectural form, have not been constrained by the guideline suggesting the use of whiter and brighter intensities of light for modern buildings.

Adjacent to the Civic District, the area around Bugis Street as well as the street itself, which used to be famous for its transvestites, has been officially gazetted as an “Entertainment Area”. To help create the distinct buzz of world famous entertainment districts such as Piccadilly Circus in London, and Broadway in New York, signage regulations have been relaxed for the Bugis area as well as a few other areas, paving the way for illuminated signs to make a comeback. Although common in cities such as Hong Kong and Taipei, neon signs were regulated out of existence in the early days of Singapore’s development as they were deemed as gaudy and unsightly. The intention is that the selective appearance of such signs will help to create a distinctive visual character in the district.

The intensifying competition for the global consumer’s dollar has also led to a project by the URA and relevant business owners to remake Orchard Road, the city’s main shopping belt. Apart from a slew of initiatives such as urban verandas and elevated linkways, building owners have been given more freedom to reinvent their façades through a relaxation of
GFA (gross floor area) calculations. Again, the guidelines for the articulation of frontages specifically encourage the use of attractive lighting to enhance the façade as well as add interest to the overall streetscape.

Festive displays and streetlighting also help to reinforce the identities of districts. Crowds of shoppers and tourists throng through Orchard Road throughout the year but the human crush reaches its zenith during the Christmas season when the busy road is festooned with yuletide lighting and decorations. Barely a month later, a similar scene is repeated a mere ten minute drive away in Chinatown as people gather to celebrate the Lunar New Year and to admire the festive light-up. Throughout the rest of the year, various districts or parks are specially decorated and lit as other major cultural festivals come up, linking place and community firmly in people’s minds.

Less flashy, but just as important, has been the landscaping of public spaces around waterways in the city. The relatively flat topography of the island means that the city’s waterways are one of its few natural landscape features. Particular attention has been paid to the landscaping of waterfront areas. The Esplanade, location of the city’s performing arts centre on the bay, is linked to the former General Post Office via the Esplanade Bridge. The bridge is distinguished by its distinctive reflective streetlights. Underneath the bridge, subtle lighting creates an ambience conducive to romantic strolls or quiet gatherings.

Despite being located right next to bustling Orchard Road, the Botanical Gardens are effectively screened from its bright lights by a thick screen of foliage and virgin rainforest. Come nightfall park visitors can admire the silhouettes of thoughtfully lit trees and plants. The only sign betraying the city lights nearby being the inevitably bright sky overhead.

Although lighting has played a key role in the push for a more varied cityscape, a comprehensive lighting masterplan for Singapore has never been formulated. Instead, guidelines on lighting were incorporated into the various concept plans and masterplans integrated with proposals for landscaping and building controls. Such guidelines were helpful in creating a distinctive environment but with Singapore continuing to develop with such intensity, an overall lighting masterplan is required to prevent the bright lights of urbanization from blending into a homogenous sea of light.

The Singapore government announced in March 2006 that the URA has started work on a lighting masterplan covering the Central Business District and Marina Bay, the new financial and business hub. By guiding the lighting design of new developments, as well as encouraging better lighting of existing buildings, it is hoped that this lighting masterplan will project an image of Singapore as an exciting vibrant city, attractive to the players in the global economy.