

Volume 1

# KNOWLEDGE PROJECT



# BACK TO THE FUTURE

**Generational Perspectives on Urban Planning  
in Singapore**

# About the Knowledge Project

The Knowledge Project is envisioned to be a platform that experiments with different ways of curating and producing knowledge about contemporary issues in urban planning practice and education. It aims to create valuable planning knowledge resources for SIP members at all stages of professional life.

## About the Volume

Using semi-structured interviews with pioneer planners and a focus group discussion with young planners in Singapore, the inaugural project explores generational urban visions and perspectives on planning. Two commentaries follow: What is a Good City? and What do Future-Ready Planners look like?

Edited by:  
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Cover image by Angela TEO:  
**Time imprints of Singapore's planned  
urban landscape, June 2022**

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# 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)

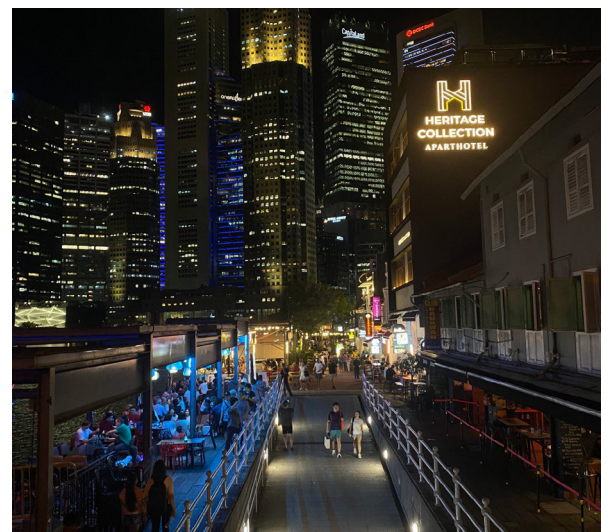
## MARINA BAY



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...

# INTERVIEW WITH PIONEER PLANNER:



# TAN CHENG SIONG

Interviewers **Felicity Hwee-Hwa CHAN, Djoko PRIHANTO, Angela TEO**  
Written by **Felicity Hwee-Hwa CHAN**

# 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.

# 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.

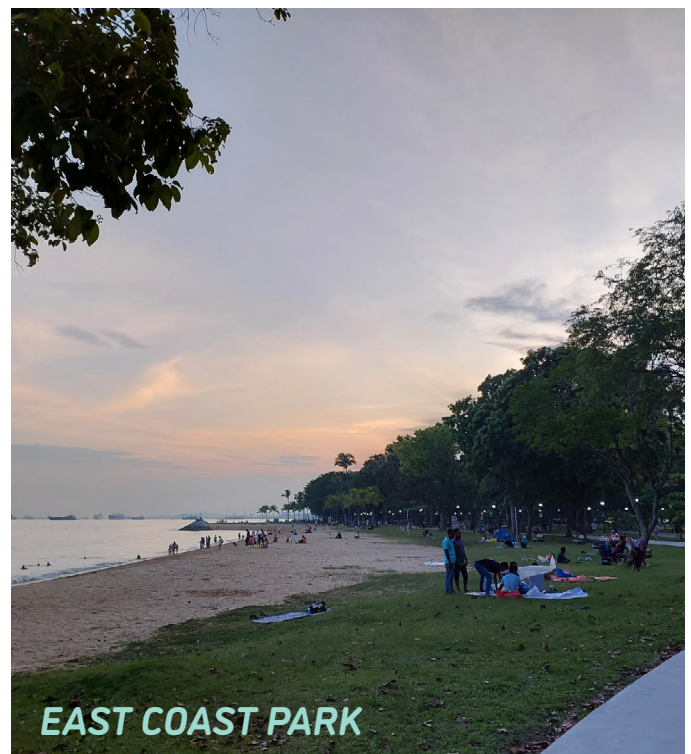
The interview started off promptly with Mr Foo giving us a glimpse of his career. He started off as an architect in an architect's office in 1973. After a short stint, he left to work in the Planning Department in the Ministry of National Development to do town planning until 1989, when he joined URA 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

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# COMMENTARY: WHAT IS A GOOD CITY?

Written by **Felicity Hwee-Hwa CHAN** and **Angela TEO**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Author credit: The order of the author is according to the alphabetical order of their last names

In search of Eden, an allegory of perfection, every generation of planners and architects across the ages have attempted to craft their own versions of utopia, in hopes of creating a better city than the one they lived in; where values they cared about can manifest in ways that lead society into a state of human flourishing. Ebenezer Howard's vision for "To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform" (1898) birthed in the late nineteenth century at a time when industrialization had resulted in overcrowding, unsanitary living conditions, pollution, and inequity, is a notable example of the social reformist zeal innate in the profession of urban planning (Figure 1). Howard proposed a vision of a new city where its inhabitants could enjoy both the advantages of residing in a town and a country, as he held the belief that "human society and the beauty of nature are meant to be enjoyed together" (Howard 1898).

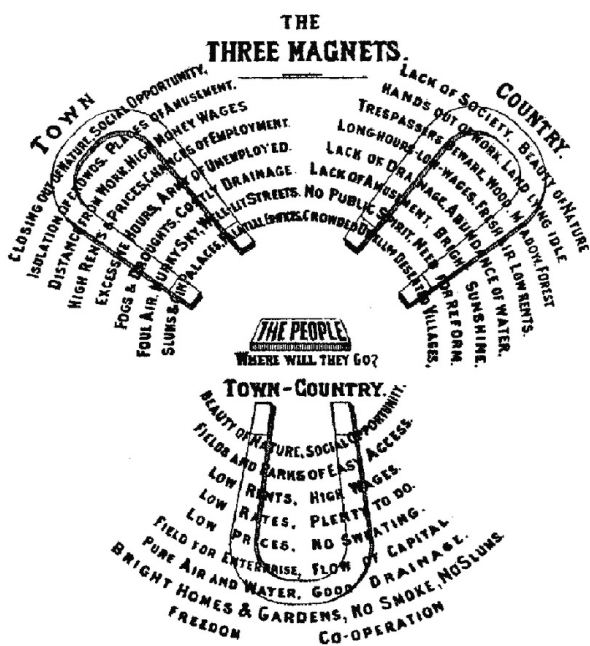


Figure 1: The Town-Country Magnet (Howard 1898)

We asked our young and pioneer planners for their views on what a good city is, with the intention of getting a glimpse into the generational similarities and differences of urban vision given their different experiences and memories of Singapore and of the world. Even though the young planners are still at an early stage of their professional lives to form their opinions of what a good city is, they were much quicker to respond to this question than the pioneer planners. The pioneer planners with their years of practicing planning and seeing how urban planning in Singapore and the rest of the world have evolved, realized that ideals need to be tempered with the constraints of relative realities. As the famous saying attributed to Aristotle goes: the more you know, the more you know you don't know. Thus, unsurprisingly, the pioneer planners demonstrated a reluctance to articulate definitively what a good city is. However, we took the liberty (with their consent) to read their convictions of what the traits of a good city are between their lines. It is our intention here that when the views of pioneer and young planners are

considered together, they will reveal how urban planning needs to be thought of as an intergenerational responsibility because every planning decision manifests tangibly in the built environment with long-term effects on how future generations live in the city.

**"A good city is one that always benefits the people who live in it"**

In our focus group discussion with the young planners, one planner said with youthful conviction that what is ultimately important is this: the city must always benefit the people who live in it, in terms of convenience and support to their daily lives. For the pioneer planners, they spoke about a good city life as one that is delightful in which city dwellers can feel connected and enjoy living in. However, as Mr Foo Chee See very quickly pointed out when we raised the question, there is no single model of a good city. Every city is different and must be taken as a unique entity; what is good is specific to each city's context and changes with time.

**An excerpt from the focus group discussion with young planners**

*"What is a Good City from Your Point of View?"*

**AT**

I'll start first... I think cities should be creative and should be able to adapt to the changing circumstances, be it politics or social aspects. It has to adapt to fit people's needs. Also a caring city - the people inhabiting it are not neglected.

**FC**

A good city should bring delight to people!

**AT**

It doesn't have to be super beautiful or monumental. It is about everyday spaces.

**AK**

Maybe, convenience? Something that ultimately benefits the people who live in it, and for me, convenience is one major component.

**YW**

I think for me — nurturing and imperfect. I think if something is too perfect there is no motivation for people to do better. Sometimes people don't have the drive or incentive to make changes because everything is already done, people get used to it, and they start feeling entitled and apathetic.

<b>Vitality</b>	The degree to which the form of the settlement supports the vital functions, the biological requirements and capabilities of human beings - above all, how it protects the survival of the species.
<b>Sense</b>	The degree to which the settlement can be clearly perceived and mentally differentiated and structured in time and space by its residents and the degree to which that mental structure connects with their values and concepts
<b>Fit</b>	The degree to which the form and capacity of spaces, channels, and equipment in a settlement match the pattern and quantity of actions that people customarily engage in, or want to engage in.
<b>Access</b>	The ability to reach other persons, activities, resources, services, information, or places, including the quantity and diversity of the elements which can be reached.
<b>Control</b>	The degree to which the use and access to spaces and activities, and their creation, repair, modification, and management are controlled by those who use, work, or reside in them.
<b>Efficiency (meta-criteria)</b>	The cost, in terms of other valued things, of creating and maintaining the settlement, for any given level of attainment of the environmental dimensions listed above.
<b>Justice (meta-criteria)</b>	The way in which environmental benefits and costs are distributed among persons according to some particular principle such as equity, need, intrinsic worth, ability to pay, effort expended, potential contribution, or power. Justice is the criterion which balances the gains among persons, while efficiency balances the gains among different values.

Table 1: Lynch's (1981) Dimensions of Performance

A good city needs to adapt to the evolving needs of its inhabitants over time. The idea that cities should possess adaptive capacities is not new. American urban planner and designer Kevin Lynch in his book *Good City Form* (1981), likened a city to a dynamic and ever-evolving ecology. He posited that cities are ecosystems characterized by diversity, interdependence, and feedback processing capabilities, in addition to having values, culture, and the ability to learn and invent. Despite the relative opportunities and constraints faced in each city, Lynch distilled five dimensions of performance and two meta-criteria of a good city form which can be used to measure the goodness of the city form for its inhabitants (Table 1). To sum up, as a young planner puts it succinctly, "A good city is one that you find beauty in everyday life!"

**"A good city nurtures and cares for the land and people living in it"**

Reflecting upon the interviews with the pioneer planners, they lamented about the fast-paced urban redevelopment in Singapore and articulated ways in which the city can be developed in a more sustainable mode that takes greater care to nurture the interpersonal human relations and social connections among people. This brings to mind Lynch's view in *Good City Form* (1981), in which he described a good settlement as one that promotes

the maintenance of the culture and survival of its people, enhancing their sense of connection in time and space, and one that encourages individual growth and flourishing.

Putting this in light of the growing public lament among Singaporeans about the loss of urban social memory as satirically reflected in the observation that the urban crane is the national bird of Singapore (Mynah Magazine 2023), it stirs in us good city visions of how to enable urban dwellers to grow and experience rooting in ephemeral urban landscapes as the relationship between urban dwellers and their land becomes increasingly transactional and transient. Recognising both the pain and the beneficial transformative potential that urban redevelopment can bring to a city, planners will need greater capacity of care and sensitivity to undertake the urban changes in the coming decades by being cognizant of the holistic values that different urban spaces offer residents and the importance of equitably reconciling different needs in a city.

**"A good city is an imperfect place"**

Garud et al. (2008) state that incompleteness is generative as it is a trigger for the creation of many diverse ideas on how a design can be extended and further developed. In the same vein, one young planner pointed out that Singapore can be too perfect to the extent that "there is no motivation

in people to make changes because everything is done for them and they start feeling entitled and apathetic” so much so that a sense of ownership and spirit of participating in the shaping of the city is lacking. This view was shared by pioneer planner Mr Tan Cheng Siong whose major concern for the urban future of Singapore is the increasing apathy among the citizenry. His belief in participatory planning of the city is well-rooted in the importance of growing relational connections among urban dwellers of different generations, and between people and urban space – an agenda that the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR) also championed since its inception in the 1960s. Their publications allude to a good city as one that is characterized by a productive exchange of ideas and perspectives among planners, and between planners and the public (Koh, Chan, and Chew 1967).

### *Concluding thoughts*

Taken together, these perspectives of a good city raise a profound question: Is the search for the urban Eden, an epitome of earthly perfection, an impossible endeavor, and one destined for disappointment? Planning disasters have recurred over centuries; in fact, the more ambitious a planning enterprise gets, the risk of a twisted unintentional outcome becomes ever more plausible. It makes Daniel Burnham’s famous saying, “*Make no little plans,*” an unwittingly ironic warning for planners. Should planners even dare entertain the concept and vision of making a good city? Is a good city a perfect city?

Perfection awakens our senses to imperfection. Imperfection inspires perfection. To strive towards perfection is to strive to be as good as possible. Thus, achieving goodness requires a struggle with the imperfect state and the brokenness of the urban and human condition. The struggle recognizes that the battle against urban entropy is never over. A good city is essentially a humble work in progress that is fully aware of human imperfection and the need for care in relating to one another. Nurturing and growth flourish in a place like this!

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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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.

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# COMMENTARY: WHAT DO FUTURE- READY PLANNERS LOOK LIKE?

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the humdrum of daily lives, upended plans of urban development, and challenged the veracity of predictive models to tell us how best to plan. It was an unprecedented world crisis of the 21st century and it made urban planners reexamine the premises of urban livability, particularly of population density, work and home arrangements, public transportation, and access to outdoor recreation. The pandemic underscored the complexity of urban systems in material ways, as we realize that each urban dweller's life is ever more intricately bound to another.

In these times, the desire to secure a stable future is ever more present; yet ever more elusive. People look to beacons of light that can offer glimpses of a hopeful future and means to work through the problems of the present to make progress towards that good future. The figure of the urban planner looms large: a role that straddles the visionary and the practical; one that stands in the gaps between the past, present, and future. Planners are time travelers with a social reformist DNA who are suited to take on this important role in the making of an urban future, which is fragmented yet coupled and thus, complex. It raises the question: *what are the values and skills needed for planners to navigate the murky waters of the 21st century?*

We asked our young and pioneer planners this question: *"What makes a good planner from your point of view?"* Drawing on their responses for this question and from questions about what is good planning and what are the important aspects for planning in Singapore, we identified the following qualities of a good future-ready planner (not in order of importance) (Table 2).

Reflecting on these qualities raised by our young and pioneer planners, they bring to mind two well-known planning theorists – Leonie Sandercock and John Forester – who have written about the sensibilities needed in urban planners if they were to cultivate the competences to handle multiple publics and diverse interests.

## Planning Sensibilities and Senses for a Cosmopolis

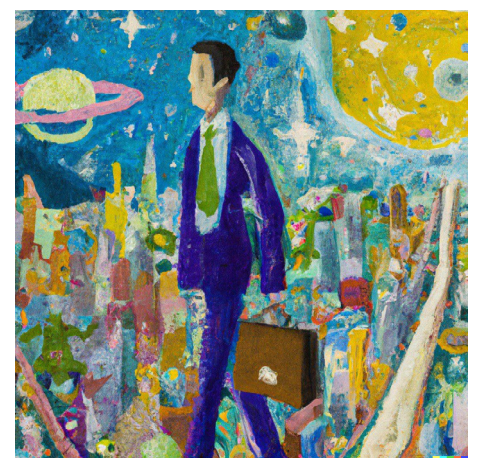
In Sandercock's book *Towards Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st century* published in 2003, she discussed the demographic and cultural diversification of cities and their concomitant issues of social, cultural, and environmental justice in the 21st century. Responding to the emerging socially diverse context arising from global immigration among other societal changes that are challenging the mode of top-down technical rationality of the 20th modern city planning, she identified five sensibilities of a planner that are critical to navigate the 21st urban century: political, therapeutic, audacious, creative, and critical. Planners need to reframe planning as a political process that allows for competing interests



Above: AI generated image using the prompt, "Abstract painting of an urban planner travelling through a universe of cities"



Above: AI generated image using the prompt, "A synthwave style sunset featuring Jane Jacobs in front of diverse cities, digital art"



Above: AI generated image using the prompt, "Abstract painting of an urban planner travelling through a universe of cities"

## Young Planners

1. **Empathetic to the people whom we design for**
2. **Visionary with courage to try out bold ideas**
3. **Adaptable**
4. **Creative and Critical thinker**
5. **Persuasive**
6. **Cost-savvy**
7. **Resilient in the face of critiques**

## Pioneer Planners

1. **Sensitive to public and clients' sentiments and Timing-savvy in rolling out future plans**
2. **Knowledgeable about the relationship between humans and land, and that people react to spaces in an emotional way**
3. **Socio-Spatial thinker**
4. **Technically trained**
5. **Scenario thinker and developer**
6. **Vested in socially equitable and optimal outcomes**
7. **Committed to inclusive participatory planning**

Table 2: Qualities of a good future-ready urban planner

to be worked into consensus that serves the common interests and good. Planners also need to have therapeutic skills toward resolving conflicts because urban conflicts are emotional issues. Planners should also be audacious to introduce new ideas to adapt to the changing times. Creativity is needed to have “the capacity to imagine a different story, a different outcome” (p.218). Lastly, planners should also have a critical awareness of how they practice their craft and the power relations they produce so that they will not unwittingly advocate for social exclusion through their plans.

In Forester's article, *Planning in the Face of Conflict* published by the American Planning Association Journal in 1987, he focused on the conflictual scope that urban planning often works in. Due to competing interests in the urban realm, he discussed the need for planners to have good practical judgment and role-playing skills to navigate land use conflicts successfully as mediators and as negotiators all in one. These roles must clearly be held in tension with each other as the neutrality of the mediator is at odds with the vested interest of a negotiator for a certain preferable land-use outcome. In these circumstances, Forester outlined four key practical traits of an effective planner in the face of conflict:

1. Offers clarity and predictability of the planning process for all stakeholders.
2. Discerns the circumstances and timing of discussing a plan.
3. Juggles multiple tasks because of the multiple parties and issues.
4. Exercises keen discretion on how to conduct planning processes – who to invite, when to do so, how to negotiate.

## Future-Ready Trait 1: Be Sensitive to timing, circumstances, and the Emotions of stakeholders

What strikes me as a common trait of a future-ready planner raised by Sandercock, Forester, our young and pioneer planners is this: planners need to develop a sensitivity to timing, circumstances, and the emotions of stakeholders. Drawing on his long professional experience, Mr Foo Chee See emphasized the need to strategically pace the change that planning interventions introduce. He explained that being fast is not always the right thing to do because when you move too fast, you can anger the public and clients who are not ready for the change. Timing is so critical. In relation to that, our young planners pointed out that having empathy for the people you are designing for is important. Good planners are those who care about the needs and constraints of the users.

The empathy goes beyond what is now commonly identified as design-thinking to a recognition that “*People react to spaces in an emotional way,*” quoting Mr Tan Cheng Siong. These thoughts echo Sandercock's call for planners to adopt a therapeutic approach rather than relying on pure technical rationality, and Forester's emphasis on practical judgment in planning matters.

## Future-Ready Trait 2: Be Creative in Developing Planning Alternatives

Another major trait: Planners need to become creative in developing alternatives so that good collective decisions can be made. The pace of change in our contemporary world has heightened; societies are evolving and

- FORESTER, J. 1987. Planning in the face of conflict: Negotiation and Mediation Strategies in Local Land Use Regulation. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 53, 303-314.
- SANDERCOCK, L. 2003. *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century*, London; New York, Continuum.

diversifying; environmental risks are increasing. Our urban futures require planners to develop audacious yet adaptable scenarios that are shared and discussed with stakeholders. One of the young planners said this, *"You need that creativity to try to do things differently. You don't always have to do things differently but if there is a possibility to do things better, then creativity is important."* Creativity is also having, as Forester identifies, a keen discretion in navigating and negotiating planning processes that are political and relationally complex. Knowing who to include and when to do so in mediation and negotiation matters to the outcomes. Quoting another young planner on the challenge of practicing creativity in planning, *"We are thinking inside the box, but at the same time, we have to think outside the box!"*

### Future-Ready Trait 3: Be "Multi-versed"

The third important trait of a future-ready planner is this: Planners must become "multi-versed." As our urban futures become more socially, culturally, and politically diversified, planners need to have the skill to negotiate the multiple social and cultural universes in a city. Whether that means learning new languages, new mediums of community outreach, or being open to new sensibilities, planners if they are to be effective time travelers of the past, present, and future, they need to swim comfortably in multiple urban realities.

#### *Concluding Thoughts*

The future-ready urban planners, in addition to having economic savvy and socio-spatially adept skills, need to refine their time consciousness. Planning interventions have to be sensitive to the interdependencies of urban past, present, and future so that social cohesiveness and place belonging will not be undermined as a city undergoes change. The anticipated urban future is one that can be discombobulating for many, and planners need to understand these interdependencies and enable the multiple urban realities to co-exist in the same space in an organized, empathetic, equitable, and inclusive manner.

#### ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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