

# Ex-envoy's focus now on urban issues

She chairs new think-tank that will hold roundtable on global cities' winning ways

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AFTER 16 years of building stronger and deeper ties with the United States, Singapore's former US ambassador Chan Heng Chee is turning her attention to the challenges of overcrowding in cities.

Professor Chan is chairman of a new think-tank, housed in the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), which opened officially in April. The Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, which she has been chairing since it opened last month, aims to use design driven by technology to create more people- and eco-friendly environs.

But already, she is plugged into the hottest debates on urbanisation as vice-chairman of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on In-

frastructure and Urban Development.

And tomorrow, the centre will hold an inaugural roundtable at the Four Seasons Hotel, homing in on the winning ways behind a thriving global city like Singapore.

Attending the one-day session are international bigwigs such as former British prime minister Tony Blair, whose policies refreshed London; Colombia's ex-president Alvaro Uribe, who transformed the drug lord-infested city of Medellin, such that it is bidding to host the 2018 Youth Olympics; and Mr Richard Daley, Chicago's longest-serving mayor.

"The centre is a start-up within a start-up," said Prof Chan, referring to the experiment that is SUTD itself.

With partners Massachusetts Institute of Technology and China's Zhejiang University, it is embarking on a fresh approach to learning by getting



Prof Chan says her chief challenge at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities is "to try to get everything going all at once" and that includes tomorrow's closed-door pow-wow. PHOTO: MARK CHEONG FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

its students from different disciplines to tackle practical problems together, as they would in the working world.

Prof Chan, also an Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said her chief challenge at the centre is "to try to get everything going all at once" and that includes tomorrow's closed-door pow-wow.

It arose from "spontaneous" talks between Global Cities Initiative (GCI) and Prof Chan, after a speech she gave at its forum in Los Angeles earlier this year. The GCI, which Mr Daley chairs, is run jointly by US think-tank Brookings Institution and JPMorgan Chase.

It is partnering the centre for the meeting which will also feature Singapore's pioneering urban planners.

They include chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities Liu Thai Ker and its executive director Khoo Teng Chye as well as Housing Board chief

executive Cheong Koon Hean.

Prof Chan hopes to keep the buzz from their exchanges going by bringing more leaders to Singapore to speak in the coming months, and publish a series of working papers on the challenges of urbanisation. She also plans to get research projects off the ground by drawing on SUTD's faculty and graduates, and hire four researchers.

Prof Chan said everything the centre undertakes will be "useable" and sensitive to Singapore's "political, social and economic parameters".

A PhD programme and tertiary courses are also in the works.

The ultimate plan, she added, is to create "a generation of students fluent in technology who can help Singapore partake in the next Industrial Revolution" which will be technology-driven and heavy on creativity.

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