

INTERVIEW WITH PIONEER PLANNER:



FOO CHEE SEE

About Foo Chee See

Mr Foo Chee See is a board director and senior advisor at SCP Consultants Private Limited. A public servant at heart, he has served as a planner and taken on multiple leadership roles at the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore during his 30-year career there.



Above: Mr Foo Chee See showing the interview team his slides on Suzhou Industrial Park (Photo Credits: Felicity Chan)

Christmas was in the air. Lights and decorations donned the lobby of the office building in Downtown Singapore where we met Mr Foo Chee See. Mr Foo is a lifetime planner. He was the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore's Director of Development Control from the late 1990s until he retired in 2006. Subsequently, he was a senior advisor at URA and a consultant for projects in China and in many developing cities. Energetic and focused at 75 years old, he ushered us into a meeting room on the mezzanine floor of the building. Bottles of water were laid out on the table, and next to his laptop was the list of questions which we had sent to him earlier.

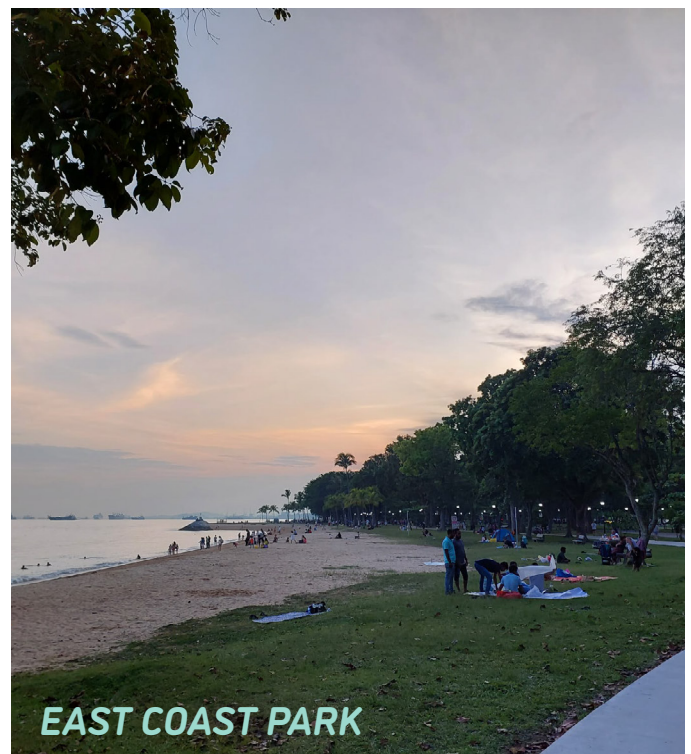
The interview started off promptly with Mr Foo giving us a glimpse of his career. He started off as an architect in an architect's office in 1973. After a short stint, he left to work in the Planning Department in the Ministry of National Development to do town planning until 1989, when he joined URA and stayed until retirement. His career at URA had many celebratory milestones: Mr Foo was part of the team of planners who worked on the inaugural 1991 Concept Plan; in 1993, he was the pioneering team of planners who planned and designed the Suzhou Industrial Park; and in 1997, Mr Foo as Director of Development Control introduced electronic submission for planning permission which significantly reduced the permission processing time from three to one months.

Among many crowning achievements, we asked Mr Foo what he was most proud of in his long planning career. He replied instantly with a glint of delight that it was the height control plan of Kent Ridge and Mount Faber, which led to the creation of micro-zoning plans for Singapore. He also talked about many land use solutions that he helped to craft from finding sites for unusual land uses to creatively negotiating with other stakeholders to leverage optimal land use. I had thought to myself at that moment, *"This is a true planner at heart who finds great delight in planning land uses and designing solutions for land use impasse!"*

A major highlight in his illustrious career that brought him definitive pride and joy was the planning and design of Suzhou Industrial Park. Whenever he spoke about the project in Suzhou, his serious demeanor would suddenly transform into an unmistakable joyful enthusiasm that filled the whole room. He excitedly showed us many images of the Suzhou Industrial Park on his laptop and spoke about its growth with the deep pride of a parent.

"People are moving out too soon!"

We asked him what he thought is lacking in the urban planning of Singapore today and the improvements that can be sought. With a thoughtful gaze, Mr Foo told us that the current approach towards meeting housing demand is unsustainable. He felt that there are too many enbloc redevelopments and *"people are moving out too soon!"*



Above & Below: East Coast Park - one of Mr Foo's favourite public spaces in Singapore (Photo Credits: Derick Seek)

To this end, he questioned if Singapore will be able to get a continuous supply of building materials and labour to keep up with its appetite for new buildings. He felt strongly that we need to reconsider the principle of optimizing land use through the increase of plot ratio. By continuously lifting plot ratio to higher levels, planners are inadvertently fueling premature redevelopment by increasing the potential exchange value of the land beyond its existing use. Instead, planning should consider enforcing a minimum land lease renewal duration of about eighty years to ensure that buildings are not prematurely demolished for short-sighted capital gains.

Adding to this, Mr Foo spoke about the need to relook at the way we plan our residential towns. He felt that the old towns had centres with a nice mix of uses and a sense of community, unlike the precinct centres we have today that are too small to meet the diverse needs of the residents. In addition, the mix of uses have become less diverse over the years, a result of leaving to free market forces that value profit above a good mix. For example, one can no longer easily find a barber but more easily, a boba tea shop. As someone who cares about urban form, Mr Foo also spoke about the importance of maintaining low-rise urban form in our built environment, particularly for community-oriented uses. He said with clear conviction, **“few things cannot go high-rise – schools, market, and eating areas”** because the form affects the vibrancy of social interaction and activity. Further, he felt that our residential environment needs to design for more physical space and greening between buildings, not more concrete.

On this matter of urban form and public life, we asked Mr Foo for his favorite public space in Singapore. He replied without hesitation, **“East Coast Park is still the best!”** There is food in the park and it is convenient, he explained. He elaborated on how planning is characterized by trade-offs but it can create much social good. East Coast Park is a brilliant example of how land reclamation has made possible the creation of a public park along the eastern coastline, which was previously prior to reclamation only accessible by the private properties along the waterfront. Thus, although reclamation came with environmental costs, reclamation had also enabled the making of a great public space in Singapore, in addition to the creation of land for future urban development.

“Singapore will become even more urban”

Mindful that our one hour of interview time was drawing to a close, we took the opportunity to ask him how Singapore would look like in 2070. He replied thoughtfully, **“Singapore will become even more urban”** and there will be only a few places for new developments like Paya Lebar Airbase and Simpang. Singapore will also likely be a city-state of about 6-7 million by then. To this he added that in preparing the Concept Plan 1991, Singapore studied how Scandinavian countries like Finland, Denmark, and Norway planned for 4 to 5 million inhabitants. What became clear to us about Singapore’s urban future as a city-state is this: Singapore is on an uncharted path.

We are going where no cities have gone.

As warmly as Mr Foo ushered us into the meeting room, he graciously walked us out to the lobby at the end of the interview. Before leaving, he showed us the slides of contemporary Suzhou Industrial Park and shared with us recent videos of the place.

Lunch time was in full swing in Downtown Singapore and live Christmas music was playing as we said our goodbyes. What struck us at the end of our interview time with Mr Foo was his unassuming candor, his passion for planning, and his love for this island city-state.

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.