

INTERVIEW:

Dr Liu Thai Ker



Dr Liu Thai Ker has been the Director of RSP Architects Planners & Engineers since 1992. He is also the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Centre for Liveable Cities in Singapore since 2008. As an architect-planner and later CEO of the Housing and Development Board (1969–1989) and Chief Planner-cum-CEO of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (1989–1992), Dr Liu was instrumental in the successful implementation of public housing and the formulation of a vision for urban development in Singapore. Dr Liu obtained his Bachelor of Architecture from the University of New South Wales in 1962, and a Master in City Planning from Yale University in 1965. In 1995, he was conferred Doctor of Science honoris cause by the University of New South Wales. His personal interests are in painting and calligraphy. He is married to Gretchen Gustafson, a writer, and has five children.

Through your remarkable career in Singapore's public housing and planning agencies, you have shaped this city's landscapes and lifestyles. In your current role as a consultant, you design cities and advise mayors from around the world. What are other cities most keen to learn from you, and why?

Dr Liu: Visitors to Singapore never fail to notice that our city is green, clean, pollution-free and visually neat. They soon enjoy the fact that our traffic flows and infrastructure works well. Our prosperous economy and the very good public housing developments further win them over. In our HDB estates, amenities for daily needs of the residents are well provided at convenient locations. This helps reduce the need for residents to travel outside their new town and save a great deal of time on the road. Indeed we have managed to create a quality environment, in the last five decades, despite the high density and fast pace of development. This is particularly meaningful to our visitors because most Asian cities experience very high density as well as immense pressure to develop quickly. Given more time, they also like the fact that our citizens are generally civilised and respect traffic rules. And there appear to be no policemen in the streets. I explain to them that we do indeed have policemen but their presence is very low key and quite friendly.

In terms of liveability and sustainability, the first few favourable impressions that our visitors gather, as mentioned earlier, are key contributors to the making of a quality urban environment. To achieve this, there are many other considerations that operate below the surface, unseen and often unknown to most people. For example, comprehensive infrastructure planning, protection of nature and ecologically sensitive areas, and energy conservation strategies and policies. Beyond meeting basic requirements, Singapore has given close attention to biodiversity. In the process of trying to be self-sufficient in drinking water supply, the Active, Beautiful and Clean Waters (ABC Waters) Programme was introduced, to combine function with liveability. Furthermore, our legal system has been highly rated. Our cultural programs are credible. In fact, the city is home to many creative designers, performers and writers.

The lesson, and therefore the message, which I often share is that the liveability, sustainable and unique beauty of a city do not depend on architecture alone. There are many other qualities that can powerfully shape the quality of a city.

Like all cities, Singapore is a work in progress, and it constantly seeks to renew and improve itself. What are the areas where Singapore can learn most from other cities? Can you give some examples that you would like Singapore to learn from?

Dr Liu: I believe we have done very well in laying a solid foundation to create an urban system and provide the fundamental needs of the society. But, for further refinement in the areas of regional character, elegance, dignity and subtlety, there is room for improvement.

What can Singapore learn from other cities? This issue may be dealt with in two parts: the hardware and the software aspects.

On the hardware side, we may learn from other cities on how they make better use of the local vegetation, trees, shrubs, and so on in their landscape. In the urban milieu, we can also learn from some of the cities on how to take advantage of the special climatic conditions to create urban spaces and architecture. For example, being in the sub-tropical climate zone, designers in Brisbane have developed an architecture typology that is uniquely Brisbane. In Singapore we would do well to continue our quest for the kind of architecture that is more tropical and Asian, while at the same time durable and classical in its aesthetic appeal. The quality will elevate our city to stand more firmly among the great cities of the world.

While we have done an excellent job in preserving and conserving the historical buildings and historical districts, I still hope that our government will conserve the last remaining Malay and Chinese *kampung* (village) in Pulau Ubin for the sake of posterity.

On the software side, we need to improve our spoken languages. We have a journey ahead to nurture artists, performers and writers telling our Singapore stories but with universal appeal. We need to help more Singaporeans, especially the next generation citizens, to look at problems and issues with greater intellectual depth and curiosity. A city is not made of bricks and mortar alone. The quality of its people and their achievements are just as important.

You've recently spoken about how you see Value, Science and Art as being at the heart of sustainable urbanisation. Can you explain this to us?

Dr Liu: The 21st century is the century of urbanisation in Asia. If Asian countries are to become urbanised like America, with a similar quality of urban environment, China will have to build the equivalent of three Americas, India five Americas, and Indonesia two Americas. That is assuming that they do their jobs well. If they don't, they may have to build and demolish and therefore build even more than 10 Americas. That will be a serious drain on world resources and may even cause further environmental deterioration of planet earth. For these reasons, I ask myself what are the few most critical factors, which might help Asian countries plan and develop their cities well, with minimum waste and little adverse effect on our globe. I can think of three main starting points, i.e. Value, Science and Art.

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If good, sound values of urban development can be embraced by top political leaders that will make a great start for urban planning and development. This is easier said than done. The political leaders in Asian cities tend to have a very strong say about how they want the city to be developed. Therefore, it is very important for these leaders to have a good understanding of what is good quality living in cities. In the old days, before the mid-20th century, when cities grew slowly and population sizes were generally quite small, the city elders tended to be people who had lived in cities for decades and even generations. Without being trained as city planners, they instinctively understood the culture of good urban life and therefore were generally able to make sound decisions for the growth of their cities. But in today's Asian cities, because of rapid and massive rural-urban migration, many urban dwellers are first generation rural people. Some of them only live in cities for only a few years, including some political leaders. With the best intentions in the world, they might not be able to grasp in such a short time what makes a good city and therefore may often make unfortunate choices. For example, many of them



enjoy the facilities. But it is not a simple task to assemble this giant urban machine. To begin with, a planner must know what parts are required for the machine to function perfectly. How big is each of the parts? How many of each type? How should the parts be fitted in relation to one another? To answer these questions, and assemble the parts, requires a great deal of research and experience, as well as a tremendous amount of stamina. No matter how arduous, as planners, we cannot afford to ignore any of these issues if we are committed to producing good master plans that work.

However a city is not just a functional machine or a heap of individual parts. There are aesthetic and cultural components as well. Many city leaders want their city to be unique and impressive. They wrongly believe that these can be achieved through sensational architecture design. I would like to suggest that rather than architecture, the two most powerful ingredients for uniqueness of a city are its:

- Natural environment (such as rivers, hills and wetlands)
- Historical buildings and historical districts

These two ingredients, if well protected, set one city apart from another. With regards to nature, no two rivers, lakes or hills look alike. In the old days, before the onset of globalisation, architecture design depended heavily on using local materials, assembled by local craftsmen to meet the challenges of the local climatic conditions (without access to modern technology) and dictation of local customs. The result - these buildings were very different from one village to another. In short, a city plan should first consider what to conserve in the natural environment and the historical districts. To do so, a city planner needs to have a good aesthetic sense and feeling for the land. In

tend to believe that sensational architecture is progress. But we know that a mere collection of sensational architecture does not make a good city, especially if the buildings are more grotesque than beautiful. To make a good city, we need to protect as well as develop. We need to build urban systems for infrastructure, roads, parks, commercial centres, etc. We need to consider functionality, liveability, and sustainability as well as beauty.

But our attention should also turn to urban planners themselves. Many experts believe that urban planning is mostly about urban culture. This is only partially true. There is a very serious and challenging aspect of urban planning, which requires a city to function perfectly like a Giant Urban Machine for Living. In fact, I like to think that a city is the largest man-made industrial design, like a giant car, a huge washing machine or a mammoth refrigerator. This urban machine must first function extremely effectively and efficiently. It must also be user-friendly, like all industrial design products. It must be easy for residents to use and

- 1 pg 4: Dr Liu Thai Ker. Photo courtesy of the National University of Singapore (NUS).
- 2 pg 5: Dr Liu in a project meeting in Kazan, Russia in April 2012. Photo courtesy of Dr Liu.
- 3 pg 6: Dr Liu in a project discussion with his staff at RSP and the traffic consultants. Photo courtesy of Dr Liu.
- 4 pg 7 above: Presentation of a project in Ningbo to the then Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew. Photo courtesy of Dr Liu.
- 5 pg 7 below: Dr Liu and Michael Fam, then Chairman of HDB, welcoming the late Deng Xiaoping at HDB's headquarters in 1978. Mr Deng, who was then the Chinese Senior Vice-Premier, was on a three-day visit to Singapore. Photo from MINISTRY OF INFORMATIONS, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore. Acc/Neg/PCD No. 19980002489/7

the process of creating the plan, he/she also needs to have high respect for the terrain of the city. In assembling the different components of the plans, he/she is expected to make every effort to fit them seamlessly into one another. I often urge that a city planner must learn to romance with the land.

Value, Science, Art - these are the three starting points which a planner will need to ponder seriously and work diligently in order to create a good city plan.

There seems an expert consensus that high-density cities are more sustainable than urban sprawl. Yet, many citizens around the world equate high-density living with a lower quality of life. You've stated your belief that high-density cities can be highly liveable. Why do you think this, and what do you think are some of the best examples of highly liveable, high-density environments in the world?

Dr Liu: Although not among the densest cities in the world, Singapore's density is clearly high. Despite that, in terms of the liveability quality, Singapore is ranked among the highest in the world. We have thus demonstrated that a city can have both high density and high liveability. New York City, being the second recipient of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, is another good example. Careful planning coupled with provision of public places and amenities are some of the key considerations for high liveability. There are also techniques required to help a city achieve high liveability. Cities like New York, Chicago and Singapore, whilst having very tall buildings they are moderated by parks and plazas, as well as an interspersal of low or mid-rise buildings. Among them are historical buildings for conservation. I am personally hopeful that given proper skills, we can still make



high-density cities liveable. In the case of Singapore, if our population needs to continue to grow, albeit at a slow pace, we have to face the reality and deal with it skilfully and confidently.

URBAN SOLUTIONS is aimed at mayors from around the world, as well as other urban experts and practitioners. If there is one message you can give to the leaders of the world's cities, what would it be?

Dr Liu: One message is that no matter how backward a city is, as long as its top leaders are committed to improving the city to world standards and learning the sound values of urban development, it is a good start. This needs to be complemented by an enlightened administrative system in which the leaders will focus mainly on important policy decisions, and the planners - assuming they are competent - must be given ample freedom and creative space to carry out their work.

Considering that the amount of urbanisation in the next few decades is going to be immense, it is the sacred duty of these leaders and their planners to plan the city properly, for the sake of collectively building a better world instead of a more urban world that brings diseases and problems to our planet.

