

# INTERVIEW WITH PIONEER PLANNER:



# TAN CHENG SIONG

Interviewers **Felicity Hwee-Hwa CHAN, Djoko PRIHANTO, Angela TEO**  
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# About Tan Cheng Siong

Tan Cheng Siong is the founder and principal of Archurban Architects Planners. As an architect and planner, Mr Tan has designed many award-winning projects in Singapore and China since the 1970s. He has also consulted for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Planning Committee.



Above: Mr Tan and the interviewers (Left to Right: Felicity Chan, Angela Teo, Tan Cheng Siong, Djoko Prihanto)  
(Photo Credits: Felicity Chan)

**O**n a rainy November morning, we sat down with Mr Tan Cheng Siong in his studio to chat about his thoughts on urban planning in Singapore. Dressed in a colorful printed shirt, 86-year-old Mr Tan greeted us with a wide smile. His charismatic enthusiasm quickly lit up the otherwise dreary grey morning. Twenty minutes into our chat, Mr Tan warmly invited us to his family entertainment den in the basement for some coffee and snacks.

Settling into the spacious and comfy couch, we continued our conversation. If there was one important theme from our time chatting with Mr Tan, it would have to be about his preoccupation with the future of Singapore. The first thing I jotted down in my interview notebook that morning was Mr Tan's ad verbatim opening line, "***The future is formidable!***"

Mr Tan punctuated his views about the future with rhetorical philosophical questions and frequent references to his favorite readings about the history of civilization and empire building in the West. He asked "***Is there hope for planning in Singapore? Singapore goes from nowhere to somewhere. And now the question is: Where is next?***"

**"We are all selfishly consuming ourselves!"**

An established architect known for his prize-winning condominiums in Singapore and China, Mr Tan is also known for his bold and distinctive views on urban planning since the 1970s. We asked him what he thought of the state of urban planning in Singapore today, what it might be lacking, and how it can be improved.

For him, he felt that we might have become overly concerned about land scarcity to the extent that it is limiting our imagination to entertain different urban future possibilities for Singapore. Planning in Singapore has been overly focused on the physicality of land, while lacking adequate sensitivity to the emotional dimension of land. The heightened survival pragmatism has taught Singaporeans to never ask for more, or to imagine alternative urban futures. He added with dismay that the challenge for Singapore is not the land scarcity but an inability to mobilize people to think about the collective social well-being of the city. Singaporeans are only thinking about economic gains, leaving the social responsibility to the government. In an emphatic tone, he said, "***We are all selfishly consuming ourselves!***"

Mr Tan spoke against the ongoing speculative en-bloc redevelopment in Singapore that has become wasteful and destructive to the building of social bonds. He informed us that Singapore has 3000 condominium sites comprising 300,000 units that together house about one million of Singapore's resident population. However, there is very little attention given to safeguard condominium developments as viable long-term communities. Instead, condominiums are perceived as only physical properties for ownership to be *stayed* in rather than *lived* in, just long enough to make

a windfall gain through en-bloc. Disagreements arising from the en-bloc decision process have been also known to negatively alter neighborly relations. With sadness he added, "***Condominiums are now valued at their lowest ever!***"

To counter the en-bloc culture, Mr Tan set up a non-profit organization ABC (Association for the Betterment of Condominiums) to educate condominium owners that there are alternatives to maintain and enhance the exchange and use values of a condominium over the years, without participating in the feverish en-bloc activity particularly given advancement in building technology that has made it possible for buildings to last longer. He informed us that contrary to popular misunderstanding, land tenure of leasehold condominiums has the possibility of extension beyond ninety-nine years if good planning justification can be found and supported. Unfortunately, instead of making full use of the ninety-nine years land tenure, buildings in Singapore oftentimes are used for only a third of that period due to overly rapid redevelopment and land speculation. He said, "***I hate to see Singaporeans being so unsustainable!***"

Instead of premature demolition through en-bloc, he proposed an alternative way of redevelopment that prioritizes the social fabric of condominiums without compromising its financial value. Firstly, every condominium should take the fate of the condominium into their own hands rather than giving it to developers. Condominium owners should consider drawing up an Owner Development Plan (ODP) that assesses and proposes the appropriate ways to regenerate the estate through intensification that optimizes its assigned GPR (gross plot ratio), instead of leaving the task to en-bloc developers. Doing this would allow owners the option to age in place and to enable the accommodation of multi-generational families within the same condominium complex. Secondly, the ODP also serves as a systematic means for different condominium complexes to create "community connector," a linear collective shared space that houses a mix of commercial and social uses, such as shopping spaces, playgrounds, and older adults community facilities, within the grounds of a row of condominium complexes. The purpose of these facilities is for condominium residents' use but can be extended to neighboring communities surrounding the condominium complexes, and even potentially generate rent for each condominium. After explaining this, Mr Tan got up from his chair and enthusiastically walked over to show us a model of a potential community connector that he has proposed for the row of condominiums along Marine Parade Road.

**"The future is formidable!"**

With an eye towards the future always, Mr Tan felt that while Singapore has been successful in the past to invest in physical redevelopment as a leverage for social and economic welfare, he believes that this could not be



Beside: Chinatown, one of Mr Tan's favorite public spaces in Singapore (Photo Credits: Ashley Kwan)



Left & Right: Kampong Glam (Photo Credits: Cardinia Gladysz)

assumed for the future. In his opinion, Singapore might have overinvested in physical infrastructure per capita. In addition, it has overly standardized its infrastructure provision even as different demographic groups have diversifying needs. He gave an example of how children travel differently than adults but in the way we'd planned and designed our urban spaces, the mobility of children has rarely been prioritized.

A humanist at heart, Mr Tan emphasized the importance of preserving social and cultural heritage in Singapore. He spoke with delight about the three conservation areas of Kampong Glam, Chinatown, and Little India. He reminded us, "*We need to conserve our memory because these are our capital.*" Even as Singapore changes and grows, he

felt that ensuring good social connectivity between people, and between people and places, is of primary importance. He talked about growing place attachment as critical to the social well-being of urban societies because "*people react to spaces in an emotional way.*"

We asked Mr Tan how Singapore will look in 2070. Describing the image in his mind, he said this: the infrastructural hardware will still be there and thus, Singapore will not look very different physically. Cars will become more expensive, and if Singapore does not pay attention to building its social connectivity, it may end up being treated as a nice-looking hotel, rather than a home. In addition, he felt that Singapore needs more inspirational and beautiful residential living spaces. Our residential landscape can be overly utilitarian;

*"culture and space affect people's mentality,"* he added. Mr Tan recounted with delight about the World Expo 1970 in Osaka and how it was an inspiration for his generation of planners and architects. From his point of view, the Expo pushed the intellectual boundaries in ways that helped them to rethink a new urban future for Asia. He talked about how there seems to be a missing visionary fervor today. Thinking of the future can indeed bring back the past in vivid ways!

His gusto for a better urban future in Singapore is infectious, and his love for the island city of Singapore is undeniable. With a twinkle in his eye, he shared with us two mantras for living a good professional life:

1. **"Always learn to laugh at yourself!"**
2. **"Planners should think of place; Architects should think of space; Designers should not only think of colour!"**

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

**FELICITY HH CHAN** is a Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities and teaches urban planning in the MSc in Urban Science, Policy and Planning Programme at SUTD.

She enjoys researching urban issues from a socio-spatial angle, and loves experiencing cities by walking.