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ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT ONG TENG CHEONG AT THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS' 38TH ANNUAL DINNER AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 16 APRIL 1999

Mr and Mrs Tham Tuck Cheong,
Members of the Singapore Institute of Architects,
Ladies and gentlemen:

The last two years have been difficult for many countries in the region. As the financial crisis spread across Asia, economies stumbled. While Singapore managed to weather the storm somewhat better than others, we have still not seen the end of this difficult period.

2 At the same time, the economies of the world are being reshaped and molded together by sweeping technological advances. In such a world where physical distances mean less and less from day to day, the emergence of the knowledge-based economy has changed the competitive landscape dramatically. Businesses which are able to restructure and consolidate during these trying times, and adapt to the demands of a knowledge-based economy will have the competitive edge in the coming years. The construction industry should not fall behind.

3 The architects and allied professionals as key players can help in the restructuring of the construction industry. They can lead the industry in adjusting to a knowledge-based economy. Many have already exploited technological advances and have Computer-Aided-Design software and hardware to help in the drafting, in model simulation and complex structural calculations. However, there are also other factors beyond architectural design that increasingly play a part in today's building construction e.g. engineering innovations, project financing mechanisms and

integrated work processes.

4 In the face of stiffer competition from global players, local architectural firms must look for synergies not only among themselves but also with other players in the industry. Architects and allied consultants who are able to adopt a closer multi-disciplinary approach will stand out from the rest. They will lead the industry in its restructuring and will be ready when the economy recovers.

5 Most of Singapore's architectural firms are small set-ups. Only about 7% of our firms have a paid-up capital of \$1 million or more. While size is not a constraint to producing excellent designs, and indeed some of our small architectural firms have done Singapore proud, size does count and is increasingly an advantage in this New World.

6 Large firms will be better able to make an impact overseas. Local architectural firms must aim to attain a critical mass to exploit opportunities when overseas markets open up. Overseas clients will not look at design excellence alone. The ability to provide one-stop service and oversee an entire project is also important.

7 With restructuring and consolidation, the construction industry will get off on a running start when our economy and the region recover. Looking ahead, we see the dawn of a new millennium. The pessimists see in its coming visions of doomsday. The optimists see a new golden age. For the realist like most of us, it will probably be neither. But change there will be – changes in lifestyle, use of space, working habits, travel patterns, etc. While crystal ball gazing is not my forte, I would nonetheless like to share some thoughts with you tonight.

8 We live in a fast-changing world. Advancement of science and technology has great impact on our working and social lifestyle. With the advent of steel, reinforced concrete and elevators, we saw buildings growing taller and taller over the last hundred years. The urban landscape changed too with the advent of the combustion engine. Trains and automobiles increase man's mobility and accessibility to urban centres. Millions of people drifted to the cities in search of job opportunities and more interesting social lifestyles. But they also created housing, health and traffic problems. Urban land prices soared, forcing schools, markets and residents out of the city centre.

9 With the introduction of mass transit systems and subways, jobs and population are once again being redistributed. When office workers used to converge into the city centre, more and more will now head into several sub-centres around MRT stations. In the reverse direction, some residents are drifting back to the city centre. We are also seeing activities, which are "non-central area functions", moving out of the city centre. The decentralisation and restructuring process will result in a more even spread of residential homes and work places.

10 We are now entering the age of ever advancing science and technology. It may be too early to tell what impact there will be with the eventual common use of handphones, e-mail and e-commerce. How will these impact on demand of working space in the city centre? How will different retail activities be affected? Will there be less demand on transport and other services especially in the city centre as more and more people begin to work and shop with their computers at home? Will the ERP gantries be redundant one day or would more ERP gantries be needed to better manage traffic outside the city centre, with possible shifts in congestion patterns? Singapore has been in the forefront of urban traffic management. We have hardly any precedence to follow. We therefore have to be innovative and creative.

11 Urban planners too will have to change their mindset. Would the conventional land use planning clearly separating work from home remain relevant? Should there even be a difference between private apartments and service apartments, that requires a permit for conversion from one type to the other? Architects too will have to prepare for changes in their architectural design to meet new challenges and the changed lifestyle which is fast evolving with rapid advancement in science and technology.

12 As we step into the 21st century, we will begin to see the impacts of new developments now taking place and some of the answers to the questions I have posed. If we respond correctly to the changes brought by advances in science and technology, things will be less chaotic and changes will be smoother. If we do not, the world will not end. But we may be less productive, more wasteful perhaps, less organised and, most likely, less competitive.

13 Ladies and gentlemen, despite the challenges posed by the current economic situation and the new challenges that will meet us in the new millennium, I am confident that Singapore architects are looking ahead to the future. The immediate task is to restructure the construction industry with the aim of making it both more productive and competitive. By adopting a more comprehensive approach, and by making optimal use of IT, architects and architectural firms in Singapore can develop the muscle and means to stand up against open competition. In the longer term, we will have to tackle questions at a more philosophical and fundamental level. But I am sure that our planners and architects in the public and private sectors will meet the challenges of the new millennium successfully, and make Singapore a city of excellence which all of us will be proud of.
