

Mr Lee 'showed foresight in urban development'

He ensured the bold plans were followed through, say speakers at conference

By **ELGIN TOH**
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MANY countries have a concept plan to guide physical development, but Singapore stands out in that it made bold plans early on and actually stuck to them.

That was largely because founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew had the foresight to insist on it, the men who worked with him to transform the city said yesterday.

However, speakers at the second conference this week to mark Mr Lee's 90th birthday also identified areas in Singapore's urban development where meticulous planning came with costs, or were inadequate in addressing problems.

One said it made inequality "invisible" and, therefore, kept it under the radar. Another noted that it could not change uncivil forms of behaviour like littering.

The meeting - dubbed "Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore" - was jointly organised by the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities and the Centre for Liveable Cities.

Speakers highlighted the importance of the 1971 Concept Plan - Singapore's first blueprint.

Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) chairman Peter Ho said this plan was "seminal" and that its "essential features are recognisable even today as the basic structure of Singapore".

These include: a nature reserve



(From left) Prof Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-large and chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities; Mr Liu Thai Ker, chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities; and Prof Chua Beng Huat, head of NUS' department of sociology, at the meeting dubbed "Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore" yesterday. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

in the island's centre, heavy industry in the west, a network of transport links, as well as sea and air ports placed where there is space for capacity upgrades.

As Mr Lee said in an interview last year: "There's a definite plan, and we stuck with the plan. There is no corruption and nobody can deviate from the plans."

Former chief executive of URA Liu Thai Ker, who advises cities around the world, including over 20 in China, said Singapore's plan had "teeth to be implemented".

Deliberate planning ensured public housing was available to

many, ethnically mixed and well connected.

But Professor Chua Beng Huat of National University of Singapore (NUS) also noted the move to mix all public housing types - one-room, three-room and above - so no ghetto developed had the unintended consequence of making inequality "invisible".

This, he said, resulted in a "neglect" of the "idea of poverty" until recently, when the inequality problem grew more pronounced.

Furthermore, these plans may be struggling to keep up with newer problems. Banyan Tree execu-

tive chairman Ho Kwon Ping said that the inability to integrate "sub-communities" in the population, such as blue-collar foreign workers living in dormitories, may turn into a social problem.

On plans for a clean and green Singapore, Gardens by the Bay chief executive Tan Wee Kiat described the effort Mr Lee put into parks and reserves. He noted how former prime minister Goh Chok Tong once remarked Singapore was the only country that read a gardening report in the Cabinet.

But these plans did not always accompany change in human be-

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PARK IN THE HEART OF ORCHARD

We have the magnificent Gardens by the Bay. We have the old, venerable Botanic Gardens. I would like to see a new park right in the middle of Orchard Road, to give back the meaning of the word "Orchard" Road. I think this could be done in the lower part of the Istana... and as far as I know, no one plays golf there any more.

- Mr Simon Tay, president of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and former chairman of the National Environment Agency

S'PORE THE REALISATION OF A VISION

If someone living in Singapore in the 1950s could have entered a time machine and travelled to the Singapore of today, he would have found the transformation of this island literally unbelievable. Today's Singapore is the realisation of a vision and the pragmatic response to a series of challenges that we faced. We faced a bleak future then. We were in the middle of a neighbourhood that was not too sympathetic towards our emergence as a nearby independent nation. To survive, we had to create a Singapore, a cleaner and more efficient Singapore, with quality infrastructure and good living conditions.

- Mr S R Nathan, former president of Singapore

ADOPT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACH

The kind of global city (Singapore) becomes could easily be characterised by many of the worst excesses of being urban, things like stress and inequality. I think having a... community-driven approach allows us to address some of them in a more realistic way. When you're trying to address things at a purely national level, what may not always happen are the neighbourhood-driven, kampung spirit sort of local identities, that can actually be just as powerful.

- Mr Aaron Maniam, director of the Institute of Policy Development at the Institute for Public Sector Leadership

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haviour. Mr Simon Tay, president of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, said that the city is clean because before dawn each day, "armies of cleaners" sweep up the litter Singaporeans leave.

Some plans were hard-nosed, even unpopular, but necessary.

Moving the airport from Paya Lebar to Changi when it was not yet clear there would be sufficient demand paid off, said Changi Airport Group chairman Liew Mun Leong. Selling public housing to recover costs made it sustainable, said Prof Chua.

Certificates of entitlement for

cars prevented traffic jams and, crucially, were done early enough, at a time when fewer could afford cars, noted URA's Mr Ho.

But "tough love" was not always appropriate. Mr Liew objected to how some pre-school space is tendered out in closed bids to the highest bidder to maximise land value, making it difficult for socially minded operators who want to charge low fees.

"Maybe we should have a more gracious use of our natural resources and land," he said.

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