

Seasoned Singapore envoy Chan Heng Chee wants to enrich learning about cities by leveraging on our strengths as a port, airport and garden city

# Standing tall despite having only standing room



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**I**F YOU are curious about what city life will be like in future, you can tap the thoughts of eminent thinkers this Friday at The Fullerton Hotel.

Infosys founder Narayana Murthy, who is India's Bill Gates, will talk on the warps and woofs of urbanisation with Harvard University don Edward Glaeser and revered Chinese architect Wang Shu, as well as Singapore's former Civil Service chief Peter Ho.

Singapore's Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee has brought them together – along with MRT chief Desmond Kuek and Mr Lee Tzu Yang, who chairs the Shell Companies here – to advise her seven-month-old Lee

Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, which is part of the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Prof Chan got the centre up and running in September last year, after 16 years as Singapore's envoy to the United States.

This political scientist had "heard a lot of buzz" about cities during her stint there, and when she was asked to chair the centre, which deals a lot with public policy, she thought it "challenging and fun" and "not so out of my field".

Recalling that in an interview last Thursday, she added: "Shortly after I came back to Singapore, I gathered quickly that there were other centres here that were doing the same thing as I was aspiring to... there was standing room only."

But then, she mused, having a "wealth of institutions" studying cities here was important to stoke the kind of friendly rivalry and collaborations that enriched learning.

Among those institutions is the

Ministry of National Development's Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC), which she has invited to co-host Friday's event with her.

On Sept 18, Prof Chan and CLC head Khoo Teng Chye will also host a one-day meet to mark the 90th birthday of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, independent Singapore's founding father, who personally oversaw the physical transformation of Singapore. "I do not think many Singaporeans understand his role in the physical shaping of the city," she said, "so we're going to discuss that."

Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh will moderate that meet, which will feature the people who helped build modern Singapore, such as Mr Khoo, and those who assess what they have built, such as sociologist Chua Beng Huat.

Noting that people tended to equate innovation with making a city more desirable to investors, Prof Chan wanted her colleagues to see innovation more broadly, as improving people's lives. "To be an innovative city, you've got to get people to accept the innova-



For Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee, having a "wealth of institutions" studying cities here is important to stoke the kind of friendly rivalry and collaborations that enrich learning. ST FILE PHOTO

tion by changing their behaviour... and how do you persuade people to change?

"So you're trying to peel layers off the onion to understand better what being innovative is like."

While she saw that it would be challenging for her colleagues to produce insights that would stand

out in a sea of already ongoing research on cities here, she has tried to put them on a firm footing by having them study various Asian sea port and airport cities, as well as the greening, ageing and evolution of cities in general.

With plans to run degree and executive education programmes

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– Singapore's Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee

too, Prof Chan is looking to hire more post-doctoral fellows.

Asked about what continues to impede efforts to improve living here, she said: "We are great at building infrastructure and we have good schools and health care, but sometimes, because of rapid change, things such as the transport system fall between the cracks."

"Fixing all that takes time... but change doesn't happen overnight. Even Singapore cannot do that."

Meet Mr Murthy, Prof Chan and other members of her international advisory panel from 10am to noon on Friday at The Fullerton Hotel.

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