



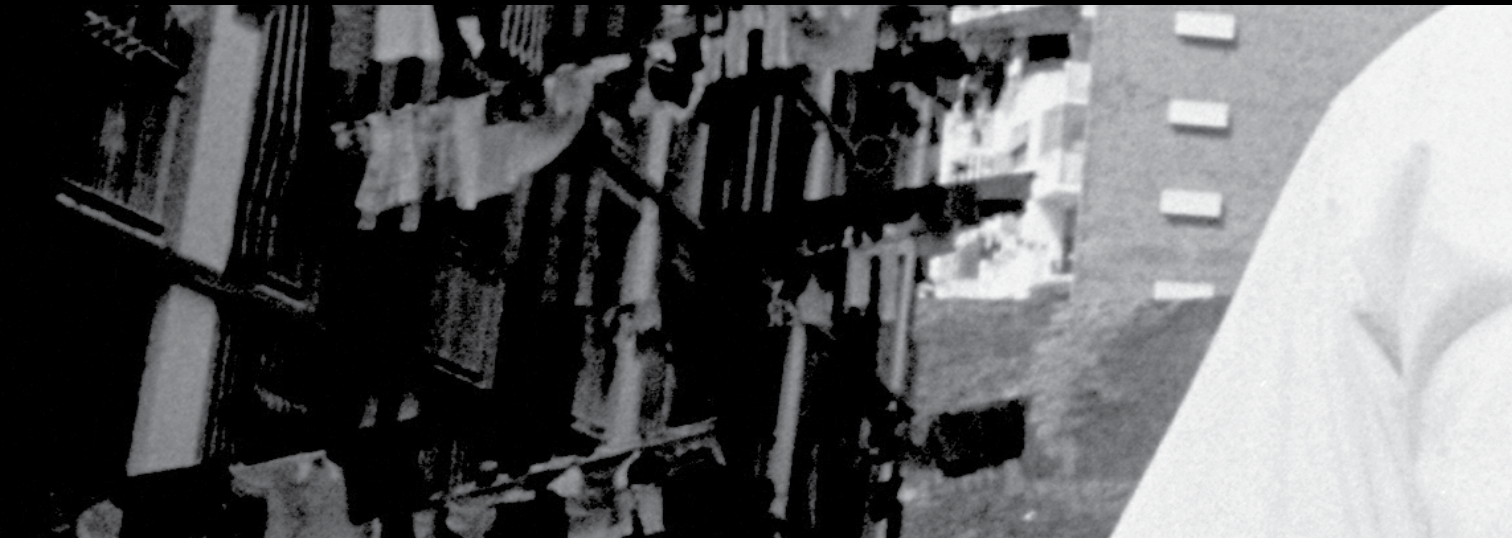
Lee Kuan Yew:

THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

Singapore

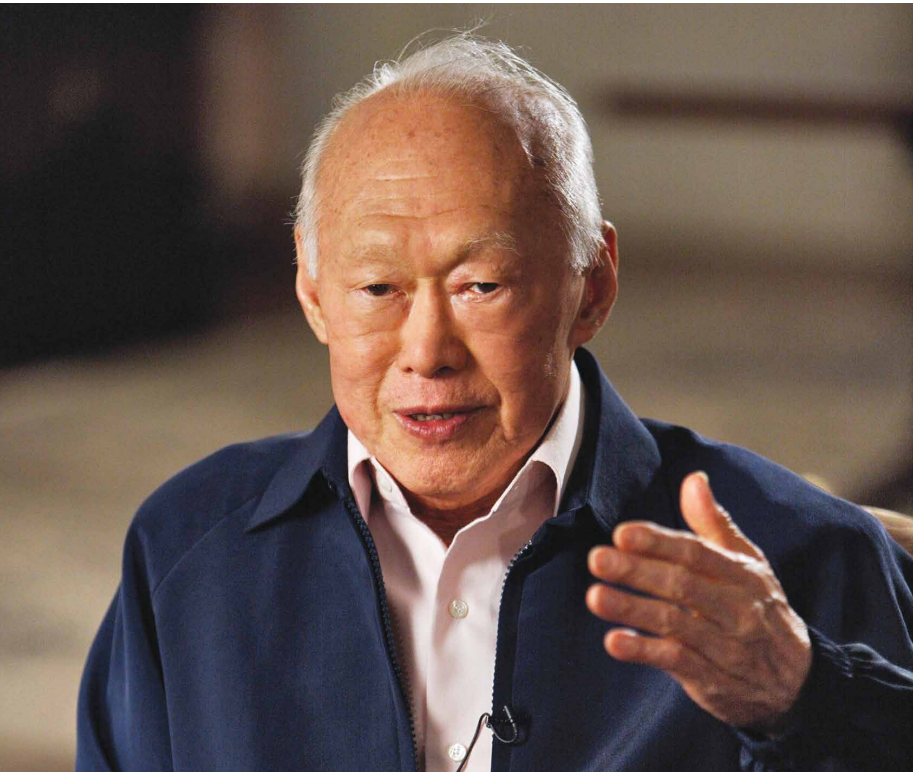


Policy makers from around the world are often intrigued by Singapore's transformation over the last half-century, much of this under the helm of the city-state's first Prime Minister, Mr **Lee Kuan Yew**. Chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities, Dr Liu Thai Ker, spoke with Mr Lee on 31 Aug 2012. Looking back, Mr Lee called the opportunity to redevelop the entire city the "chance of a lifetime." A Cambridge-trained lawyer, Mr Lee became Prime Minister in 1959 at the age of 36. He stepped down in 1990, but remained in cabinet until 2011 as Senior Minister and Minister Mentor. Mr Lee continues to be a Member of Parliament, in his original electoral ward of Tanjong Pagar.





Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at a public housing estate in 1965.



01 Mr Lee, then Minister Mentor, at an interview in 2005.

● **You are certainly the key architect for the way Singapore is today. A lot of developing cities want to know how we got started. How did we get ourselves on the right footing?**

I learnt from negative examples. Hong Kong has crowded, tall buildings, you seldom get sunshine in the streets, no greenery. So that's something we must avoid. I also watched how the French cities did their underground roads... and we had teams going out along the Equator to collect various plants that will thrive in Singapore so we would have variety... We are not the only city. There are thousands of other cities and we can see the mistakes they have made. We can also see what they have done right.

● **What do you think were the critical success factors for Singapore?**

First, you must have an efficient administration... It cannot be one-off. It has to be regularly done and there must be an organisation or several organisations that sees to this. We started rebuilding Singapore, and the two big organisations were the Housing & Development Board (HDB), and later on the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)... [In contrast, China faces problems with resettlement] because there is no special agency that will build the new houses and coordinate it with the road builders and the tree planters. I think URA and HDB, plus the Garden City Action Committee, played crucial roles.

Second, it must be a level playing field for all... You must have a society that people believe is fair. We have a heterogeneous population – Chinese, Indians, Malays and others – so policy is colour-blind... A crucial thing is not to allow clever developers to corner large pieces of land at critical areas, waiting for the development. We forestalled them to prevent exploitation of fellow men.¹

Third, it must be corruption-free... The basis for that was a non-corrupt bureaucracy, especially the police, heavy penalties for corruption, rigorous enforcement of the law. Today, people accept it as a fact – you've just got to obey the law... There are no haphazard

buildings, like in Bangkok, Jakarta or even Kuala Lumpur, where you've got two tall towers and then squatters all around. There's a definite plan, and we stuck with the plan. There is no corruption and nobody can deviate from the plans. A building that is not in accordance with the plan cannot be allowed.

Those were the basics, and that's how we started.

● **Were there special opportunities that helped Singapore to be developed?**

We became a hub because of the convenience. For shipping, you have to pass Singapore, it's the southernmost point [of continental Asia]... We were poor and we were underdeveloped, so we had to work hard... The chance [to industrialise] came with the British military withdrawal in 1971. They surrendered to us the land they were holding. So we had the Bases Conversion Unit, with [former finance minister] Hon Sui Sen as the head. He knew all about land and we entrusted to him the work of planning, where to build what on these vacant spaces.



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● **What were the key obstacles that you faced at different stages?**

The key obstacles were a lack of land, and the high cost of compensation for coastal land. So we passed a law that said that when government acquires coastal land, we compensate without taking into account that it's by the seaside.² The market was at an all-time low at that time and so we acquired large tracts of land. They were lying fallow – investors were waiting for the climate to change so they could manipulate and sell it at a big price. We just acquired as many large pieces of land as possible and claimed the right to reclaim coastal areas... Jurong was a swamp, which we reclaimed. I think there's a picture of me and Hon Sui Sen in Jurong and I was pointing towards it...

¹ State land was sold with a condition that it be developed in a specified period, to discourage speculation.

² The Foreshores Act was amended in 1964 to end compensation to landowners for their loss of sea frontage.

So the coastline changed and that accounts for Paya Lebar. We abandoned Paya Lebar as the main airport in favour of Changi, and with the East Coast Parkway you can get from the airport to the city in 20 minutes. These are basic infrastructures. Unless they are in place, it's very difficult to overcome the obstacles, so they must be in place early. You must have the infrastructure right and that was made possible because we reclaimed coastal land without paying high compensation and so we had a brand-new airport, and a brand-new East Coast Parkway.

● **I feel that land acquisition is an example of our very creative, farsighted, unconventional legal system, which is one of the key factors to our success story.³ What would you say about that?**

I anticipated these problems. At the low point [in the property market], people gave up on Singapore and said, “this place is going down the drain” and property prices went down. So I pushed this legislation through. It's probably because of my legal background that I wanted to get the legality of what we were

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³ The 1966 Land Acquisition Act lets government pay compensation for land it acquires based on current value and zoning. Landowners may question the compensation value, but not the acquisition itself.

doing properly entrenched, so that it cannot be varied and changed for fickle reasons.

You've got to look ahead and forestall or preempt the problems. I mean, if we did not introduce the Certificate of Entitlement [a vehicle quota system, begun in 1990] at a time when the public could not afford cars as much, you could not do it now without a big row – because you can't get people to give up their cars. But we did it when the cars were few. Today, it's accepted as a fact. If you want the roads to be free, you've got to pay for the right to use the road.

● **What are your current concerns about the urban development of Singapore?**

I think the large influx of immigrants has disturbed the population. But if you don't bring in these people, at the rate we're reproducing ourselves, we will cease to exist in two generations. So you've got to balance this rate of inflow and the discomfort of seeing unfamiliar faces in crowded trains and buses. So we must have the immigrants to keep the place young, make the economy grow and look after the old. They are willing to sacrifice and work hard, they want to succeed. So they set the pace and the competition.



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● **In terms of urban development, what are you most pleased with?**

I'm pleased that we redeveloped the city when there was a chance to do it. We knocked down Outram Prison in the west, we started from Changi in the east and worked towards the centre and rebuilt the whole city. And the big heritage sites in the city, like Fullerton Building, we left those alone. That was a chance of a lifetime.

01 The conserved Fullerton Building.

02 Mr Lee on a constituency tour in the 1950s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



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01 Land was reserved for planting trees along the East Coast Parkway, a highway linking the city and airport, built on land reclaimed from the sea.

● Lee Kuan Yew on the ingredients of a good city:

Safety:

Create a sense of safety, a sense of feeling comfortable in this place. It is no use having good surroundings, if you are afraid all the time. I went to New York's Central Park, and you felt unsafe... The police force must be effective, not visible. We have Neighbourhood Police Posts – police who know the people in that neighbourhood, so they know when strangers come in. It is easier to prevent people from going to another place where they are not recognised and committing crimes, because if you are not from the neighbourhood and you come in, you are noticed... Today, a woman can go jogging at three o'clock in the morning, and she would not be raped. It is an essential part of a liveable city.

Cleanliness:

I used to see bushes covered with soot. So I said follow European emission standards. Lorries from Malaysia cannot come in unless they comply with our pollution standards... And consideration for neighbours – [avoid creating] noise, burning joss papers and having ash floating all over the place, upsetting people. Do not do to your neighbours what you don't want others to do to you... I went to Osaka and I could smell chemical factories. I said no, we mustn't allow that. We are a small island; unless we protect ourselves by placing the right industries in the right places – taking into consideration the prevailing winds – we will despoil the city. This could easily have become an unliveable city.

Mobility:

The city must move – transportation... I could see traffic jamming up and making travel impossible. Bangkok was an example where you had to have pot full of pee because you may be stuck in the traffic for one or more hours. The way to stop it is to limit the number of cars, so that they can flow at least at 25 miles per hour, and to improve public transport. We debated between buses and rail. I was in favour of buses because it is cheaper. But we were convinced in the end that although the cost would be high, [rail] will remove the traffic from the roads and keep buses flowing.



There must be a sense of equity, that everybody owns a part of the city

Spaciousness:

Hong Kong has crowded, tall buildings, you seldom get sunshine in the streets, no greenery... So I said alright, from west to east and east to west, we'll knock down the whole city and rebuild it. Unlike Hong Kong, we spread out throughout the island, so it's not crowded and we've got the space for greenery... For instance, while building the East Coast Parkway, they were giving enough space for planting trees along the side... Singapore must retain the sense of space. We're going to build taller buildings, but we can't build them closely together. There must be a sense of playing fields, recreational areas for children and old people – a sense that this is a full country with all the facilities which you expect of a large country but in a confined space... That is a problem which the present government must tackle – [deciding] how much population we can bear.

Connectivity:

We became a hub because of the convenience... For aircrafts, it's the efficiency of the airport and the interconnectivity. If air passengers have to stopover, they prefer Singapore. We have coaches to take them to see the city free of charge and they can stay one or two days in convenient hotels near the city. We made it comfortable and easy for the traveller and you can have a shower at the airport... Most important is connectivity. Many airlines fly to Singapore direct from other cities – that gives us an enormous advantage. If they move to Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta, then the headquarters of these companies will move... We must make it attractive for corporations that want to base here.

Equity:

There must be a sense of equity, that everybody owns a part of the city... I could see that wage-earners in Taipei and South Korea did not own their homes, they had to pay heavy rents. I aimed for a home for every family, so a large portion of their salaries need not go into paying for rents. They own it, an asset which will increase in value as the city grows... A homeowner keeps the public space around his home clean. The person who rents doesn't care, he just looks after the inside. So I said, let everybody own a home, their value goes up if the place is clean and beautiful on the outside and inside. We were asking people to get their sons to do National Service, to learn to fight for the country. Unless you give them a home, why should they be fighting?