

# Technology shapes cities for the better

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SENIOR WRITER

ONE of the chief concerns about living in a city is how easy it is for one to get from Point A to Point B quickly, safely and cheaply.

As Indian entrepreneur Narayana Murthy pointed out at a public forum at The Fullerton hotel last Friday, settling that not only boosts one's well-being, but can actually be a big boon to economic productivity too.

For example, he noted that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2009 surveyed Toronto and found that those living in this largest Canadian city were so stuck in daily traffic jams that employers lost C\$3.3 billion (S\$4 billion) worth of productive hours.

The OECD is an international body that helps countries tackle the economic, social and governance challenges of globalisation.

When you consider that 3.4 billion of the global population now live in cities, among whom 828 million live in slums, the losses in productivity can be very large indeed.

The forum, on how technology and governance are shaping cities today, was hosted jointly by the Singapore University of Technology and Design's Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC) and the Ministry of National Development's Centre for Liveable Cities.

Mr Murthy, who founded the IT multinational Infosys and is dubbed the Bill Gates of India, was among four speakers, the others being former civil service chief



(From left) Mr Peter Ho, Professor Wang Shu, Mr Narayana Murthy, Professor Edward Glaeser and Professor Chan Heng Chee at a public forum held at The Fullerton hotel last Friday. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Peter Ho, Harvard University don Edward Glaeser and acclaimed Chinese architect Wang Shu.

The quartet are part of LKY-CIC's international advisory panel, which had its inaugural meeting last Thursday.

The panel's three other members are former diplomat Chan Heng Chee, who chairs the seven-month-old LKYCIC; SMRT chief Desmond Kuek; and Mr Lee Tzu Yang, who chairs the Shell Companies in Singapore.

Given that the past 20 years have unleashed the most rapid technological developments in history, it might seem only good sense to wire one's city to the hilt to ease life there.

But Professor Chan, who moderated the full-house forum, wondered how risky it was to rely too much on technology, which is always replacing itself within months.

To that, Mr Murthy said: "We have found that replacing technological infrastructure is becoming easier, cheaper and more comfortable for the user. So as long as city planners are comfortable with the returns that the new technology brings, obsolescence should not be an issue."

Agreeing, Professor Glaeser said: "Rarely have countries been locked in by technology; they are locked in by human capital."

So, he added, governments should stoke entrepreneurship by rewarding those willing to try new things.

Pointing out that technology was but an enabler, Mr Ho said good governance boiled down to choosing robust technologies that suited one's city best.

"We take our MRT for granted and complain a lot when it breaks down, but imagine the alternative explored many years ago, which

was to have an all-bus system - if we had adopted that instead and continued to grow as we are growing today, we'd be having big problems," he said.

Mr Murthy said that upcoming software and IT-enabled services would shift power from the rich to the poor and middle classes, and so "rulers of cities will have to change their mindset", which has long been fixated on attracting only the super-rich to their urbanescapes.

Another result of this power shift, said Mr Murthy, is that technology would make everything more transparent and so enable one to pinpoint who is accountable for specific actions.

He said: "We will begin to see fewer abandoned projects because it is city elites who abandon projects that threaten their power and interests."

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## High-rise havens or jails?

CHINESE architect Wang Shu, who won the coveted Pritzker Prize last year, is not one to mince his words.

At last Friday's public forum on how technology and governance shaped cities, Professor Wang challenged city planners to hold true to their native cultures and traditions.

Speaking in Mandarin, he flashed slides of downtown Beijing, with its elevated rail tracks and skyscrapers, and then said: "I'm not sure if those designing Asian cities like Beijing were influenced by European architecture, whose building designs are based on the concept of jails.

"The isolated individuals closed up in their own apartments are all like prisoners - they come out to do some work, have some food and entertainment and then go back to their jails. And they're happy with it." Professor Wang heads the China Academy of Art's architecture school in Hangzhou in Zhejiang province.

His critique of high-rise living made for uncomfortable listening for many at the forum, including Harvard University's celebrated urban economist Edward Glaeser, who champions high-rise living in his critically lauded book, *The Triumph Of The City*.

Professor Glaeser's point is that cities have been essential to human progress, especially since many talented people flock there in search of better opportunities and rewards.

Besides the fact that educational institutions are found mostly in cities, Prof Glaeser argued that city dwellers also gained valuable knowledge and skills "that one got from standing around watercoolers" because they were able to interact more intensely with so many more people in cities.

But eye doctor Geh Min, the former Nature Society of Singapore president who was in the audience, took issue



Prof Wang challenged city planners to hold true to their native cultures and traditions, and compared high-rise dwellers to prisoners.

with Prof Glaeser's rosy view of the city as a fount of knowledge.

She said: "My concern is that these exchanges of knowledge are mainly among human beings and are ultimately short-circuited or incestuous... because people who live in cities are not sufficiently exposed to nature and therefore what they are learning is not the big picture."

Also, noting Prof Wang's call to be original and have greater regard for nature for better living, she said: "Nearly 20 years ago, there was a huge earthquake in the city of Lijiang in Yunnan province. In its aftermath, the people found that its traditionally built structures had not collapsed, but its modern high-rise ones had.

"Obviously, the people there had learnt from tradition to build mud houses that would withstand earthquakes."

To all that, Prof Glaeser said: "I'm not a lifestyle consultant, but a sense of purpose and satisfaction with life is not higher in bucolic areas than in cities, so let's not mythologise rural or traditional parts. And while modern engineering has sometimes screwed up, overall, it is more efficient (than traditional methods)."

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