URBAN PLANNING |

Asia's challenges in managing its cities

These include reactive urban planning, uncontrolled urban sprawl and poor governance, say planning specialists

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THE architect of modern Singapore has a number of bugbears about urban planning and he wants them off his chest.

For starters, Liu Thai-Ker believes that politicians in the rapidly urbanising Asia of today aren't giving city planning the scientific precision it deserves.

He told *The Business Times* that urban planning is a specialised skill, yet it is sometimes undertaken by people from other disciplines, ranging from architects to designers.

Dr Liu, senior director at RSP Architects Planners & Engineers and the founding chairman of Centre for Liveable Cities, said: "Would you ask a dentist to fix your eye? You wouldn't. Urban planning is as precise as that. But we say, 'Oh, you can draw? Plan my city.' It's as ridiculous as saying, 'Oh, you have a medical degree? Fix my brain'."

And it doesn't help that those trained in urban planning are unfamiliar with its basic principles and techniques. He is vexed that many senior planners and lecturers he meets cannot answer simple questions such as how far apart two parallel roads should be, or what is a reasonable acreage for a central business district.

"The basic knowledge of city planning is not well understood, despite the fact that we have developed many cities," he said.

The result: Too much emphasis placed on "sexy architecture" and urban design. Worse, this leads to major infrastructure mishaps that surface only decades down the road. Urban planners "get away with murder" when they do guesswork, he said.

But the times may be a-changing. A new multi-disciplinary study of urban science has emerged to challenge the old way of city planning, by coalescing different disciplines – urban planning, architecture, engineering, environmental science and social science – whose practitioners used to work in silos.

Dr Liu was speaking in a recent interview ahead of the Julius Baer Next Generation Summit: Asia 2015 held on Friday.

Interviewed along with him were Luigi Vignola, Julius Baer head of the investment-solutions group and markets in Asia, and Peter Edwards, director of Singapore-ETH Centre for global environmental sustainability.

The summit, which featured Dr Liu and Prof Edwards, was

TALKING ABOUT CITIES
From left: Prof Edwards, Mr Vignola, and Dr Liu. If there is any hope of alleviating climate change, the solution should be found in cities. Cities make for great synergies. Among symbiotic industries, one plant's waste can be another plant's raw materials, for example. There is also economies of scale for public transport. PHOTO: LAURA NG

open only to the Swiss private banking group's wealth management clients.

Mr Vignola said that the summit showed the bank's commitment to its next-generation investment philosophy, which seeks sustainable growth opportunities and looks beyond fads in financial markets.

Dr Liu used to be architect-planner and chief executive of the Housing & Development Board for three decades until 1989; he then moved on to become chief executive and chief planner of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, where he led the major revision of the Singapore Concept Plan 1991.

He said at the interview that Singapore has had a good head start in urban planning in its first 50 years as a nation, thanks to the pragmatic development goals set by its first-generation politicians; having good "software support" in the form of trained engineers has also helped.

The rest of Asia is following suit now with high-density urbanisation – the only option it has, given that the region is home to 60 per cent of the world's population living on just 30 per cent of the world's land area.

Prof Edwards pointed out that Asian countries are, at the same time, mindful of the need to conserve as much agricultural land as possible – and not just for eco-

nomic reasons: The rice-growing areas and rice production systems actually play crucial roles such as in managing the water supply and preventing flooding; agriculture also returns nutrients to the land, thus reducing the need for fertilisers.

Yet, in many South-east Asian countries, people are migrating to urban areas because they can no longer make a living from agriculture. These new urban areas thus no longer benefit from the ecosystem services that agricul-

ture used to provide, which is the cause of environmental problems such as flooding.

Drawing out the paradox, he said: "Cities as presently conceived are inherently unsustainable, and yet they are the key to sustainability."

Why is this? Because today's cities are extremely intensive in using resources – mostly inefficiently and with little recycling. And yet they are "cradles for innovation", with talent pools of people with many fields of expertise.

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ting climate change, the solution should be found in cities.

Cities make for great synergies. Among symbiotic industries, one plant's waste can be another plant's raw materials, for example. There is also economies of scale for public transport.

But South-east Asian cities still have to dramatically improve their environmental performance, or "planetary boundaries" – maximum limits that the planet can take to sustain itself – will be breached in a few dec-

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> **Dr Liu, on city planning not getting the scientific precision it deserves**

ades. He hopes that urban planning would become a more proactive, rather than reactive process. Better governance and administrative systems are needed for more effective urban planning.

"In many countries, the governments are not even in control of where people settle, and have no clear concept of land ownership or have a single cadastre to tell who owns which plot of land," he said.

This has led to the emergence of unintended megacities which

sprawl and house populations of more than 10 million, straining the environment. The optimum size for a city is a population of one to two million, he said.

"We need to find ways of preventing uncontrolled urban sprawl, which brings with it many problems. As these urban areas grow – and Asian cities are growing faster than anywhere else – the challenge will lie in steering them towards becoming dense, well-organised, mid-sized cities, rather than have an urban sprawl which presents problems that have to be sorted out later."

And urban planning is better done earlier than later, Dr Liu added.

Dr Liu, who is also planning adviser to more than 30 cities in China, said that he has proposed to the Chinese government that it break the mega-cities down to smaller ones.

Beijing, for instance, with more than 20 million residents, could be broken up into five or six cities, each with three to four million people, and each with its own central business district, universities, hospitals and recreation facilities.

"So then, only on special occasions do people come to Tiananmen Square. But the officials in China tell me, 'It's not possible, it's too late'.

"I don't accept that. Every city has hope. The only difference is that the later you make up your mind to improve your city, the more it will cost you to rectify it."

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Public's view in masterplanning of limited use, say specialists

It is good to listen, they say, but urban planners must take a stand or risk making bad decisions

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HOW much participation and say should local communities have in their cities' master plans?

Asked this question, urban planning specialists say, surprisingly: "Not much."

Still, Liu Thai-Ker, former chief at the Housing & Development Board and the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and, many say, the architect of modern Singapore, said: "Definitely as a principle, we should listen to people. The critical issue is that, at the end of the day, the planner should take a stand and not try to be popular. That is the key difference.

"If you try to play a politically correct game and play popular, you make bad decisions. You can't even please everyone collectively because different people want different things."

While revising the Singapore Concept Plan 1991, for instance, he made the effort to take into consideration communities' needs before executing the plan.

The problem was that much of the feedback from residents was not very helpful, because it tended to be inward-looking, concerned only with these residents' immediate environments.

Meetings with professional and business organisations yielded more useful feedback because people from these organisations were clear about what they needed from cities.

Going farther back into history, he recalled how resistant squatter-residents were at first to moving to high-rise flats in the 1960s. The government had to entice them, not just with brand new flats, but also shopping malls and schools and extended bus lines.

The government also moved the residents in cohorts, as communities instead of individually, so that neighbours and relatives could still live near one another.

"When you push, there must also be a pull factor," he said.

Then, from 1969 to 1971, he noticed the letters to newspaper editors on the resettlement issue changed in tone, from "Why must you resettle me?" to "Why haven't you?".

Dr Liu said that people are sometimes not in the best position to make decisions, because they lack the broader overarching perspective that the government has. But if a government does its job well, people will in time be persuaded of the benefits.

Sometimes, governments also have to appease the people and compensate them for the inevitable changes they have to make to their livelihoods.

"We went down to minute details to compensate the squatter residents – not only measuring the size of the huts but the number of chickens, and even the age and weight of the chickens and the pigs, and also the height of their vegetables," he said.

"Our government really went all out to make people believe that we were fair to them, and ensured that their livelihood did not change for the worse, but for the better."

Peter Edwards, director of Singapore-ETH Centre for global environmental sustainability, agrees that planning has to be done by a select group of people, but he added that this may change in today's digitally inter-connected age, where the gathering of feedback can be efficiently done using technology.

"We are entering a time when people expect to be consulted, and expect their answers to be considered and taken seriously," he said.

FROM KAMPUNGS TO HIGH-RISE LIVING
The first HDB blocks in Singapore, along Stirling Road in Queenstown. Dr Liu said that as the resettlement of squatter residents progressed, the tone of the letters to newspaper editors on the subject went from "Why must you resettle me?" to "Why haven't you?" SPH FILE PHOTO