

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City Panel 2 — City: Who Plans?

By Sufia Maisarah



Caption for photo: Dr Woo Jun Jie (left) & Mr Seah Chee Huang (right). Ms Hwang Yu-Ning (not featured) who was overseas attended the session via conference call.

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 and featured speakers Mr Seah Chee Huang, Chief Executive Officer of DP Architects as representative from the private sector, and Ms Hwang Yu-Ning, Chief Planner & Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) as representative from the public sector. The panel took place over a hybrid format with both a live and an online audience. The speakers gave their presentations on city planning in Singapore before going on to a question-and-answer session with the audience.

Speakers' Opening Remarks and Presentation

Ms Hwang Yu-Ning kickstarted the panel with her presentation. She started off with her opening remarks by saying that when it comes to city planning, building experts and architects will come to mind, however, everyone in Singapore plays a part. She described the planning processes by URA, and the steps taken to gather feedback from the ground, which include focus group discussions, exhibitions, competitions and other methods. To ensure smooth planning, the public and private sectors will have to work hand in hand. Different instruments such as taxes and policies are used to ensure things run smoothly. Initiatives such as the Business Improvement Districts brought together property owners and business operators to take the lead in the management of their precincts. This allowed them to take ownership while reaping the benefit of greater footfall to their areas.

Ms Hwang then went into the planning processes that involved different stakeholders and gave the example of the masterplan for Marina Bay, which began in the 1980s. The plans for Marina Bay were non-static and changed over different generations and culminated into various attractions. Ms Hwang also mentioned the park connectors and waterways in Singapore as examples of nature being integrated with surrounding urban landscape. She then talked about places that included insights from the public and integration with community. Heartland hubs such as Tampines Hub and Kampung Admiralty and Rail Corridor were the main examples. There, the surrounding communities were involved through gathering feedback, conducting workshops and exhibitions, and using data and insights to better plan and cater to the needs of the various surrounding demographics.

At the end of her presentation Ms Hwang said the URA is always looking forward and recognises the need to adapt to new challenges. She also mentioned that with COVID-19 pandemic, new trends have arisen. She concluded with a reminder that Singapore is a city-state with limited space, and the authorities will always try to capitalise on new ideas, and public engagement and collaboration with the private sector will always remain vital.

Next, Mr Seah Chee Huang gave his opening remarks by looking at the role of architects. He stated that architects were not most involved in city planning but they had the role of negotiating through the different policies and regulations. Mr Seah went on to mention that the question of “who plans?” is rhetorical given the meticulous planning by the authorities and the private and public sectors working hand in hand. Like Ms Hwang, Mr Seah also discussed the constantly evolving nature of city planning and mentioned the enactment of the Land Acquisition Act of 1966 as a form of outreach. He then spoke about the Singapore Green Plan 2030 and its five pillars which will depend on Singaporeans for its success.

This dependence on the people goes into every aspect of planning in Singapore, he added, especially when it comes to land and environment which is shared by everyone, making civic partnerships important. He used the example of feedback gathered for Tampines Hub as a form of public engagement in designing a building outside of the city centre, which would benefit many and become an emotional connection between people and space.

Mr Seah emphasised that society here is sophisticated enough to laud new developments and designs. He acknowledged that private sector participation was key in supporting larger urban development. He used the example of Golden Mile Complex as an example of engaged citizenry and urban advocacy in private development. The conservation of the building proposed by URA and its later gazetted status is significant for heritage architecture in

Singapore. The interest of preserving Golden Mile Complex is shared among the public and private sectors and is a clear indication of people's interest in city planning. Mr Seah concluded that over the past 50 years Singapore has successfully established strong imageability of the city as there are clear results in establishing a well-designed urban landscape. The next coming phases will need for more diverse and inclusive means of citizenry engagement in vision making and the identity shaping process.

Question & Answer

Questions from the audience focused on a number of issues relating to urban planning in Singapore.

The first question was about as emphasis on public engagement such as with nature groups and heritage groups can become highly politicised, how could it be ensured that the government continue to make sound and objective decisions notwithstanding strong vested interests. Ms Hwang answered that it is through trying to bring different voices together, bringing in balanced perspectives and hearing from different groups. Given that Singapore is very constrained by limited land, Ms Huang stated that a science-based approach is needed to weigh different possibilities. Mr Seah said the idea of common ground was key as well as providing a platform for empathy. He added that, on top of a science-based approach a discussion of values and what contributes to the greater good is also required.

The following question from Dr Woo was on how planners manage potential risks and threats in the future on things like urban density, while still in the tail of a global pandemic and facing potential disruptions from climate change. Dr Woo also mentioned that urban density has become a bit of a double-edged sword, as the city without urban density could not possibly thrive as well, hence how has that changed the way in planning parameters and spaces. Mr Seah replied that there were three ways to look at. First, the dimension of area to something volumetric, followed by the idea of time and then health. Area is key as urban planning in Singapore must look at how much volume buildings are able to withstand. He then mentioned the notion of time as useful when looking at the larger scheme of things, as time in Singapore is used as a metric to connote distance. In relation to health, Mr Seah thought that the pandemic according has forced us to think of new ideas and has made us very aware of space. Ms Hwang then added that there have always been attempts at balancing density and in trying to create a good quality of life that people could enjoy. She also believed that understanding values was something important in drawing up a plan.

The next question was from the audience and was about how people have talked about what worked well in planning over the years. It was then asked if there were instances and examples where we have not done as well or where we had made mistakes which had learned from to improve our plans subsequently. Ms Hwang answered there will always be challenges and hence the importance of reviewing plans every five to 10 years, to take time and review trends. She added that it should include bringing voices together and hearing perspectives as time would allow us to make large moves. Ms Hwang acknowledged that not all plans worked and there would always be the need to revisit plans and hear from the ground. Mr Seah added the idea of adaptability and using people as the point of reference to understand policy.

Following question from the audience was on how to consult those who are not consultable and those who are not happy with these processes, and how about those who are not able or willing to step forward. Ms Hwang answered that the authorities would try to have representative sampling of commissioned surveys, work with different NGOs and conduct sessions in different languages. Aside from that, was to approach youth leaders and broaden human engagement to ensure diverse range. When it came to biodiversity and wildlife, Ms Hwang believed it needed to be approached scientifically. Mr Seah agreed with Ms Hwang's comments and saw the science-based approach as the most sensible. He added that human engagement must be strategic and purposeful to address concerns and anxieties and highlighted the importance of social media and newsletters in reaching out to the public.

Another question asked was on urban heritage. It was about besides preserving our past for heritage, how do we go about preserving the present for our future heritage, given that we are a young country and will need to continue building our heritage even as we rejuvenate the city. Ms Hwang explained that the URA works with different stakeholders to try and capture buildings from different eras and understand buildings important to people. In addition, they would look beyond design to see how people resonate with buildings, and this is where the National Heritage Board comes into play. Ms Hwang also said that urban heritage was not only about preserving old buildings. It can also be done by other avenues, and, for a young nation, the authorities try to keep buildings and others that are important to our identities, and this is a continuous process. Mr Seah reiterated that heritage starts from conversations and establishing what buildings have an impact on people.

Dr Woo then asked what are some buildings that capture the zeitgeist, that could be reflective of current trends. Mr Seah suggested HDB public housing that are close to majority of Singaporeans, and that for public housing at every injection of new estate, the old must be kept.

The next question from the audience, was whether a more dynamic environment requires a quicker urban planning cycle than what we have at present; less than 10-15 years. Ms Hwang replied that there were active studies going on besides the 10 to 15-year cycle reviews. She explained that if the major reviews were done faster, there might not be enough time and distance for major change.

Dr Woo then asked what the advantage was of developing a city-state. Ms Hwang replied that there is the single-layer government and small size, whereby different stakeholders are aware of constrictions and challenges. She also mentioned the biggest constraint will always be land and the challenge are to optimise space not only for this generation but also for the next. Mr Seah offered his view that the advantage for Singapore is the physical showcase of the country's success due to the radical thinking and crisis mentality in the earlier days.

The question-and-answer session was concluded with a final question from the live audience in which when it comes down to land, how do you choose for business or for nature. Ms Hwang answered that people want jobs, and planning is all about balancing social and economic needs and ensuring that Singapore is sustainable in the future. Therefore, long-term plans bring together all the needs to prioritise them. Ms Hwang reiterated the science-based approach when she talked about nature and greenery, to ensure that Singapore is protecting

and retaining the available nature. She concluded that there would always be some measure of balancing in different considerations and needs.

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