

# People-Centric Approach to Urban Planning

*David Chan*

In recent years, liveability, well-being, quality of life, social capital and other constructs in the social and behavioural sciences have joined traditional planning concepts such as access to amenities, mobility and connectivity to become central considerations in Singapore's urban planning policies. Although the expanded language for urban planning is recent, the people-centric goal of improving life and living in Singapore has always been fundamental for both urban planners and national leaders. This is clear to those who are well-informed of the history and current focus of urban planning and public policies in Singapore. But as we reflect on the future and prepare for it, it is important to have more clarity on what a people-centric approach to urban planning entails.

In a people-centric approach, social and behavioural factors are not treated as "good to have" luxuries in urban planning. Instead, they are recognised as necessities to be incorporated when designing and implementing urban policies and interventions. It means research and development in urban planning should go beyond technical solutions to include social and behavioural sciences. This becomes obvious when we recognise that liveability is about people's evaluations, experiences and encounters when they interact with their physical and social environments

To effectively adopt and apply a people-centric approach to urban planning, I suggest we focus more on three important but somewhat neglected issues. First, we need to understand that the key social and behavioural sciences constructs in urban planning, such as liveability, quality of life and social capital, are inherently multi-dimensional. Each construct comprises multiple distinct variables that may be related in different ways and to different degrees. Depending on which specific variables we focus on and what metrics we use, the evaluation of the construct and how it applies in Singapore's urban planning can vary widely. The complexity in the construct definition and measurement should not be confused with the practical relevance of the construct to urban planning. The fact that many of these constructs are multidimensional makes it even more important to be evidence-based when incorporating social

and behavioural factors in urban planning. Evidence and application must be rooted in the rigour and relevance of the social and behavioural sciences.

Second, when incorporating social and behavioural factors, it is critical to ensure that they adequately capture the experiences of various segments of the Singapore population. For example, the same built environment can impact different groups of people differently or impact people differently over time. Take for instance the Singapore-Kuala Lumpur High Speed Rail terminal station that will be built in Jurong. When it is ready, it could bring about a large transient commuter population in the area, and with it, implications on how to manage emergencies involving a crowd that includes travellers and workers who may be entering Singapore for the first time. They are less familiar with the physical surroundings of the station than the regular commuter living in Singapore. Therefore, the physical layout and urban forms in the surrounding area must be aligned with contingency plans for incident management during train disruptions. This in turn calls for a collaborative approach in urban planning involving different agencies. It also calls for an integrative approach that brings together various experts to better understand how people think, feel and act in different settings, and how these thoughts, emotions or behaviours may differ between groups or change over time. This means having social and behavioural scientists working alongside urban planners and other public service officers, architects, engineers, and physical scientists to enhance people's well-being and quality of life in urban settings.

Third, it is important to anticipate how needs and wants may change over time and across demographic groups. This is especially relevant when using social attitude surveys to gather public sentiments as inputs for town planning. It is unwise to simply take the needs and wants reported in these surveys as given. Instead, it is necessary to think about how they can change, the different demographics, and how environmental change can actually influence people's expectations.

As urban planners and national leaders in Singapore reflect on and prepare for the future, they need to adopt and apply a people-centric approach. As a city-state, Singapore aspires to be both a global city and a cohesive country. Unlike other countries where people can move between cities in the country, Singapore is unique in that people who want a change of living environment would have to leave the country. Singapore needs a living environment and ways of life that will enable more emotional attachment and rootedness to the country, for both citizens and non-citizens.