

Summary of Conference Proceedings, 11, 13, 17, 24 Jan 2022

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Pre-Conference Session: Cities, Civilisations and Geopolitics — In Conversation with George Yeo and Liu Thai Ker

The Singapore Perspectives pre-conference session, moderated by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Professor of Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities Singapore University of Technology and Design, featured two prominent speakers, former Foreign Minister Mr George Yeo and Dr Liu Thai Ker, former head of Housing and Development Board (HDB) and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), and currently Chairman of Morrow Architects & Planners.

Ambassador Chan opened the session by looking back in history and mentioning the influence and the significance of cities on the development of civilisations before delving into a deeper discussion with the speakers.

Mr Yeo shared his views on the opportunities that arise from cities being nodes in a wider international network. He described the importance of connectivity and how various networks brought together people of different backgrounds and identities. He remarked that networks are at the core of the region and are crucial to the development of Singapore as a location where international communities intersect. Mr Yeo acknowledged the bright prospects and potential of Asian countries and how it is important for Singapore to reconnect with ASEAN and the region.

Dr Liu shared his experience with urban planning during the period of Singapore's independence. He noted that practicality and benefit for the people were the core aspects of designing infrastructure in the early days and attributed the potential rise and demise of a city to urban planning. Dr Liu emphasised the importance of good policy and how the crisis mentality drove Singapore into becoming a world-class city. He also cautioned against complacency, which could potentially impact Singapore's competitiveness with other global cities.

The session concluded with a Q&A with the audience where the speakers gave their views on Singapore's future as a global city, the impacts of climate change, food supplies and population density.

Forum 1 — Opening Keynote Speech: Cities, Countries and Resilience

Minister for Health Mr Ong Ye Kung gave the Singapore Perspectives opening keynote speech. Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies moderated the subsequent discussion.

Minister Ong shared about three kinds of cities across history and what they represented. Jericho serves as an example of how cities came together as a group of close-knit people, while Chang An and Rome exemplify political capitals representing governance. As for New York City, it represents contemporary global cities and their roles as nodes in global flows of exchange.

Singapore holds the qualities of all three kinds of cities. Singapore is a global city, and as a city-state, has to perform important governance functions. Minister Ong pointed out that the most crucial part of cities was their “Jericho” nature — the sense that a close-knit people would want to determine their future together.

During the Q&A segment, Minister Ong addressed questions on how to meet the different needs in the city, identity, and the need for governance. Minister Ong pointed out how Singapore’s strength was in connecting across different cultures. Having strong mutual trust was important in managing the diverse needs and in the important issues of protectionism, inequality and climate change.

Minister Ong also noted that there were many layers of checks and balances in Singapore’s governance systems, and that the Opposition was another layer. On a last question of issues involving marginalised members of society, Minister Ong said that social mobility was a priority of government, and that the government will move with the changes in societal attitudes as different generations may have different perspectives.

Forum 2 — City as an Inclusive Space

The second forum of Singapore Perspectives, moderated by Dr Harry Tan, Research Fellow at Policy Lab of the Institute of Policy Studies, focused on the city as an inclusive space. The speakers of this session were Professor Saskia Sassen of Columbia University's Department of Sociology and Mr Lim Eng Hwee, Chief Executive Officer of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). Associate Professor Irene Ng from the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore was also present as a discussant.

Professor Sassen spoke about transnationalism and the increase of specialised actors during her pre-recorded remarks. She highlighted the surfacing of a new modernity, which has led to physical and digital innovations, as well as how pandemics adversely impact cities. Prof Sassen moved on to talk about the importance of global cities remaining inclusive, despite the growing trend of social inequality within cities, which leaves behind the working class. Her remarks concluded with how more attention needs to be paid to cities that lack resources despite having good talent.

During his speech, Mr Lim covered the topic of land-use planning in relation to Singapore and the URA. He spoke about how the URA prioritises liveability and inclusivity by ensuring housing is adequately provided for, equitably distributed and inclusively designed. Mr Lim's speech highlighted the method of land-use planning used by the URA, efforts in economic land-zoning, inclusive spaces for vulnerable groups, as well as how data analytics is used to inform key decisions.

Associate Professor Ng spoke about how Singapore was a role model for city planning when it came to diversity, highlighting the success of the ethnic integration policy. She stressed that despite Singapore's intention to be inclusive, more needs to be done to include the most excluded groups who tend to be overlooked. Assoc Prof Ng emphasised that data is typically normative and excludes outliers, so there is a need to get on the ground to understand whether initiatives make sense for those they are designed for.

During the Q&A session, panellists Mr Lim and Assoc Prof Ng, as well as moderator Dr Tan had an engaging discussion on topics such as Singapore's increasing population and its effects on liveability, heritage preservation as well as tangible and intangible aspects of inclusivity.

Forum 3 — City as a Cosmopolitan Space

The third forum of Singapore Perspectives 2022, “City as a Cosmopolitan Space”, was moderated by Dr Mathew Mathews, Principal Research Fellow and Head of Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies. The speakers featured were Ms Chang Hwee Nee, Chief Executive Officer of the National Heritage Board, and Associate Professor Elaine Ho from the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore.

Ms Chang opened the session by sharing her insights on Singapore as a cosmopolitan space from a heritage perspective. She believed that cosmopolitanism is part of Singapore’s heritage, and that heritage is vital in defining identity in the years ahead. She added that heritage promotes understanding of different cultures, and heritage institutions and common spaces allow us to learn about other cultures and interact with one another. She shared, however, that the challenge was in achieving a fine balance between embracing differences and having a unified common identity.

Professor Ho offered her perspective on how migration trends have changed diversity in Singapore. She shared that Singapore would need to move beyond the “Singaporeans versus Others” dichotomy — and acknowledge other aspects of difference making, continue to capitalise on social anchors in urban spaces, understand that there is differentiated embeddedness where immigrants can be embedded in social anchors at different times and ways, and consider treating remigration positively by mobilising the affinity diaspora.

The panellists engaged in a discussion on how we could better promote and highlight the different histories and traditions in Singapore and forge a more cohesive cosmopolitan Singapore. They highlighted ongoing efforts such as programmes and museum learning experiences for students, the need to encourage interaction, and the importance of understanding our history and differences.

When asked about the relevancy of the CMIO categorisation in cosmopolitan Singapore and whether enough was being done to allow Singaporeans to accept the broader diversity here, the panellists agreed that CMIO remains relevant as a policy framework. Ms Chang shared that agencies have been making efforts to promote understanding of cultures and more conversations on diversity would need to take place, while Prof Ho suggested that more attention could be given to interactions happening organically on the ground, and to promote understanding through food.

Overall, the panel discussion brought insights on the different aspects of cosmopolitanism in Singapore and how there could be deeper understanding between groups of people to allow Singapore to thrive as a cosmopolitan city.

Forum 4 — City as Economic Space

Forum 4 of Singapore Perspectives 2022: City featured the topic of “City as Economic Space”. Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies was the moderator. The speakers were Professor Edward Glaeser, Chairman & Fred and Eleanor Glimp Professor of Economics at Harvard University; Mr Gabriel Lim, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Trade and Industry; and Dr David Skilling, Founding Director of the Landfall Strategy Group.

Professor Glaeser shared about the history of cities, and how they had been associated with diseases. Nonetheless, cities remained important places of productivity and economic opportunities. Singapore might even benefit in this pandemic period as talented people seek out comfortable places with high quality of life to work in.

Mr Lim focused on three aspects on how city could thrive. Singapore remained well connected via various free trade agreements, and increasingly through the digital economy. The second attribute was the availability of talent, and to invest in human capital and being open to global talent. The third attribute was Singapore’s confidence in shaping our own future especially in the area of climate change. Mr Lim was confident that Singapore could play a leading role in developing solutions for the climate crisis.

Dr Skilling noted that smaller economies have had strong economic performance in the last few decades. Dr Skilling also argued that Singapore has also gone from a hub to become a platform in being able to capture economic value from global flows, more so than a peer city such as Hong Kong. He observed that globalisation was changing, becoming more regional, and cities needed to adjust to the new realities.

During the Q&A session, the panellists fielded questions on Singapore’s competitive advantage. Mr Lim thought and advantage was Singapore’s understanding technology, and Dr Skilling added that Singapore’s cluster-based approach to industry development, bringing together complementary industries and companies, was also an advantage, rather than being a low-cost labour location. The panellists also acknowledged the tensions that arise from our foreign labour pool, and the importance of redistribution. They touched on government efforts in the development of SMEs and how the latter had to be more specialised in sophisticated supply chains. The panellists thought that while hybrid work might be common, Singapore would still be a great place for people to come together. They also noted how emissions were being decoupled from economic growth, and that there was widespread momentum to continue the shifts towards sustainability.

There was also discussion about Singapore’s competitors. The panellists discussed how UAE and its city of Dubai were being watched closely, as well as Jakarta and the future Kalimantan. On the other hand, with globalisation becoming more regional, Singapore could still play a role as a hub for flows across different parts of Asia.

Forum 5 — City as Connected Space

The fifth forum of Singapore Perspectives 2022, “City as Connected Space”, was moderated by Dr Faizal Bin Yahya, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. The featured speakers were Mr Tan Chong Meng, Group Chief Executive Officer of PSA International Pte Ltd, and Ms Quah Ley Hoon, Chief Executive of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

Dr Faizal gave an overview of Singapore’s global connectivity and locational advantages. He also shared about the development of the Changi Airport and its performance during the pandemic.

Ms Quah highlighted the importance of Singapore’s global hub port and international maritime centre. She also described Singapore’s plans on staying ahead as a global hub, such as the development of the new Tuas port as a smart next-generation port, connecting data and streamlining information flow across supply chain ecosystem partners, and the building of the maritime innovation hub.

Mr Tan said that the maritime ecosystem needs to stay ahead of the curve. He emphasised the need to prepare people to embrace new technologies and mindsets, and how working with digital solutions could improve efficiency and reliability in the industry. He also shared the key developments in creating new connectivity excellence, such as the building of an intelligent logistics ecosystem, providing support for cargo inside containers and having a common data highway to facilitate secure data sharing between supply chain ecosystem partners.

The panellists discussed questions on the considerations behind the location of the Tuas port; remaining competitive in the face of new challenges; the impact of the pandemic; how Singapore can emerge stronger; how the shift towards green energy may affect Singapore’s bunkering and petrochemical hub; and talent development in the industry.

When asked about the potential threat of new developments in the industry such as the Kra project and Northern passage, Ms Quah responded that Singapore is able to differentiate itself from the competition with a strong maritime ecosystem, being forthcoming to developing new plans for the industry and having a strong network and high trust in our port. Mr Tan added that Singapore could continue to work on its strengths while participating in new developments to see possibilities and raise value add of Singapore. He believed that the economic activity on the Northern passage is low, and the economic viability of a shipping route is dependent on the pick-up and drops of containers that ships are able to make on their journeys based on the economic activity on the route, adding that the hub-and-spoke model is still very much needed.

Overall, the panel discussion provided insights on how Singapore’s connectivity remains critical to its success, and how Singapore is moving forward to stay ahead of change to remain an attractive global hub.

Forum 6 — City as Green Space

The Singapore Perspectives 2022 forum on “City as Green Space” featured Dr Olivia Jensen of the Lloyd’s Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk at the National University of Singapore and Dr Harvey Neo of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). The discussion was moderated by Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Economy Department at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Dr Jensen shared how cities, with their concentration of skilled people and assets, are at the forefront of innovating solutions for sustainability and resilience. While acknowledging Singapore’s good track record of planning and implementing consistent policies across different sectors, Dr Jensen also spoke about how it is important to consider the impact that cities have beyond their borders in tracking their progress for climate action. Dr Jensen discussed how individuals could take action in three main spheres: through their private consumption choices, their advocacy in communities or their engagement with public policies. She posited that engagement in public policies may bring about the most impact and expressed that greater transparency in public policies is needed for a whole-of-nation effort in addressing environmental issues and industry changes.

Dr Neo characterised economic development as the driving imperative of Singapore’s public policy decisions and considered how the lack of a common language in debates over developmentalism and environmentalism in Singapore may lead to our neglect of environmental actions when their benefits may not be immediately apparent. Dr Neo also expounded on issues pertaining to Singapore’s relationship with its neighbours in the region and how Singapore may need to start on an equal basis and seek to gain legitimacy rather than seeing itself in a leadership role for climate action. Dr Neo expressed concerns about the achievability of the target in the Singapore Green Plan 2030 to meet 30 per cent of our nutritional needs locally by 2030, given the short land leases for local farmers.

Forum 7 — Cities in the Digital Space

The 7th forum of Singapore Perspectives 2022 was titled “Cities in the Digital Space”. It was moderated by Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies and featured Mr Lew Chuen Hong, Chief Executive of the Infocomm Media Development Authority, and Professor Carlo Ratti of Urban Technologies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Mr Lew spoke about the key success factors of cities — their critical masses and their abilities to be sites of exchange — and explained how the digital commons is now able to both replicate and scale up these conditions. In his view, in order for cities to stay relevant, they need to engineer a “reality premium” which would be impossible to replace digitally.

Prof Ratti introduced his research on the use of space and networks on the MIT campus. The COVID-19 lockdown provided the opportunity to examine how networks had changed when they had to move completely onto the digital space. One key difference was that the presence of weak ties, the connections made between acquaintances or strangers, within networks decreased greatly when all interactions had to move online.

The Q&A segment centred on how to develop both physical and digital infrastructure for the future, concerns about digital regulation and protection, and the adoption of new technologies such as AI and 5G.

Panel 1 — City: Who Owns?

The first panel of the in-person conference for Singapore Perspectives 2022, “City: Who Owns?” was moderated by the Institute of Policy Studies’ Mr Christopher Gee and featured speakers Prof Cheong Koon Hean of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities and Mr Manohar Khiatani, Senior Executive Director of CapitaLand Investment Limited.

Prof Cheong started the discussion by posing the question “who owns what?” in response to the title of the panel. She contextualised the idea of the city by explaining why people would choose to come together and live in dense and close quarters. People move for economic activity, the promise of better jobs, a higher frequency of social interaction and the proximity to multiple amenities such as schools and hospitals. However, because cities play host to a large number of people in a small space, rapid urbanisation puts a lot of stress on resources. In particular, she mentioned land scarcity and the volatility of land prices. This makes the question of who owns the city vital. In a market like Singapore, land becomes investment assets.

The government therefore taps the best of the private sector while also considering wider public interests and safeguarding the city for the people. With this in view, the government plays two main roles in the city: it facilitates economic growth and also plays a social and redistributive role. It does this through planning and zoning. This ensures that land is protected for both economic and social goals.

Mr Khiatani picked up on Prof Cheong’s remarks about land scarcity and raised the issue of trade-offs. He said Singapore needs to be both a liveable city as well as a city that is attractive for international business. He used the example of industrial land to demonstrate how absolute market forces were not appropriate for determining land prices. Were prices left up to the market, Singapore would price itself out of important manufacturing activities that are critical components of the economy. As it stands now, 20 per cent of Singapore’s GDP come from manufacturing. Ultimately, the key consideration to take into account is not the maximisation of land price but the maximisation of the economic returns from the land.

During the Q&A session, the panellists were asked about the tension between international competitiveness and the social good, and how best to manage this balance. The panellists drew on their extensive experience in both the public and private sectors to sketch out the key concerns that govern and land use. Prof Cheong reiterated that long-term planning was essential to the success of the city due to Singapore’s land scarcity. However, the plan needed to be flexible in order to account for unexpected developments. The government’s role is not only to be a regulator. Rather, regulation is seen only as a means to an end. Mr Khiatani responded to say that hardware, software and “heartware” were essential to any development. In the example of the one-north development, the government wanted to create a business park that deviated from the campuses of the 1980s, which were centred around quiet spaces and greenery. Instead, one-north was to become a vibrant collaborative space. The government and JTC kickstarted the project and installed key elements while still leaving space for the private sector to come in. The result was a successful collaboration between public and private sectors.

Panel 2 — City: Who Plans?

The second panel on the final day of Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022 was moderated by Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at Institute of Policy Studies. It featured speakers Mr Seah Chee Huang, Chief Executive Officer of DP Architects, and Ms Hwang Yu-Ning, Chief Planner & Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). The panel took place over a hybrid format with both a live and an online audience.

In her presentation, Ms Hwang talked about the importance of collaboration between the government, people and private sector. She emphasised that the development of various projects in Singapore have been dependent on these collaborations. With the pandemic, she recognised the emergences of new trends and concluded that the authorities will always capitalise new ideas with the aid of the wider Singaporean population in mind.

Next, Mr Seah gave his presentation from the point of view of the private sector. He touched on the evolving nature of city planning in Singapore. He also mentioned the importance of public engagement and the involvement of the private sector in urban development. Mr Seah concluded by mentioning how Singapore over the past 50 years has successfully established a strong imageability of the city as there are clear results in establishing a well-designed urban landscape.

The Q&A session covered a range of issues relating to city planning, which included balancing urban density, planning and making mistakes in urban development, community engagement and consultation, and urban heritage. The speakers gave their views on the questions from the audience while reiterating the importance of a strong collaboration between the public and private sectors and Singaporeans.

Panel 3 — City: Who Belongs?

The third panel of Singapore Perspectives 2022, “City: Who Belongs?” was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. The featured speakers were Ms Cindy Khoo, Deputy Secretary, Strategy Group, Prime Minister’s Office; and Associate Professor Ho Kong Chong, Head of Urban Studies, Yale-NUS College, and Associate Professor at the Sociology Department in the National University of Singapore.

Ms Khoo described how the government viewed national identity as having three components — shared values, sense of belonging and sense of commitment. She noted the need to refresh our identity as the texture of society changes. She elaborated on the presence of echo chambers and how people would form identities in real life and online. She suggested that lived experiences shape our sense of identity, whereas our reflections and choices affect our lived experiences, hence reinforcing our beliefs and norms. She shared how the government could enable this process to happen on a collective level.

Professor Ho discussed the importance of the neighbourhood in fostering a sense of belonging. He said that governmental belonging begins when citizens co-create and participate. He explained that everyday routines provide a platform for people to identify with, and also highlighted the importance of senses in the neighbourhood, which can help develop “place belonging”. He felt that the idea of belonging is an oppressive expectation and an imposition if this issue is continually harped upon. He shared his concerns that existing practices brought over from overseas by new citizens or permanent residents could run into conflict with local practices, and how effective market mechanism in private housing could result in people living near their own communities and lead to the concentration of different groups.

The panellists had a discussion on the necessity of the concept on belonging, defining national identity, the influence of social media and how to adapt to it, the effectiveness of neighbourhoods for interaction and building a collective identity, and when Singapore would be able to move past labels to accept that identities are porous and fluid.

When the panel was asked questions pertaining to possible changes in national identity, Ms Khoo replied that we would need to reflect through our lived experiences and everything we love about Singapore to determine what would make us Singaporean — as well as reflect our shared values, such as how Singlish and hawker culture reflect living with efficiency and embracing diversity. She said national identity is not shaped in a top-down manner, and Singaporeans should participate and be part of the conversation in shaping national identity. Professor Ho added that on top of lived experiences and the things we have in common, participation is important as that is the basis for governmental belonging and citizenship. He said it is insufficient to have a common set of elements, and there must be an attempt to contribute, initiate and participate.

Overall, the panel discussion provided insights on the challenges in balancing being both a global city and a country, and the importance of citizenship and participation in the discourse in shaping national identity.

Closing Dialogue Session with Minister Desmond Lee

The closing dialogue of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, moderated by Professor Tan Tai Yong, President and Professor of Humanities (History) at Yale-NUS college, featured Mr Desmond Lee, Minister for National Development and Minister-in-Charge of Social Services Integration.

In his opening statement, Minister Lee emphasised that cities reflect the diversity of the society, not only in terms of race and religion but also increasingly in the ideas and perspectives of the people.

On preparing for major trends of the future, Minister Lee addressed issues of sustainability, inclusivity, city maintenance land-use planning and the ageing population. He noted that these issues were “known unknowns”, but the increasingly volatile and uncertain world has also made imperative that Singapore prepares for the “unknown unknowns”.

Finally, Minister Lee painted his vision of Singapore as a city in the coming future — a city that celebrates diversity, is inclusive, is in harmony with nature, is rooted in heritage and that is digitally enabled and connected. He outlined the important elements of trust, stewardship and collective action in achieving this vision.

During the Q&A session, Minister Lee responded to queries on housing policy, the pessimism of young Singaporeans, Singapore’s role in the region, and brain drain among other questions.