

SPEECH BY MINISTER DESMOND LEE AT THE LEE KUAN YEW CENTRE FOR INNOVATIVE CITIES 10TH ANNIVERSARY EVENT, ON WEDNESDAY, 21 SEP 2022, 3PM, AT THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Professor Chong Tow Chong, President of SUTD

Professor Cheong Koon Hean, Chair of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities,

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

1. Good afternoon, thank you for having me today.
2. When the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities was first launched in SUTD in September 2012, Ambassador Chan Heng Chee described the Centre as “a start-up within a start-up” - because it is a brand new research centre and brand new in a fledging university with big dreams and huge expectations.
3. Ten years on, I would like to congratulate you for your significant achievements and contribution to the field of urban research, and for continuing to engage with the pressing issues of the day with the same drive and ambition.
 - a. In exploring issues such as the Future of Cities, Ageing Urbanism and Urban Environmental Sustainability, you have distilled the best learnings from around the world and offered practical and valuable insights to academics and practitioners alike.
 - b. For example, you recently published book titled “Age Friendly Neighbourhood Planning and Design Guidelines” which provides useful knowledge on age-friendly infrastructure that is contextualised to the Singapore’s context. Bridging research and the real-world, it also provides toolkits to facilitate implementation, scale up to more neighbourhoods and benefit more residents.

- c. Complex urban problems require integrated, well-considered solutions. Because urban problems are not just infrastructure problems, there are social issues that need to be resolved at the heart. At the Centre, you play a key role in bringing together a wide network of Singapore and international experts, from a diverse range of disciplines, to imagine bold, innovative, and workable solutions to complex challenges.
 - d. The lecture later by Professor Burdett and panel discussion on “Future Ready Cities” are examples of how the Centre can bring together academics, architects and policy makers to facilitate these open discussions.
4. I am also extremely encouraged that you are training future generations of urban researchers, analysts and practitioners, who can collaborate with us to develop cross-domain solutions, at the intersection of technology, design and policy.

The Singapore Story: Innovation in Urban Development

5. Singapore is a city-state in the modern world, one of the few sovereign city states in the world. And therefore, being at the forefront of innovative city research is critical for us. Research is key in driving innovation that can address the complex challenges that cities around the world face today.

6. Innovation, pragmatism, and boldness have been key hallmarks of Singapore’s urban development journey thus far. But powering of all this has been the social compact between Government and our people, and between citizens, on what society and our city should be like.

7. An example of this is our approach to housing a nation.

- a. When HDB was established to tackle poor housing conditions in the 1960s, our pioneer leaders departed from the rental public housing model inherited from the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), which was the conventional approach in those early years.
- b. Instead, they moved decisively towards home ownership to give Singaporeans a stake in Singapore’s development; and a reason to call the city home.

- c. Today, many decades on, over 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing. Our HDB flats and home ownership model can be considered the exception rather than the norm, when compared to public housing in most parts of the world.

8. Our pioneer leaders also dared to take 'novel' policy approaches in the social realm. Because housing policy in Singapore is actually a social policy, to foster a cohesive and resilient nation, and to design infrastructure, achieving social goals.

- a. This includes the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), which aims to promote greater social interaction by maintaining a diverse ethnic mix across our housing neighbourhoods. The idea that this policy can make communities more diverse, but pragmatic because if people don't get the chance to mix in the first place, they won't get to understand each other.

- b. We have also experimented with integrating purchased HDB flats and rental flats within the same HDB block to encourage better social mixing and stronger neighbourly ties and social support.

- c. And through our latest Prime Location Public Housing model, we want to actively work against powerful but invisible social and economic forces that operate in cities. We want to act against these forces to keep homes in the most prime areas of our city accessible to a broad spectrum of Singaporeans.

9. For cities, urban development and nature conservation are often in fierce conflict. Yet, it need not be a zero-sum game if we are disciplined in planning and adopt a scientific and innovative approach in designing our cities.

10. Back then, Singapore was ahead of its time, in its vision of being a 'Garden City' and today, thanks to the work of many generations, we are actively working towards becoming a 'City in Nature'.

- a. For example, the Landscaping for Urban Spaces and High-Rises (LUSH) programme is an innovative and practical approach to inject greenery in our high-rise urban environment.

- b. Similarly, our space limits have not stopped us from building the Park Connector Network (PCN), an extensive network of green corridors linking major parks and nature areas across our island for Singaporeans to enjoy.

11. These practical innovations – which are the products of policymakers’ imagination, but also the adaptation of the best ideas distilled from around the world – stem from a Singaporean DNA, of dreaming, learning from the best around the world, and refusing to take our resource limitations as destiny.

12. Underpinning our Singapore Story is a vision, powered by innovation to build a unique city that balances development and nature, vibrancy and liveability. This is the spirit which we need to continue to keep alive and nurture, as we prepare for the next bound of challenges facing our current and future generations.

Refreshing our Social Compact to Power Innovation and Solutions Today

13. As we look ahead, we see powerful forces that will impact and shape urban development. These include ageing, climate change as well as the disruptions brought about by new forms of work, powered by digitalisation.

14. It is even more critical for us as a city-state to look ahead, identify the implications of these driving forces on urban development, and find innovative solutions that meet our fast-changing needs.

15. But the pace and direction of change is dependent on the evolving social compact and understanding between Government and people, between fellow citizens and residents of the city, and between us here today and our future generations.

16. So, it is timely that my colleague, DPM Lawrence Wong, had launched the Forward Singapore movement.

17. It is an important exercise for all of us to come together, have deep searching questions about our duties and obligations towards one another and to future generation, foster a shared vision for the future, and jointly create innovative ways to build a better life for us all.

18. We will launch the conversations under the Build pillar of Forward Singapore this weekend.

19. For a start, we will focus on renewing and refreshing our vision and social compact that should underpin the next chapter of our public housing story. This builds on top of the recent extensive consultations that we have had, with more than 15,000 Singaporeans, as part of the Long-Term Plan Review, undertaken by my colleagues at the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Conclusion

20. Working together to envision our future and seeking out innovations and new ideas, are critical for Singapore to continue to thrive in the face of challenges and change. At the Centre, you are well-placed to think deeply about these issues, bring together experts from a diverse range of disciplines and help drive important conversations on how to translate innovative research into practice.

21. I would like to invite you - as researchers, policy thinkers, academics and urban planners - to also participate actively and share your views with us as part of Forward Singapore.

22. So, happy 10th anniversary, and we look forward to a long partnership, for many years to come. Thank you.