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SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS, ST C053 AT THE SINGAPONE INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS ANNUAL DINNER AT THE MANDARIN BALLROOM, MANDARIN HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 7 NOVEMBER 1980 AT 7.30 FM

During my recent visit to cities in Europe, Canada and the United States, I took the opportunity to observe how architectural forms had developed in the West amidst new ideas and technological innovations in urban development and transportation. Although the main purpose of my visit to these places was to gain first-hand knowledge of how these cities cope with their transportation problems, I was equally fascinated by how their urban planners and architects go about satisfying the ever changing needs and demands of a modern city. It is interesting to observe and examine how changes in modes of transportation affect architectural form and urban design.

Nost of my observations are confined to commercial developments that take place in and around the mass transit stations. I could not fail to observe that it was in fact in these areas, around mass transit stations, that intensive commercial development takes place. One interesting result of all this is the extent to which pedestrian mall and the atrium have been developed.

In the days when on-street parking was wide-spread, the most prominent shops faced the main roads, displaying their goods in wide and open windows for all to see. And there was plenty to see for pedestrians walking on five-footways all along the main shopping roads. To a large extent it can be said that the road influenced the form and pattern of commercial development in the cities. The road was then, and still is in many places, the centre of human activity.

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All this is chenging now with the development of large shopping complexes, office buildings and hotels, helped in no small way by the advent of mass transit systems, whether by buses or trains. With the underground MRT stations or car parks. pedestrians circulate within the building. The internal circulation space within building complexes and street blocks that has been created lends itself to new kinds of architectural forms and designs. The internal space has now become the new centre of human activity. Many shop windows now in fact face inwards. The Peachtree Centre in Atlanta and the Embarcadero in San Francisco embody this new space concept with excellent results. This inside-cut space design has created a new urban environment free from air and noise pollution and is safe from vehicular traffic. Although our architecture has progressed somewhat in this direction. it has not developed on a wide chough scale in Singapore. Perhaps the rail-based MRT, if and when it is built, will be the catalyst for such developments.

This leads us to the interesting question of whether commercial development in Singapore should be intensified in urban centres along certain fixed corridors which would also be served by the proposed MRT. This is the practice in most large cities and I suppose they have several good reasons for doing so. The main advantage, of course, is that people can commute quickly and reliably to and from these large activity centres. Each contre can be made to be as self-contained as possible. The commuter having made the journey to these centres will then be able to perform as many activities as possible without having to commute to other places. The other advantage is that the owner and operator of the MRT system will be able to cream off some revenue from these developments to finance his own operations. Since the intense activity in the area is a result of his trains bringing people into the area, it is only fair that he gets a share of the profits. This type of arrangement has been developed to a fine degree in Hongkong where it has been estimated that the MRT Corporation will get about HK\$1.5 billion from property development. It costs them HK\$5.8 billion to build the first stage of the MRT.

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On the other hand, there are also some people who see the danger of developing a city along fixed and inflexible corridors. Advocates of this school of thought point towards the rapid strides in the micro processor technology making electronic communications readily available at our finger tips. Nith a sophisticated and extensive system of telecommunications linking television monitors to computers they believe that man of tomorrow need not travel to his work. Work will travel to him instead. Mork can be done at home with television monitors linking him to his fellow workers and with access to a central computer storing all the information required for his work. This would lead to some reduction in travel during the peak hours. Even the traditional weekend shopping trip may no longer be necessary. Goods can be bought through the television monitor which will be linked to all major shopping centres. Having chosen the goods he wants to buy, his shopping bill will be automatically accounted for in his bank account.

If indeed all this takes place and on a large scale. it may be the very answer to our traffic congestion problem. Mhether it will take place fast enough and solve our congestion problem in the 1990s is difficult to say today. When it does take place, however, it will have a profound influence on the urban structure of our cities. It will have an even greater . influence on urban transportation. There are people, however, who disagree with this scenario and are confident that the need to have personal face-to-face contact will override the convenience of speaking and meeting through the television monitor. They argue by analogy that man's need to travel have not diminished since the invention of the telephone some 100 years ago. What the telephone has done instead is to increase his working efficiency and as a result the volume of economic activity has increased rapidly. I suppose there are good grounds for both arguments.

If you think all this a little far-fetched, there are even more escteric designs for the future. As early as the 1960s, several visions of the cities of temerrow began to emerge from a group of British architects through their somewhat wayward magazine called "Archigram". One of these was a "plug-in city" where individually self-contained living capsules

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bould be plugged out from one city super structure, transported and plugged in to another city super structure. Man would live, work and play within the super structure. There would be no need for frequent travel. His living capsule will follow him if he changes job from city to city. Not to be outdone, some of the cities of tomorrow were also envisaged to be completely mobile. This so-called "walking city" could move by itself - the entire city super structure - to more favourable locations like nomadic tribesmen seeking new pastures. For those of you who look forward to this new mobility, the sad news is that there are not many new pastures in Singapore for these walking-monsters to move to.

I have drawn all these examples not as a prediction of what would happen in the future but merely to illustrate the point that there are several ways in which the citics of tomorrow could develop, some of which are radically different from what exists today. What all this means to urban and transport planners today is difficult to say. As architects, however, you will have important roles to play. Even today, you will have felt the influence of modern technology in the way you work and design your buildings. When I was in Europe. I was shown design and draughting of engineering drawings by a computer-controlled machine. It is capable of drawing plans and elevations and setting out perspective drawings from any given angles. It could also produce topographical plans from stereoscopic aerial photographs. In time to come, all drawings may be produced this way; requiring less manpower but leading to greater productivity. This is a minor revolution perhaps, but certainly a fore-taste of what can be expected in future.

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