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INTERVIEW

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Balancing the Old and New

From shaping the central Marina Bay district to revitalising public housing in the heartlands, **Dr Cheong Koon Hean** has overseen different facets of Singapore's development as former CEO of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and as the current CEO of the Housing & Development Board (HDB). She shares with Louisa-May Khoo about the need to balance new elements with social memory and people's needs, to inclusively rejuvenate the city.

What is urban regeneration to you?

The traditional view of urban regeneration is often about improving physically derelict buildings in an area. But to me, the contemporary definition is to have an integrated long-term vision to rejuvenating an area, with a focus on people, business, place and improving sustainability. And instead of developing an urban sprawl away from the city to cater for growth, urban regeneration of an existing area can provide opportunities to renew the city. This broader definition is more holistic whereby we also emphasise quality of life, environmental considerations, placemaking, good

governance and developing reliable urban infrastructure to rejuvenate the city.

When I was at the URA, an interesting project we did was the rejuvenation of the Bras Basah. Bugis area. We injected a new university—the Singapore Management University—to bring in thousands of young students back into the area, which used to house many distinguished schools. We converted older buildings to create an arts and museum district. Collectively, these facilities brought back civic, education and entertainment activities which increased the life and vibrancy of the city centre.

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Marina Bay on the other hand, is a good example of bringing in the new as an expansion of the city. With a greenfield site on reclaimed land, we conceptualised a new signature image for Singapore as a global city. Marina Bay was planned as a mixed-use district. Although it has a focus on the financial and commercial sectors, we didn't want a purely commercial district because it would lack vibrancy. So we injected a lot of housing, hotels and entertainment uses. We also focused on placemaking and the provision of public spaces that could bring in life and people. Look at the National Day celebrations at the floating platform, it's a venue like no other. And the district also hosts the only Formula One night race in the world. Of course, we also paid a lot of attention to the urban design, to create a beautiful skyline that people appreciate.

For Marina Bay, how did you ensure that the old and the new are not disjointed?

The starting point is always good planning. You have to understand the city. It's not just about the new; the old is very much a part of Marina Bay. Hence we kept many of the old buildings, such as the Clifford Pier and Customs House on the heritage side of Marina Bay. This area used to be seen as the “backside” of the city. Then we made an effort to turn the city around to face the water. We opened up vistas to the waterfront and new buildings were made more “porous” at the ground level for seamless pedestrian and

visual connectivity to Marina Bay and in particular the waterfront promenade.

We also ensured that it's walkable from the older to the newer areas, where the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) stations, walkways and public spaces seamlessly plug the new city with the old.

As Marina Bay is essentially a financial and commercial centre, with many banks and financial buildings, we did not want the general public to feel alienated or out of place in this area. So, we made the bay area and waterfront fully accessible to all, with lots of public spaces and promenades. We ensured that around Marina Bay there are always public spaces for people to enjoy, for activities like marathons or performances. It's very important to have spaces meant for everyone.

How is urban rejuvenation done in Singapore's public housing estates?

We started public housing in the 1960s. We've built one million flats—some are in the more mature towns and others in the middle-age and younger towns. As the HDB houses over 80% of the population, it is important to keep rejuvenating our estates, because we cannot afford to have urban ghettos.

In 1995 we introduced the Estate Renewal Programme to raise the standard of the older towns to that of the newer ones. We upgrade the external areas, such as the parks, playgrounds and public spaces around the neighbourhoods, through the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. We also upgrade the interior of the flats using the Home Improvement Programme. The massive Lift Upgrading Programme, executed for over 10 years, has enabled lifts to now stop at every floor, for almost every block in Singapore.



01 The view from the floating platform at Marina Bay is always a highlight of National Day Parades held there.

02 People enjoying the PasarBella pop-up market on the Marina Bay waterfront.



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Sometimes, it doesn't make sense to upgrade a very old building; it's better to redevelop. That's where the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS) comes in: where feasible, we acquire flats in an old area, demolish them and build more new flats with modern facilities. Thus, we can intensify and bring new families into the old towns.

A good example is the renewal of the old Dawson estate in Queenstown. The vision is to build "Housing-in-a-Park". We introduced a lot of greenery and the national water agency, PUB, weaved in water bodies such as the upgraded Alexandra Canal into the landscape through their Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Programme. New and innovative public housing designs were adopted. We kept one of

the old buildings as a reminder of what was once at Dawson. We even kept many of the old trees. That's an important consideration for rejuvenation: it is about keeping social memories too.

In addition to rejuvenating the city area, we also developed new areas like Punggol Eco-Town. We introduced a lot of new design concepts and ideas. Punggol Waterway is a good example—by damming up the rivers, we created two reservoirs at Serangoon and Punggol, and connected them with a new river, which became part of the leisure facilities within Punggol. In fact, I am told that some people have nicknamed Punggol as the "Venice of Singapore".

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- 01 Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS) projects keep mature estates like Clementi Town vibrant.
 - 02 More than 60 mature trees in seven public housing sites in Dawson estate were conserved.



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Urban regeneration is sometimes criticised for eroding traditional lifestyles. How is this addressed in Singapore?

The whole of Singapore has changed. We used to live in *kampungs* [Malay for ‘village’] and old crammed shophouses, which lacked utilities and sanitation. But life has moved on—lifestyles have changed; people’s income levels and expectations have risen. The economy is totally different from the days of farms and *kampungs*. The expectation is to live in well-built modern buildings served by good amenities.

Instead of romanticising old lifestyles, we have to ask the residents whether they want to continue to live that way, with no electricity, clean water and sanitation. While the rest of us may want to visit these old places and see the way people used to live in the past, the ones who are living in these old premises most likely do not want to still live like that. Nonetheless, these old buildings hold important social memories and history for us. So, practical conservation is about recognising what has changed, and adapting buildings and uses to a new lifestyle. The old buildings need to generate economic value in order for the owners to have enough income to restore and to upkeep them. It’s a much more pragmatic and sustainable way to safeguard our built heritage.

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But in planning an area, we can take cues from the past character of the place and even conserve some of the buildings in the area where appropriate, and give them a new lease of life. It's not exactly the same, but we do recognise that we want to keep the sense of history, while acknowledging that lifestyles have to change. This is always the fine balance we need to maintain in Singapore.

In fact, the URA won an Urban Land Institute award for the way it successfully balanced conserving built heritage with economic realities in a pragmatic way. The URA Conservation Programme has successfully conserved over 7,000 buildings and structures, much more than many other cities would have kept, even though we are more land constrained.

How do we ensure that rejuvenation efforts are in line with what people want and need?

Planners are not building for themselves. We must always remember that we're building for people. So it is very important to have a process of engagement to understand what people want.

For the Remaking Our Heartland (ROH) programme, we used to formulate the plan first and then ask people: "Do you like the plan?" But we took a very different approach when we planned ROH 3 (covering Pasir Ris, Woodlands and Toa Payoh towns) in 2016—we started from the bottom up. And because ROH projects are not in greenfield sites, we can touch base with the people living in the towns that we are trying to rejuvenate.

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So in the ROH 3 batch, we formed many focus groups with the residents and held several conversations with them over numerous weekends. They gave us good inputs including what improvements they would like to see and the places in the towns that were meaningful to them. This was the starting point: we recognised what people remember, what they would like to keep and what new things they wanted. From there, we conceptualised the plan.

Another example is in Tampines Town. There was a path leading to a neighbourhood centre that was popularly used by residents. We wanted to create a “social linkway” where people walking along this path would have opportunities to interact and meet every day. So we set up booths along this corridor, stopped people and asked them: “What would you like to see here? What is meaningful to you?” We even got them to help design some of the spaces. When we actually built this intervention, this little “urban acupuncture” project, it was really the residents’ own project—the linkway was exactly what they wanted. So, it’s about co-creating a plan.

“We initiated the ‘Friendly Faces, Lively Places’ fund that people can draw on to organise activities... to encourage community interaction.”

I think this is one of the challenges for all planners. How can we involve people in our planning process so they feel that they are doing it together with us and have a sense of ownership of their environs?

The other point is that buildings are all hardware. But after that, do people use the space? In the HDB we not only look at the hardware, but also the heartware: you want people to activate an area so that they feel it belongs to them and will take care of it. For example, we initiated the “Friendly Faces, Lively Places” fund that people can draw on to organise community activities or to improve a space, such as a void deck, so as to encourage community interaction. This encourages people to be more proactive and to take ownership, thereby fostering a greater sense of rootedness for the place in which they live.

As we build for an increasingly diverse society, how can we ensure that the tenets of inclusivity and community building still hold?

It’s a combination of policy and design. A very important principle that we’ve held on to for over 50 years is for HDB towns to foster social cohesion. When we build new towns and projects, we always ensure a mix of income and ethnic groups.



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We mix two-, three-, four- and five-room flats within each estate for different income groups. We are also experimenting with integrating rental units with sold flats.

The Ethnic Integration Programme has been a key policy that has helped different ethnic groups socialise with one another. Every town has quotas for different ethnic groups to reflect the national demographic mix. We do not want enclaves where specific groups reside. So every town is a microcosm of Singapore. That is set by policy. All of us grew up quite comfortably with neighbours who are Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasian. We eat at the hawker centres together and go to schools together.

You can also design spaces that provide opportunities to interact. We’ve introduced community living rooms and roof gardens where residents can congregate for get-togethers or to chat. Even our playgrounds are

01 Staff from non-profit group Participate in Design hold an engagement session with residents, supported by the “Friendly Faces, Lively Places” fund.

02 People of different backgrounds easily intermingle within HDB estates.



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designed as 3-Generation playgrounds, where children play and grandparents and parents can exercise together. It's not only ethnicity; we're talking about different generations and income groups mixing together.

What do you foresee as future challenges for urban regeneration?

We need to pay attention to the changing demographics in our society—for example, we have an ageing population. When planning new areas and rejuvenating older areas, we study the demographics of the town closely. If we want people to age in place, we need facilities nearby. For example, we built two-room Flexi flats for older people who may have monetised their larger flats and decided to move to smaller ones. We always site these near a neighbourhood centre, with convenient access to facilities such as grocery stores and clinics. But we also want the young to mix with the old. So in Kampung Admiralty, we combined elderly housing with a medical centre and childcare centre. These are innovative ideas you want to continue to have for the ageing population.

Also, as more of Singapore gets built up over time, we will have more brownfield sites compared to greenfield sites, like many older cities in the world. Greenfield sites are much easier to plan from scratch and to build on. With brownfield sites, it becomes more complex to rejuvenate. Existing uses have to be moved out and these sites are infill and might disrupt surrounding areas. All these will have to be managed very carefully. I believe these are the new challenges for Singapore. 

Watch the interview here:



<https://youtu.be/5j2j4S8ga1E>