

# Managing Land and Emotions



Source: Magnus Manske, wikipedia

WRITTEN BY  
**Alvin Chua**

**“[O]ne of the greatest strengths of the Singapore government structure today is the fact that you have checks and balances.”**

— Tan Boon Khai, Chief Executive,  
Singapore Land Authority

How does the government justify acquiring land from the people? How does the government deal with property owners whose land leases are expiring?

These emotive and at times, contentious issues were some of the topics Singapore Land Authority (SLA) chief executive Tan Boon Khai tackled at his CLC lecture on 20 April 2018. Sharing his insights into SLA’s land management policies, Tan said there are various measures in place to help the agency. One of the most significant is the Land Acquisition Act, which has helped shape the city-state’s development. In the years after Singapore’s independence in 1965, this legislation allowed the state to



SLA's Chief Executive Tan Boon Khai shared about Singapore's future challenges and how the Land Acquisition Act helps ensure sustainable development. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

compulsorily acquire land for national development. Having this flexibility to carry out long-term, sustainable development for nation-building, the government built and delivered public goods for citizens such as housing, transportation systems and infrastructure.

"What we're trying to do is to look at Singapore's long-term plan to... continue to have relevance not only just 10 or 20 years down the road, but 50, 100 years [later]," explained Tan.

The need to redevelop and intensify land use in land-scarce Singapore is why the government's policy is for all land to return to the state upon lease expiry. The discussion on properties whose land leases are expiring has become a hot topic in recent times after close to 200 residences in Geylang Lorong 3 were reminded that they had to move out by 2020 as the land would be returned to the government upon lease expiry. According to Tan, the area will be part of a redevelopment project that will include new public housing. "That will not only rejuvenate the entire site, but also give more people better homes," he said.

While SLA's power to acquire land is enshrined in law, Tan said the agency recognises the emotional weight of land issues. It works hard to help affected landowners through resettlement, administrative and legal procedures. For instance, it mitigates the impact of acquisition or lease return through measures such as advance payment of statutory compensation and concessionary rental schemes. There are also



During the Question and Answer session, Senior Tourism Consultant Pamela Lee shared suggestions to inject new life and lower maintenance costs by widening the usage of conserved structures. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities



Lecture guests each received a copy of the newly launched Urban Systems Studies book, Land Framework of Singapore: Building a Sound Land Administration and Management System. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

resettlement and relocation policies, such as priority allocation and subsidised mortgage loans for public housing when people need to relocate.

“The last thing that many people want, or would accept, is the fact that the government comes in to take away your home, your private land, without what many people perceive to be fair compensation,” said Tan.

In 2007, the Land Acquisition Act was also amended for compensation to be based on market value at the time of the acquisition. Previously, compensation was pegged to statutory dates and did not always reflect contemporary market values. The management of land continues to be updated to keep pace with national developments. Legislation has been introduced for substratum title and acquisition to deal with underground spaces. The agency’s database of geographic, topographic, property and land title information is also shared with other public agencies to be incorporated into their 3D models for air flow management, flood simulations, urban heat studies and solar potential studies, among others.

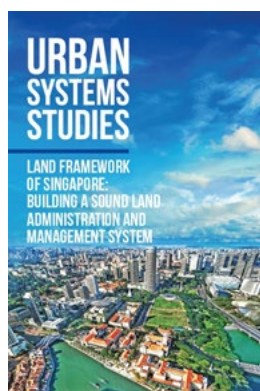
Besides acquiring and managing lands, SLA also oversees various state assets. These include black-and-white bungalows built in the colonial era that have been turned into childcare and educational facilities, among other uses. Tanglin Village, a former military camp in the Dempsey Road area, has been transformed into a food and beverage and retail destination, as was the Grandstand, a former horse-racing ground. During the dialogue session, Tan underlined the challenges behind such adaptive re-use of SLA-managed

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properties. These include the lack of resources to reconfigure properties for different uses, and the “Not in My Back Yard” or NIMBY syndrome among some in the community.

When asked about the regulatory regime for en-bloc property sales, Tan said this was an issue between home owners and potential buyers. He personally felt it would be a never-ending argument to figure out what percentage of assenting owners is required for a collective sale, and it was unwise to expect the government to always step in.

“The real estate sector today is already a highly regulated sector. There is not as much scope or freedom [for developers] to manoeuvre,” he said. “I would accept that there is room for improvements [to regulations], but I would say that to have more regulation in an extremely regulated environment, may not be the wise choice.”



**Download CLC’s newly launched Urban Systems Studies book**, of *Land Framework of Singapore: Building a Sound Land Administration and Management System*, to find out more.

# About the Speakers



## **SPEAKER**

### **Tan Boon Khai**

Chief Executive Officer,  
Singapore Land Authority

Mr Tan joined SLA as Chief Executive on 1 May 2015. He is a lawyer by training and was previously with the Singapore Legal Service, holding appointments including District Judge in the former Subordinate Courts of Singapore and Deputy Senior State Counsel/Deputy Public Prosecutor in the Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore. Prior to joining SLA, Mr Tan was with Capitaland Limited, where he held several portfolios, including Senior Vice-President, Office of the President, Head, Group Procurement, Capitaland, and Regional General Manager (Singapore and Malaysia), The Ascott Limited.



## **MODERATOR**

### **Choy Chan Pong**

Member,  
Centre for Liveable Cities Panel of Experts,  
Former Senior Adviser,  
Urban Redevelopment Authority

Mr Choy Chan Pong was the Group Director in URA who was responsible for the planning and implementation of the Government Land Sales programme for more than 20 years, up to 2010. He introduced the auction method and the Reserve List System, oversaw the sale of the Business and Financial Centre site and was involved in the sale of Integrated Resort site at Marina Bay. landmark developments in China, Hong Kong and various other countries.

## About CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>

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