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Subject: (Embargoed) Speech by Mr Mah Bow Tan, 22 Apr 2000, 8pm

# *Singapore Government*

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**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT, AT THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF  
ARCHITECTS' (SIA) ANNUAL DINNER ON SATURDAY, 22 APR 2000  
AT 8.00 PM AT THE SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION  
& EXHIBITION CENTRE**

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### **Towards Architectural Excellence**

Mr Edward Wong,  
President, Singapore Institute of Architects;  
Mr Tham Tuck Cheong,  
Immediate Past President,  
Council Members and Members of SIA;  
Ladies & Gentlemen:

1 Last year, URA published a book called "home.work.play". It looked at the history of planning in Singapore, the present Singapore and what the future

holds in terms of housing, work places and leisure facilities. In this book, many young Singaporeans were asked what they would like to see in our future city.

2 Some wanted more places for arts and music, others wanted more places for people to meet and exchange ideas. Some were very down to earth. They wanted more places for food, shopping and leisure. One student said she wanted better designed buildings. Another simply said he would like more covered walkways. Will all their wishes come true?

3 The answer to this question lies to a large extent on the people gathered in this ballroom this evening. As architects, designers, planners, developers, building professionals, and most of all, as Singaporeans, we all have to ask ourselves this question: what kind of Singapore do we want to live in?

4 This in essence is what the current Concept Plan Review is all about. The Concept Plan is a strategic land use blueprint to help us transform Singapore into a thriving world class city in this 21st century. We want to build a city which all Singaporeans will be proud to call home and which will attract foreigners to live, work and even settle here.

5 To realise this goal, planners and professionals, including architects, engineers, designers and builders, must play complementary roles. It is the responsibility of the planners to grapple with the constraints and challenges of limited space to create a vibrant yet liveable city that caters to the needs of an ever growing population while maintaining a high quality living environment. It is the job of the professionals within the parameters set out by planners to exercise skill and creativity to produce quality buildings and an exciting urban landscape. There must be constant dialogue between the two, so that each knows the challenges and problems faced by the other, and each challenges the other to do better.

6 Planners must ask the architects: are we getting the quality of buildings that we deserve? Architects must ask the planners: are our rules and regulations stifling initiative and innovation? Through this constant cross-talk and exchange of ideas must emerge a more healthy respect and appreciation for each others' respective roles, as well as changes in the way we plan, design and build our city.

7 I am not suggesting in any way that we have stood still. Indeed, over the years, as our architectural profession has matured, so have the design of our

buildings improved. Our planners have been gradually relaxing and reducing controls to make better use of land and allow more room for creativity in design, as a result of regular consultations with the profession and the industry.

8 The latest effort by URA in this aspect, which I am pleased to announce, is to increase the storey heights allowed for flats and condominiums under the standard plot ratio typologies. With this revision, developers will be able to free more ground space for communal facilities or landscaping. In some small sites, it might be difficult to achieve the GPR or gross plot ratio within the coverage control. This revision will remove this problem in all unconstrained sites (URA will release more details later tonight.)

9 But the relaxation of rules alone is not enough. For Singapore to become a truly unique city with its own character and charm, we must explore new ways to encourage developments that are distinctive and aesthetic, yet practical and buildable.

#### URA review

10 How can we foster architectural excellence and creativity in the building industry? URA recently embarked on a review of its current practises concerning urban design and after consultation with relevant industry professionals, has decided to make some changes. One, it will dissolve the Architectural Design Panel and replace it with a Design Waiver Committee. Two, it will establish and publish urban design guidelines for the key districts. Three, it will set up an International Advisory Panel. Four, URA will identify selected development projects for which design competitions will be held. Let me elaborate.

#### Dissolution of Architectural Design Panel

11 The Architectural Design Panel or ADP played a critical role in the early days of Singapore's development. It ensured that buildings along important roads were well-designed. This was especially important in the 70s and 80s when urban renewal was moving at breakneck pace, and the character of the main streets within the CBD was yet to be established.

12 As you will appreciate, it is no mean feat to strike a successful balance between form and function. The ADP, thanks to the contributions of those who served on the panel, including many who are present this evening, has done a good job. This is apparent from the favourable comments about our city by many visitors. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the

contribution of all ADP members, past and present, to the development of our urban landscape.

13 However, with the maturing of our architectural profession and a better appreciation of the value of good design, there is a general consensus that the panel may no longer be necessary. URA will therefore dissolve the ADP. -

#### Urban design guidelines for key districts

14 Next, design guidelines. To maintain the distinctiveness of key areas of our city, urban design controls are necessary. Key districts for which urban design guidelines will be published include the Civic District, Singapore River, the Golden Shoe area, the Bugis-Selegie Entertainment Area and Orchard Road. URA will work with the private sector in drawing up these guidelines, which will be made public. Outside these areas, there will only be minimal design guidelines.

15 URA will also set up a Design Waiver Committee to evaluate cases of high quality design that propose to vary from these guidelines. Good designs at suitable locations will be given leeway to deviate from the norm. URA will release details on this later.

#### International Advisory Panel

16 As we seek to develop a world-class city, URA will be establishing an International Advisory Panel to obtain a wide range of alternative views on and to keep up with the very latest in good planning and urban design.

17 This panel will comprise eminent experts from selected global cities who will meet periodically to share their views and ideas on URA's planning strategies. It will also suggest how we can improve urban design and promote innovative architecture. Our own professionals will also benefit from the discussions organised in conjunction with the meeting of this panel.

#### International design competitions to source for ideas

18 Finally, URA will identify some landmark sites which will be suitable for the development of special buildings which can make a difference to our cityscape. Will we see buildings like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, or the Commerzbank HQ in Frankfurt or the Bank of China building in HK? To create such distinctive buildings at these landmark sites, URA will tap all possible sources of ideas including holding international design competitions.

19 Some of these sites can be put up for sale by tender, with feasible urban design ideas gleaned from such competitions. I hope that our very own architectural talent will participate actively in such design competitions when the time comes.

### *Towards Greater Buildability*

20 I have spoken thus far about the need for good design. But, as every architect will admit, good designs are not only creative, they must also be practicable. As you are all aware, effective January next year, the Building and Construction Authority will implement legislation requiring building designs to achieve a minimum buildability score.

21 In preparing for this legislation, BCA has actively sought participation and feedback from SIA, as well as from other industry players and professional bodies. Their views and concerns will be taken into consideration. Details of the legislation will be announced next week, at the Forum on Legislation of Buildable Design.

22 Let me remind you that the aim of this legislation is to raise productivity and improve quality in the construction industry, an objective which is shared by all gathered here. I therefore urge the architectural community to respond positively to the new legislation.

23 BCA organises regular training sessions on the Buildable Design Appraisal System at its training institute. BCA has also introduced a trial implementation exercise which is open to all Qualified Persons. While most of the bigger firms have sent their architects for training, many of the smaller companies have not. I urge SIA to work closely with BCA to reach out to these smaller firms.

### *Conclusion*

24 Finally, back to the question: what kind of Singapore do we want? How do we achieve our dreams? Govt will continue to keep our ears and minds open to what you, the professionals, have to say. By working together, we can shape Singapore into an even more beautiful and distinctive city of excellence.

Thank you.

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