

# INTERVIEW WITH



# YOUNG PLANNERS

Interview by **Felicity Hwee-Hwa CHAN** and **Mingcheng CHEN**  
Transcript prepared by **Ashley KWAN**, **Angela TEO**, and **WANG Yi Wen**

## Introduction

### Felicity Chan (FC)

Welcome to the first interview! Please introduce yourself and say who you are, what you're doing now, and then we can start with the questions. I am Felicity, a researcher, educator, and an urban planner at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at SUTD.

### Ming Cheng (MC)

Ming Cheng here. I've been working in the planning profession in the private sector for 10-13 years or so. And I've joined this team because I'm keen to learn what the young planners are thinking.

### Yi Wen (YW)

Hi I'm Yi Wen, I'm currently a second year masters student, I'm studying masters of urban planning at NUS.

### Ashley Kwan (AK)

I'm Ashley, I just graduated this year, and I'm a planner in the private sector.

### Angela Teo (AT)

I'm Angela, I have also just graduated this year and I am a planner in the public sector. It's my second month at work.

## How Did You Decide to Study and Work in Urban Planning?

### AK

Okay, I can start; My Bachelor's was in architecture and I didn't quite like it so I decided to try something new. When I first joined NUS, I noticed that this was a route you could explore, and I had always been interested since. When I realised that I couldn't imagine myself working as an architect, and found planning to be more interesting, given its broad range of topics I slowly worked towards choosing urban planning as my specialisation.

### AT

For me, my Bachelor's was in sociology but a series of serendipitous events led me to discover urban planning. In my second year of University I had a sports injury and was on the bed for quite a while. It got me to think about what I wanted to do after graduating and what I should pursue as a career. If I'm going to work for more than half of my life, what do I want to devote my life to? It was a time of reckoning! Sociology was quite broad and I was introduced to frameworks and theories about how society worked and the various factors that contributed to social problems, but not necessarily how to resolve these problems. Then I was tending a Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) booth with my friend and she asked me: "Do you want to take an elective in urban planning with me?". I think that was when my interest in urban planning developed because it introduced me to how urban planning and the design of spaces have an influence on social relations and the way we live.

So I started to take more urban planning modules and a minor in urban planning to find out more about what it was, and something clicked! I continued to explore the different aspects of urban planning through internships/volunteer work/competitions, and my interest only deepened. So I came to the conclusion that this was something that I could commit myself to and I have continued to pursue it since then.

### YW

For me, in my Real Estate Bachelor's, we have a handful of modules on urban planning. For example, there was an introduction to urban planning that exposed you to very basic urban planning and urban theory, like the garden city concept.

I enjoyed the module and did well; so that kind of encouraged me to look into this discipline more. MUP [Master in Urban Planning] was also a programme that was already made known to us quite early during our undergraduate years, and I had a bunch of friends that were also kind of interested in urban planning, and we were interested in exploring postgraduate studies. By Year Two, early Year Three, we were already attending MUP briefings about what to expect about what you will be studying. Also for us, [doing a MUP] is a concurrent degree, so timeline wise it's actually also pretty convenient, you start the Masters programme Year One modules during the undergrad Year Four.

## Getting into Planning as a Career

### AT

It was very difficult for me at the start when I did not have any urban planning experience or an architectural background as I did not possess the required technical skills. During school breaks, I applied to a bunch of urban planning firms for internships and the response wasn't good. From what I heard, the firms usually hire people from geography, architecture, and mostly disciplines that are more related to the built environment. But sociology isn't really a directly related field, so I think it was quite hard to find internships in urban planning. Thankfully I came across opportunities for side projects and other internships along the way, which helped me to become more familiar with the industry, to gain some experience, and to build a portfolio.

### YW

For MUP, quite a number of my classmates are international students and they already have a bachelor's in urban planning or architecture. So it was easier for them to find internship opportunities given their background. I think some of my other local friends who have had internships in the public sector in the past also found it easier to transition into a urban planning related opportunity in the public sector.

### AK

I was talking to a friend and she was telling me that she tried to apply for internships with urban planning firms in Singapore but design firms tend to prefer students with an

architecture background or someone with more training in drawing and planning.

**YW**

Yeah. Similar to what Ashley shared, one of my classmates from a real estate background told me that most of the firms that she interviewed with, said that they were looking for students with architectural background - someone with a more solid technical skills. It seemed that one or two years of experience in MUP might not seem to make the cut to get a planning internship sometimes.

## What Makes a Good Planner from Your Point of View?

**AT**

Adaptable: because the way planning is done changes, and the way people want cities to be planned, also changes. For example, there are a lot of calls for public participation again as people want their voices to be heard, and this also changes the planning processes. It would be beneficial for planners to have the ability to adjust to the changing circumstances.

**AK**

Yeah I agree - I think they should be empathetic and critical. I just watched this mini documentary and it reminded me that planners should be careful and challenge the assumptions that we bring to our design and our work.

**FC**

In what sense, empathetic?

**AK**

Like, a city should benefit the people whom we design for.

**AT**

I guess building on Ashley's point, another analogy that could describe the role of planners, maybe is that of being a nurse [laughs]. When you are warded in a hospital, you usually only see the doctor once a day or when there is a critical emergency. But the nurses are there to attend to the patient regularly - you have to stay with the patient, you know how the patient feels, you know what the patient needs. And you also have to be patient and empathise with the patient.

**YW**

Wow...

**AT**

You need to constantly care for the patient.

**YW**

What a metaphor.

**AT**

Also like what Ashley said about challenging assumptions,



Above (Left to Right): Angela Teo, Ashley Kwan, Wang Yi Wen, Chen Mingcheng and Felicity Chan (Photo Credits: Felicity Chan)

Below: The Young Planners and Mingcheng during the interview (Photo Credits: Felicity Chan)

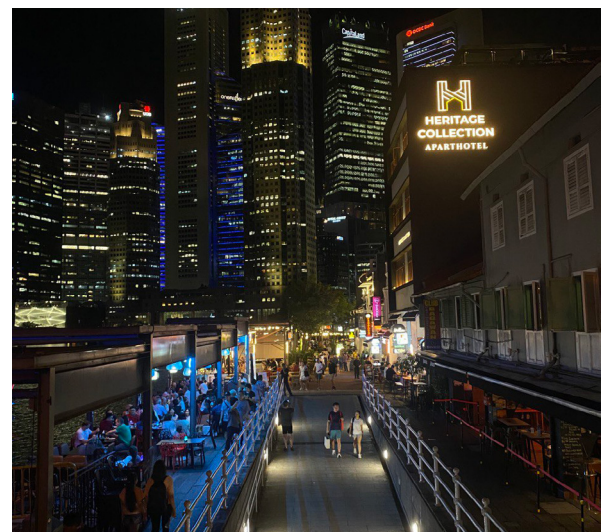
## MARINA BAY



Left: Marina Bay and the Floating Platform during sunset (Photo Credits: Ashley Kwan)  
Right: Marina Bay skyline and the Merlion (Photo Credits: Angela Teo)



Left: Lush trees of Coney Island (Photo Credits: Angela Teo)  
Right: Tranquil rest spots at Coney Island (Photo Credits: Angela Teo)



Left: Riverside Point overlooking Clarke Quay (Photo Credits: Wang Yi Wen)  
Right: Boat Quay in the evening (Photo Credits: Wang Yi Wen)

an instructor from my Masters programme (MSc in Urban Science, Policy and Planning at SUTD) told us on the first day of class that the ground rules for the class was to have: "Strong beliefs loosely held," as in, you can have your strong convictions or opinions about something, but be open to people challenging it; and if there's some truth and benefit in it, you can also adjust your beliefs accordingly.

**MC**

Wise words.

## Which Public Space in Singapore do you Like the Best and Why?

**AK**

Maybe, the Marina Bay area? The area in front of Marina Bay Sands, like the promenade.

**YW**

Maybe the plaza in School of Design and the Environment 4 (National University of Singapore), it's considered a Privately Owned Public Space right? It's quite empty, there are railings and huge trees outside with a big green space. I quite like the calmness of the area.

**FC**

Ashley, what is it about Marina Bay that you like?

**AK**

I like all the activities there. We did a site study for a school module and we stayed there for a few hours to observe the activity. At every hour, there were a lot of people doing many things. There is a feeling of vibrancy; it makes you feel excited, even though you're doing nothing.

**AT**

Indeed, that MBS area is quite nice because you can see the skyline. Singapore has no mountains but looking at the skyline makes you feel a sense of awe.

**FC**

It is a landscape that was designed to impress.

**YW**

I just thought of another place - Boat Quay. I'd interned around the area and I had to walk a lot. Every time I walked past UOB plaza and saw the steps towards the river... It felt so peaceful. I wanted to sit there and do nothing. But I don't go there often now because it's quite far and out of the way.

**AT**

Last one - Coney Island.

**YW**

What do you like about Coney Island?

**AT**

It has a very foreign feeling (we don't usually get to

see Casuarina trees in our neighbourhoods - like you are entering an island and a different time zone. I only visited Coney Island this year when my friend told me that there was a place in Singapore that is similar to Walden Pond in the United States. So I went with my friend and spent the whole day reading at Coney Island, and I must say that it was a very memorable experience. I like that they have seating spaces with varied degrees of publicness or privacy. They have the long terraced steps where you can sit down, look out to the sea and to small pockets of beach areas. Overall it was a very enjoyable environment to spend time in as it was very peaceful and breezy.

## What Do You Envision Singapore to Look Like in 50 Years?

**MC**

I'll be dead...

**ALL**

[Laughs]

**AT**

When I visited Vietnam, there was this low furniture movement. Outside many of the shops and eateries, there were low tables and chairs oriented to the streetview. Although it's not that clean and the sidewalk is dusty, you see people sitting and having a drink... It is quite a delightful experience, you can just sit and people-watch. I'd hope Singapore can have an environment that is something like that when I'm old. To me, successful ageing and meaningful participation in society when I am old is more than ageing actively. I like ageing peacefully too.

**MC**

So you're thinking of adding more variety to city life?

**AT**

You may see a lot of elderly in parks but I am not sure what proportion of their day is spent being active. Active ageing measures will be more effective for people in our generation - a preventive measure I feel... But yes, when I am old and my knees are weak, I don't think I can walk the whole day but hope to still be able to engage in a variety of activities with different intensities. Neither can I be at the park nor be at the exercise equipment the whole day.

**MC**

Vietnam's street life is spontaneous - I could be sitting by the side of the road and there are people riding bicycles and dragging a TV behind them. Suddenly, they would stop and pass me a microphone so I can order a song on the street. It's like karaoke. Of course, you have to pay. They come up with all sorts of business ideas.

**FC**

I think what y'all are saying here is about a way of life in a city and having a right to the city. It makes me think about the elderly, people like my mom, who are in their 70s and

don't feel as accepted at Orchard Road. They still visit but they don't want to linger because they don't feel like they belong there. I think Singapore has a lot of age-biased environments. It makes me think about what kind of urban conditions enable people to sit and rest without being asked, "Why are you not being productive?"

**AT**

I didn't think about not being productive. I can still be productive in my own ways, but I just like the idea of relaxing and lounging even while the traffic remains busy.

**FC**

In Singapore, we are always rushing and needing to go somewhere.

**AT**

Time to start a low furniture movement here!

**FC**

I do wonder if you're an elderly, it would not be easy to get up from low seating.

**ALL**

[Laughs]

**MC**

In Taiwan, when my parents have nothing to do in the morning, they will go hiking. They may head out to have lunch, walk around, and then go home. Perhaps, in Singapore there isn't as much nature to go to. If you talk to the taxi uncles here, they'll share that they've bought houses in the Philippines and intend to retire there.

**FC**

My friends are already planning for retirement, and they are only in their 40s. They've talked about starting a commune...

**YW**

I think I would prefer Singapore to remain less gentrified. Real estate prices rising is one thing, but my friends and I were chatting the other day and we realised that hawker centres are getting gentrified.

Stores are dying out and they are replaced with more expensive food. Everything's just getting more expensive. I'm sure inflation and rising rents have a role to play too. But I guess hawker centres are just one of the more prominent spaces that we will notice when it changes... What about shopping malls or other spaces? Everything's becoming more similar, homogeneous, perhaps even public spaces too. As a country develops, there'll be sunset industries or things that are not as relevant that die out as the older population disappears. It is a pity! I think I'm alluding to a loss of identity and heritage when the younger generation is no longer interested in keeping them.

**ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS**

**ASHLEY KWAN** is a Master of Urban Planning graduate (NUS) and an urban planner at DP Architects.

She likes to experience the city by taking walks and discovering well-designed houses. In her ideal city, she envisions a perfect blend of urban and nature, with vibrant, green streets, and an abundance of feline friends!

**ANGELA TEO** is a Master of Urban Science, Policy and Planning (SUTD) graduate and a planner at the Housing & Development Board

She delights in exploring the everyday spaces in cities and in observing the different ways of life within them. She finds even more delight when these observations are accompanied by a good cup of coffee.

**WANG YI WEN** is a Master of Urban Planning graduate (NUS).

She enjoys basking in the greenery sprinkled across the city from afar and finds delight in observing tranquil sceneries.

## Choose an Animal that Best Represents Yourself

**FC**

This is a fun question. I have one - I was watching an animal documentary and among the animals, the animal that seems to be safest from danger and can take its time, is the elephant. I don't know if it best represents myself, but if I could choose an animal to represent the type of life I can have, it would be an elephant. Slow, big, and no other animal dares to attack you, not even the lions. They are always walking around with their family, never quite alone, always looking out for each other.

**MC**

Very hard to choose one that I like. Maybe one that lives at the waterfront - I think I would be a seal.

**AK**

They are actually quite aggressive, right?

**MC**

Yeah they are quite aggressive but most of the time they are by themselves, chilling in the sun. If people approach them, then they are (aggressive).

**YW**

Is that your ideal life?

**MC**

No, I was just thinking... No one dares to approach you and something quite lowkey.

**FC**

Looks like we are both looking to be a lowkey animal. How about you gals?

**YW**

If I can choose, I would prefer to be a bird. I can fly anywhere anytime, eat anything you want, sleep anywhere.

**FC**

But you have to get up early! Otherwise you might not get worms!

**YW**

That's true... But I think I like the idea of freedom, being able to fly anywhere, whenever you want.

**AT**

Do you feel very trapped?

**YW**

Now, I don't know. I guess out of all the animals, I see birds the most. I live near a nature reserve too.

**AT**

What kind of birds? The aggressive birds? Predators?

**YW**

Maybe... Just a normal bird... Not the mynahs, they are too noisy... The one I see the most, and the one I like the most is the zebra dove... They're not shy.

**AT**

Can I pick sea animals? Sea creatures...

Lobster maybe... At least for this period, because lobsters always moult, like shedding their skin. It is an uncomfortable process... It'll have to go through a lot of changes, transition, and a period of growth. It is uncomfortable but the lobster still survives. I like it. It seems resilient.

**FC**

And then it gets eaten.

**ALL**

[Laughs]

**AT**

It brings delight and joy to people! I like that.

**FC**

How about you, Ashley?

**AK**

Maybe, a cricket? I don't know, I imagine a cricket living in a huge forest...

**AT**

Do you like feeling small?

**AK**

Yeah, I just want to be a nobody... Can you imagine something so small in a huge forest?

**FC**

You don't have to stand out... Meanwhile, I chose an elephant because I thought no one would come and disturb me.

**MC**

You both want the same thing but different...