



INTERVIEW

IN CONVERSATION WITH
HENG SWEE KEAT

Emerging Stronger in a Post-COVID World

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, who is also the Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies, shares how Singapore is charting a new post-COVID path through innovation, sustainable development and collaboration between cities.



| *Image: Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore*



The pandemic has given urban planners a window of opportunity to rethink fundamental planning assumptions and mindsets.



The Urban Park in Guoco Tower is an example of how Singapore is transforming its CBD into a vibrant space round the clock.
Image: GuocoLand

It has been more than a year since COVID-19 first emerged, bringing about unprecedented challenges and changes for the world and for Singapore. What are some lessons that Singapore and cities can learn from the past year to be ready for future disruptions?

The pandemic has not spared any corner of the world. The high population densities and concentration of activities in cities seemed to make them more vulnerable in particular. But the picture is a complex one—the virus has had an uneven impact across cities, and sometimes even within the same city. It is not just population densities that mattered, but also factors such as access to quality healthcare, trust in government, and whether people complied with mask-wearing and safe management measures.

But the pandemic has also given urban planners a window of opportunity to rethink some fundamental planning assumptions and mindsets, and to consider how to build more resilient cities going forward.



First, the pandemic has unlocked new possibilities in planning cities. One example is the role of Central Business Districts (CBDs). In most cities, people generally live outside the CBDs, and commute to and from work. But during the pandemic, it was surreal to see CBDs virtually empty. Digital technology made remote work not just possible, but more productive for some. Even after COVID-19, remote working is unlikely to disappear, though some jobs will still require a physical presence. Many cities are now considering what this means for the design of CBDs, homes, and public transport networks. Singapore is fortunate to have a head-start. Even before COVID-19, our urban planners were already studying how to transform the CBD into vibrant mixed-use neighbourhoods with more residences. We have

New generation neighbourhood centres like Oasis Terraces (right) provide surrounding housing districts a variety of social, communal and recreational facilities.

Image: Housing & Development Board, Singapore



also been building a “polycentric” city, with regional centres to bring work closer to homes. COVID-19 has given fresh impetus to these earlier efforts. We must also continue to invest in our digital infrastructure, including 5G technology, and integrate them in our planning.

Second, COVID-19 has highlighted the need to design cities that are resilient and adaptable for future pandemics. Cities have focused on optimising the lived experience of residents during normal times. But they have generally not paid the same attention to how cities can be resilient to crises like pandemics. How do we enable people to continue their daily lives with minimal disruption, even with limitations to physical movement? One lesson from the lockdowns worldwide is the importance of being able to access amenities without having to travel too far. Singapore’s public housing agency, the Housing & Development Board (HDB), has done a good job in carefully designing our public housing towns to have social and recreational amenities that are easily accessible. Looking ahead, there is also an opportunity to provide more coworking spaces for those whose homes might not be conducive—for example, in commercial or community spaces.

Community clubs around the island have been repurposed as vaccination centres.

Image: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.





With overseas travel on hold, Singaporeans are flocking to nature areas such as Pulau Ubin for a quick getaway. Image: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

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Another important aspect of building resilience is to provide buffers in our urban fabric to enable rapid responses to crises. The pandemic highlighted the value of being able to make use of temporary and flexible spaces in the city, to meet unexpected needs. We have converted major meeting and convention venues into temporary care facilities or accommodations. And we have also repurposed community spaces into vaccination centres. It is important to remain dynamic—while the challenge today is COVID-19, the next time round, it could be a different type of pandemic or challenge.

Third, the pandemic has shown the value of integrating green spaces into urban landscapes. With overseas travel on hold during COVID-19 and activities restricted due to safe management measures, Singaporeans have been exploring our parks and nature reserves more than ever. Footfall has increased significantly. For example, Pulau Ubin, which I visited during my year-end break last year, saw a sharp increase in visitorship, with twice as many visitors compared to the same period before COVID-19. In a small city-state like ours, it will not be easy to balance development needs with the desire to preserve our green areas. But this must be our ambition. This is why we have plans for every household to be within a 10-minute walk from a park by 2030. We are also planning to add 1,000 hectares (10 km²) of green spaces by 2035. Health and wellness should be a core objective when designing cities.



While we will not move the needle globally, we must do our part with the global community, because climate change is an existential threat for everyone.



More broadly, beyond COVID-19, it is important for urban planners to master emerging trends. There will be other disruptive forces—whether it is changing technological trends, shifting consumer behaviour, or ageing demographics. Understanding the implications of these trends will be critical in shaping planning. After all, what urban planners do will have a lasting impact for many decades.

Many have spoken of a “green recovery” as key to building back stronger after the pandemic. Singapore is already taking decisive action with the recently announced Singapore Green Plan 2030. Why is it critical for Singapore to embark on this plan now?

Sustainable development is not new to Singapore. Singapore’s first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew drove the vision of a Garden City in our early years, even before “green” was fashionable. Our founding generation transformed Singapore from a polluted backwater with mucky rivers in 1965, to one of the cleanest and greenest cities in the world.

And we have not stopped there. We built Gardens by the Bay, a green lung over 100 hectares (1 km²) in size right in the heart of our city. The Botanic Gardens is another good example. We added 18 hectares (0.18 km²) with



Heng Swee Keat and Minister for National Development Desmond Lee plant a Cengal tree at the opening of the Singapore Botanic Gardens Gallop Extension in March 2021.

Image: Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore

the Tyersall-Gallop Core, bringing the total size of the Botanic Gardens to 82 hectares (0.82 km²). I recently opened new features at the Gallop Extension, which will provide even more outdoor spaces for Singaporeans to enjoy.

Why is it critical for Singapore to take even more decisive action at this point, through the Singapore Green Plan? After all, our emissions are 0.1% of global emissions. But while we will not move the needle globally, we must do our part for the global community, because all of humanity has just this one Earth, and climate change is an existential threat for everyone.

For example, as a low-lying city-state, many parts of Singapore will be submerged by the end of the century if we do nothing. We must therefore build on our earlier efforts to do even more. So I am glad that global momentum on climate change is rising, especially with the US re-joining the Paris Accord, and President Joe Biden convening a meeting of world leaders.

Low-lying countries like Singapore are vulnerable to flash floods caused by more frequent bouts of intense rainfall and rising sea levels caused by climate change.

Image: ROADS.sg

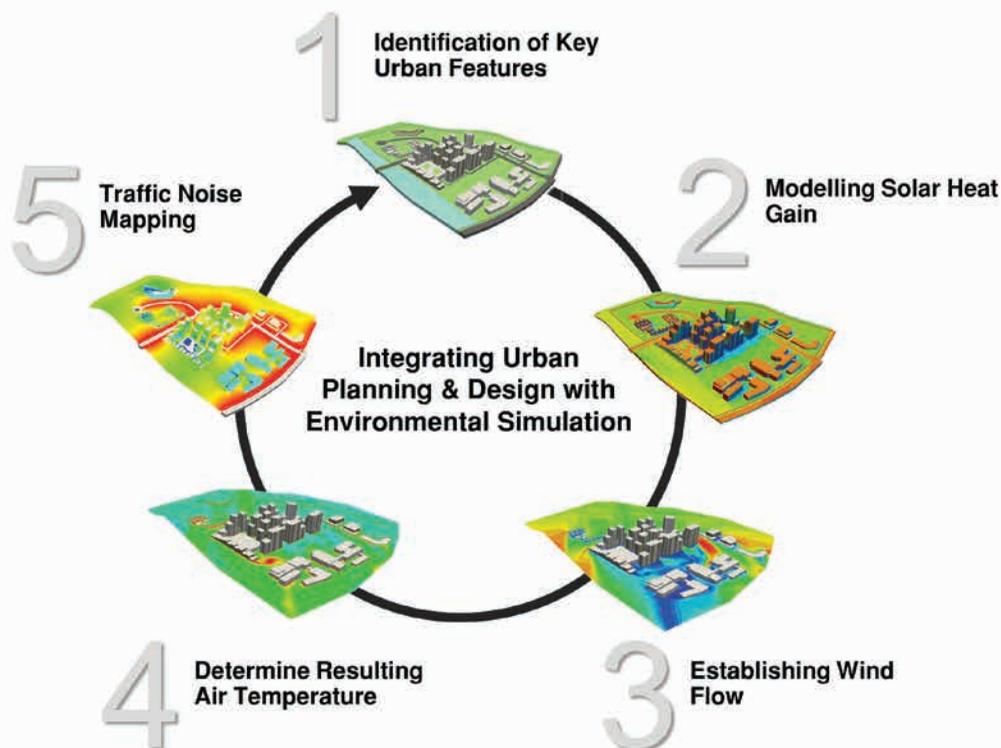


The Green Economy is one of the key initiatives under the Singapore Green Plan. How does Singapore envision long-term sustainability as a new engine for economic growth?

There are many exciting opportunities for businesses and workers in the areas of “green growth”—such as in renewable energy and the circular economy. “Green growth” can be an economic driver for Singapore and the region in the decades ahead, as more people take sustainability seriously.

Singapore aims to halve peak emissions by 2050, and achieve net zero emissions as soon as viable in the second half of the century. Underpinning these efforts is a major push towards research and innovation. Last year, I announced our S\$25 billion Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2025 plan, with urban solutions and sustainability as a major focus.

Integrated Environmental Modeller (IEM)



The Integrated Environmental Modeller (IEM) helps urban planners optimise thermal comfort when designing new towns.
Image: Housing & Development Board, Singapore

What are some of these urban solutions that will be implemented for Singapore to meet the ambitious targets that have been set for the next 10 years?

There are many, and it would not be possible to list all of them. One example is the Integrated Environmental Modeller, which helps urban planners maximise thermal comfort for residents, to combat the Urban Heat Island Effect. We have used this to design Tengah, our newest public housing estate. Another example is how we are making a bigger push on clean energy. Within the decade, we will deploy at least 2 gigawatts of solar power—five times that of today. Given our small size and high population density, we will need creative solutions, such as applied photovoltaics on building facades, and floating solar panels on our reservoirs and offshore waters.

We have an important advantage—our small size allows us to be nimble and agile. Solutions that are worth scaling up can be done quickly across our island. We should continue to innovate and pilot new urban solutions. If we can do these well in Singapore, they could be of use to other cities.

How is an active citizenry critical in the fight against climate change and in building strong communities? How can the government better support their people in building a sustainable and resilient society, and vice versa?



This is the spirit of Singapore Together. It is all of us sharing a common purpose, and doing our part to make a difference.



To build a sustainable and resilient society, everyone has a role to play.

What can individuals do? One important way we can all contribute is by generating less waste. At the current rate, Semakau Landfill—Singapore's only landfill—will run out of space in 15 years! So we must all make a determined effort to “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle”. Each of us would also need to make some sacrifices and trade-offs, such as by reducing our energy consumption or paying more for certain products. While our individual efforts may seem small, small acts by everyone can together make a big difference.

Ground-up efforts from the community are also critical. For example, in my constituency in East Coast, residents have stepped forward to volunteer as “Green Ambassadors”. Such efforts are helpful not just to drive the green agenda, but also foster a sense of community through a shared purpose.

Businesses also have a role to play. A good start is the Alliances for Action, which we launched in June last year. These are multi-stakeholder partnerships, led by industry, with a strong bias towards action and solving



Solar panels are being deployed progressively in HDB towns as Singapore moves towards clean energy.
Image: Sunseap Group

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real-world problems. One of the Alliances focuses on environmental sustainability. Southeast Asia has tremendous potential to contribute to green growth, especially through nature-based solutions for carbon removal. This Alliance seeks to develop a marketplace for high-quality carbon credits, and provide technology-enabled verification systems for carbon solutions. This can catalyse investment in carbon solutions in the region.

In Singapore, the government is committed to working with all Singaporeans on this journey. We value citizens' ideas, feedback and partnership. We will continue to make significant investments in science and technology, and we will take a science-based approach and be upfront in explaining the challenges.

Climate change is a complex issue. To tackle this well, we must put together our collective wits and will, and rally different stakeholders—businesses, community groups and individuals—to make a difference. This is the spirit of Singapore Together. It is all of us sharing a common purpose, and doing our part to make a difference.



| The Emerging Stronger Conversations gave Singaporeans a chance to reflect on COVID-19 and share their views with the government on creating a more caring and resilient society.
 Image: Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore



The WCS Mayors Forum 2018 convened 124 Mayors from 119 cities to discuss how liveable cities could learn and adopt new technologies, and find more funding sources to finance infrastructure projects.

Image: Centre for Liveable Cities

In the face of rising protectionism around the world, you have spoken of the importance of continued global cooperation as the world seeks to rebuild after the pandemic. What is the role of cities in achieving this?

Cities have flourished because they are key nodes of economic, cultural, and social activities. Much of the world's economic activity is concentrated in cities, as the economies of agglomeration are a powerful driving force for urbanisation. People will continue to be drawn to cities to pursue their aspirations.

As the world seeks to rebuild after the pandemic, cities, as key nodes of ideas and innovation, will be more important than ever. Singapore must build deep links with vibrant cities, to collaborate and tackle complex challenges, such as COVID-19, which respect no borders.

The challenge of climate change is instructive. Cities today generate 70% of global carbon emissions and consume two-thirds of the world's energy. To tackle this challenge, cities must work together to deepen their innovative capacities. I am hopeful that we can find good solutions.

As a Global-Asia node, Singapore is well positioned to foster collaborations and partnerships across countries. The World Cities Summit is an excellent example of this. It is encouraging to see thought leaders and experts from cities all over the world come together, to share their experiences and ideas. We should continue to bring together ideas to confront our common challenges, share solutions, and forge new partnerships. 🌐