

THE BIG IDEA: Low-cost, middle-class city housing

Harvard urban economist Edward Glaeser says cities – not villages, not suburbs – are key to the future, as they allow people to mix and exchange ideas.

■ Cities need to be kept affordable for the middle-income, who are the largest economic group in urban areas. The way to do this is to build

high-rise but low-cost housing they can afford.

■ Housing cost can be kept down with technologies that improve building materials and methods, including labour-saving devices.

■ Singapore, with its successful public housing scheme, is well-positioned to be a global leader in supplying lower-cost high-rise living.

Affordable homes super-high in the sky

That's urban economist's solution to ensure quality of life for lower-income



By CHEONG SUK-WAI
SENIOR WRITER

SOME might consider the wheel, electricity or the Internet as humankind's greatest inventions.

But American urban economist Edward Glaeser says that cities are its best creation by far. Cities organise and focus vital human activities like trade, transport and teaching so well that billions have been pulled out of poverty.

But with more than half of humanity living in urban areas – and three-quarters by 2050 – how can space-starved cities house so many more people?

By building super-high apartment buildings at affordable prices, says Prof Glaeser, 46, who was in Singapore recently to attend the inaugural meeting of the international advisory panel of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, which is part of the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Having taller apartment blocks, says this Harvard University don, will free up more ground-level space for parks and other recreational spots to lighten the stresses of crowded lives.

All of which sounds obvious, but Prof Glaeser's crucial caveat for high-rise homes is that they must be affordable to middle-income folk. This is because such folk form the largest working group in most cities, and so are their main economic engine.

They are also the ones who struggle most to own homes, he points out, unlike the rich who have their pick of properties, and the poor, whose housing is subsidised.

He says: "It is not just about going super-high in the sky, but it is also about expecting our cities to deliver to middle-income folk a

quality of life that is not much lower than that provided by the Sun Belt suburbs in the United States."

The Sun Belt comprises such American cities as Atlanta, Dallas and Phoenix, which still have swathes of land on which "unbelievably cheap" palatial mansions are built at US\$70 (S\$90) per sq ft and sold at about US\$130 psf.

He argues that constructing towering homes that are easier on the pockets of the middle class will be most effective in keeping talent concentrated in cities, which he sees as essential to human progress, as detailed in his clear-eyed and critically lauded book, *Triumph Of The City*.

But why would developers in, say, Singapore be motivated to supply private, low-cost high-rise housing when they can make more building luxury homes?

He insists: "I don't think the current frothiness in the Singapore housing market will turn off the market's desire for cheaper housing."

He says that the key to making high-rise living affordable is a combination of new technologies that include vastly improved building materials and breakthrough methods of construction, including more labour-saving techniques. "It is all about building up cheaply, safely and pleasantly."

While his idea about providing affordable high-rise living in metropolises might hardly appear like a Big Idea, it has actually topped decades of Western thinking in the other direction, that is, towards low-rise housing and suburban sprawls.

In fact, Prof Glaeser – who was made a Harvard full professor at age 31 – has given momentum to the movement known as retro-urbanism, whose leading voices include the renowned American urban theorist Richard Florida and the US Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, who declared in 2010: "We've reached the limits of suburban development... People are



Prof Glaeser, 46, says the key to making high-rise living affordable is a combination of new technologies that include vastly improved building materials and breakthrough methods of construction. ST PHOTO: EDWARD TEO

beginning to vote with their feet and come back to central cities."

Prof Glaeser's views run contrary to those of the late American architectural critic Jane Jacobs. In her iconic book, *The Death And Life Of Great American Cities*, she championed as ideal residential buildings no higher than six storeys – and castigated high-rise living as dehumanising hives of social dangers.

Prof Glaeser says: "She was right to point all that out. But it's not true that Greenwich Village neighbourhoods are the only way for urbanites to survive. There isn't only one way to live."

That said, the native New Yorker who grew up in a 1,300 sq ft apartment in Manhattan, knows only too well how skyscrapers often block the best views, cast giant shadows everywhere and often become dens of moral decay. "So the important economist's caveat is that people should pay for the social costs of their choices and actions," he says. "So we should charge city dwellers for the congestion and pollution they create, and not give them infrastructure below cost and sprawling developments."

He also takes issue with Mrs Jacobs' argument that because it was cheaper to maintain old buildings than build new ones, the way to keep prices down was not to build any more.

"That's not how supply and demand works," notes Prof Glaeser, who is against preserving old buildings for nostalgia's sake. "If you have robust demand for an area and you don't allow enough new supply of homes, prices there will go up and you risk turning the area into a boutique luxury space affordable only to the wealthy."

Case in point: Greenwich Village, which only "hedge fund billionaires" can afford these days.

In all this, he insists that he is not trying to dictate that those who want to live in suburbs or large landed houses should not do so. He just believes that it makes better economic and ecological sense to pool talent in cities, where one can meet and mingle with all sorts of people. That is a great advantage in an age when those who have the freshest information fastest make the most money. After all, he notes, 80 per cent of the US' 100 biggest cities, except Washington, DC. As Mr Kotkin put it: "A funny

thing happened on the way to the long-trumpeted triumph of the city – the suburbs not only survived but have begun to regain their allure as Americans have continued aspiring to single-family homes."

That, however, is not likely to happen in Singapore soon, Prof Glaeser notes: "One of the things that is different between Singapore and US cities such as Boston and New York is that there just aren't any middle-income people living in these cities because they have been priced out of it."

"But in Singapore, people don't just move to Dallas if they cannot buy property in Singapore. So they're still here and you've got to figure out a way to house them."

In fact, the widely travelled don adds, he sees Singapore's greatest challenge now as being to ensure "good qualities of life for people lower on the income ladder".

The married father of three then muses: "It's a real problem to focus on, but it's still a lot better than having unclean water, drug gangs running your streets or a malfunctioning urban school system."

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THE BIG IDEA IN ACTION: Carving out more space from the air

SINGAPOREAN architect Tan Cheng Siang has taken a stab at the challenge of providing affordable high-rise living in the land-squeezed city-state.

Among many other accolades, Mr Tan, 76, was named Designer Of The Year at the President's Design Awards Singapore last year. He founded his architectural partnership Archurban Architects Planners in 1974, and among his most notable projects are the Pearl Bank Apartments and Pandan Valley Condominium.

Now, Mr Tan has come up with a concept he calls Sky Land. As its name suggests, it is about carving out more space from the air, at a much lower cost to prospective home owners with modest incomes.

Technologically, he says, the way to make high-rise buildings easier on the pocket is to employ a variety of

techniques together, including precasting and prefabricating building materials and apartment areas, a lot more automation that cuts down on the need for labour, as well as a good dash of DIY.

Sky Land, as envisioned by Mr Tan, involves housing Singaporeans in an "X" formation. This X will be encircled by schools, shops and existing HDB flats, all densely packed within the circle. Roads and MRT tracks, he says, will be like spokes within the circle, with MRT stations at the centre of the X.

Each limb of the X will be a frame within which are decks of apartments, with each frame between 12 and 24 storeys high. In this, Mr Tan's vision differs slightly from that of Professor Edward Glaeser, who favours much higher buildings to maximise each land plot.

Each housing deck, in turn, will be linked by sky bridges, to create even more public spaces for residents to interact.

As for the homes themselves, Mr Tan envisages them as glass-encased terrace houses surrounded by greenery and public walkways, so giving dwellers the feeling of living right in the middle of a lush flower-flecked garden.

Mr Tan, who is currently based in Shenzhen as a member of its special economic zone planning committee, hopes his idea will take root and bloom within the next 40 years.

For now, Mr Tan notes how assiduously the Government has been reclaiming land and even digging underground caverns now. Of these efforts, he says: "It merely accentuates the spectre of land scarcity to squeeze out a tightly packed existence."

THE BIG IDEA IN HISTORY: Scraping the sky

THE notion of high-rise developments is as ancient as the biblical Tower of Babel. There are, especially, many magnificent structures all over the world to honour divinity, from the towering spires of churches to mosque minarets to the stupas and pagodas atop Asia's mountain peaks.

But humankind's fascination for building up has been more about showing off one's wealth and power, which led to such things as the ancient Greek thinker

Archimedes inventing the first lift in Sicily, while French king Louis XV enjoyed a private lift in his palace in Versailles.

But it was only in the 19th century that it became possible for people to build skyscrapers that would really last. It all began in 1855 with the American Henry Bessemer who, working on an idea by

fellow American William Kelly, found a way to purify molten pig iron by blowing oxygen through it, thus cracking a way to make steel on the cheap. That got his countryman George Fuller pioneering a way to construct a tall building within a giant steel cage, which supported the building's weight completely. This was much more efficient and cheaper than the existing practice of having a building's walls bear its entire weight because load-bearing limited how high a building could be, as taller buildings needed more massive foundations.

But public confidence in high-rise buildings soared only after 1857, when Elisha Otis invented a safety brake for lifts, which prevented people from plummeting to their deaths if lift cables snapped.

Edward Glaeser on...

SINGAPORE

"It's a miracle. It's hard to think of any place that has achieved so much in so little time, with no natural resources and with so little downside."

PUBLIC HOUSING

"Singapore is perhaps the only country where public housing works at all. Elsewhere, such housing is almost uniformly a disaster because of crime and other social distress."

WHAT SINGAPORE COULD LEARN FROM ELSEWHERE

"I usually think of Singapore being the model for the world, not the world providing models for Singapore."

WHAT ABOUT SINGAPORE SURPRISED HIM

"That there were maintenance issues with your metropolitan rail system. While it is almost impossible to find a rail system that doesn't have maintenance problems in various forms, Singapore should have been able to move quickly enough on this."

INDIA

"I cannot say enough about the genius, energy and entrepreneurship of the Indian people. It just feels to me that they are so let down by a government that is unable to give them what they deserve."

CHINA

"Driving around a large Chinese city is not easy and I continue to think that the time for China to bring in the ERP is now, before 60 per cent of its people drive!"

WHY HIS THREE CHILDREN LOVE SINGAPORE MATHEMATICS TEXTBOOKS

"They learn all sorts of things they would not know otherwise, such as satay."

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