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**SPEECH BY MR BERNARD CHEN, MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE,  
AT THE EIGHTH ANNUAL DINNER OF THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF  
PLANNERS AT THE ISLAND BALLROOM, SHANGRILA HOTEL  
ON FRIDAY, 18 APRIL 1980 AT 8.00 PM**

Let me first of all declare that on two counts, I am an intruder to this 8th Annual Dinner of the Singapore Institute of Planners. Firstly, I am not even supposed to be here as Mr E W Barker was scheduled to be your honoured guest. Since he has to attend a more urgent official assignment overseas, he has asked me to take his place. Secondly, I am neither a town planner nor architect, not even a geographer or historian, except for the limited exposure to these two subjects when I was in school. I can only claim a remote association to the business of town planning, through some of my friends and colleagues who are planners and architects. I would, therefore, like to confine my remarks to some observations of town planning from a layman's point of view.

Town planning is somewhat like economic planning. To the town planners and economists, the ideal position would be one in which there are no constraints to drawing up comprehensive town plans or economic plans. How wonderful it would be if we could have started planning Singapore without the population, squatters, rent-controlled properties and unlimited land supply. Similarly, it would have been a godsend if economists could draw up their five-year plans without bothering about unemployment, inflation and productivity. Some of these ideal situations do exist in the institutions of higher learning when learned masters and students set their own parameters, define their inputs and come out with impeccable plans that seem to provide solutions to all conceivable problems. In the real world that we live in, however, it is sad to say that we can seldom afford these kinds of luxury even if they do all exist. As in economics, where our economic planners have

to grapple daily with the problems associated with running the economic machine, our physical planners are faced with similar woes.

If we were to look back into history, not too far back but say two decades ago, none of us in those days would have even harboured the hope that we would be able to see the Singapore of today, despite all its shortcomings. In the past 15 years, Singapore's economic development has advanced at a very rapid rate in the initial 10 years, followed by slower but steadier growth in the past 5 years. With this economic development came the economic and social progress which has been passed on in toto to our people in terms of higher standard of living, better social amenities, such as housing, health and education and overall, a more healthy living environment. This economic and social well-being was created almost from scratch as we had little resources to start with. Worse, we inherited the problems of high unemployment and political instability from the colonial era. We had to overcome these obstacles and at the same time get on with the business of nation building.

Some of you might not have been aware that elaborate and painstaking efforts were made to formulate plans of all kinds to ensure that we could propel Singapore towards greater prosperity. Jurong Industrial Estate did not happen by accident. It was part of a comprehensive industrialisation plan aimed at turning Singapore into a manufacturing centre to supplement its role as a traditional trading port. Detailed plans were drawn up to implement the massive housing programme to accommodate our people. A crash programme was mounted to build more schools for our children. Plans were also prepared to provide the facilities, doctors and nurses to keep the population healthy. There were many more plans and programmes, too numerous for me to go through them. Suffice to say that we even went to the extent of having a Family Plan. However, as I said earlier, all plans looked good at the point of preparation. Most of them became

outdated the moment implementation...

outdated the moment implementation began. It was the same with the plans I have outlined. For Singapore, however, there was one difference. This is the flexibility and adaptability which Government had built into the various plans it has adopted. Changes were made to accommodate changing circumstances and rules and guidelines revised from time to time to enable the plans to be implemented as closely as possible to the original objectives. No doubt, some of these changes of rules and regulations were to prove to be nightmares for those who are at the receiving end of these policy changes. For the physical planners, architects and engineers, there were changes in mandatory setback for road widening or reserves, tree planting requirements and provision of car parks. For the teachers and parents there were changes in the education system and for the man in the street, there were many campaigns of one kind or another to make sure that he behaves in the interest of the community. Despite these changes which to some are irritations and annoyances, we had been able to witness, by and large, successful implementation of all the major plans that the Government has adopted in the early years and achieved the primary objective of providing our people with a standard of economic and well being that all of us Singaporeans can be justifiably proud of.

You may well ask what are the secrets to the success we had managed to achieve in the face of great odds. Were there any magical potions that Government had concocted to see that all foreseeable problems and difficulties were overcome? Just as there are no crystal balls and magic wands, there are also no shortcuts and easy solutions to problems of planning. There are however several vital ingredients in all these plans and certain distinct qualities of the planners tasked with implementing these plans that are worthy of note. Regarding plans, all of them have incorporated the need for changes, some time to be made at short notice. For example, our economic plan is not

*static*, it is a rolling five year plan. Similarly, the Master Plan and the State and City Plan are sufficiently general to accommodate changes in zoning when there were changes of policy. The guidelines, rules and regulations made to ensure smooth implementation of these plans are also flexible enough to be amenable to changes in emphasis as dictated by policy changes. Here I know I am treading in dangerous waters as those of you who are present here this evening, especially architects, engineers and developers will take *issue with me* on how inflexible some Government planners had been. On the other hand, Government planners say confront me too with the problem that much as they would like to accommodate the changes they were unable to do so because of frequent policy changes or that the reasons of changes were not made explicitly clear to them. Be that' as it may, I would not want to be put into an arbiter's position. I would leave this topic to the end of my speech.

Coming to the qualities of the planners themselves, the first distinct characteristic is that the top administrators and planners charged with the implementation of the various plans were not prisoners of their own planning environment. They were able to see beyond their own confines and thus appreciate the overall considerations and specific constraints posed by other planning efforts. Given the shortage of resources and increasing competing demand generated by development in all sectors, it was paramount that these top planners, regardless of whether they are economic, social or Physical planners, were able to co-ordinate all the plans, draw up priorities and resolve conflicting and competing demands. To do this requires more than a professional mind. It demands that a planner must be fully aware of the social and economic changes that were taking place in Singapore. He must be able to reconcile the competing demands for the same scarce resources. Above all, he must also be thoroughly well versed with the guidelines, rules and regulations that govern the various plans to make sure that when he wants changes made to them, he

would not create new difficulties and more conflicts. Finally, he must constantly keep himself abreast of all the social and economic changes and monitor the implementation of his plans regularly to ensure that he makes the right changes at the right time. In essence, therefore, the ability to grasp the vital economic and social issues and to effectively co-ordinate their conflicting and competing demands, backed up by a thorough knowledge of the job and the ability to make correct changes when required, is the hallmark of the top planners we have in the past 15 years. We were thus able to be in a happy position to look forward to the next decade with the comforting thought that we are no longer starting from zero base.

I need hardly emphasise that planning Singapore for further progress in the next decade is going to be a much more difficult business than we have had to experience in the past decade. For one thing, the scarce resources will get more scarce. The competing demands for these scarce resources will be even more severe. The economic and political developments in the world are getting more uncertain, thus making changes arising from changing circumstances even more certain. Above all, our people, now used to high standards in almost everything is not likely to be satisfied with more of the same. They want more of the better. Hence, it is not only HDB flats, it is HDB executive flats and HUDC flats. Instead of traffic light junctions, motorists now will clamour for flyovers and interchanges. No longer are Singaporeans satisfied with shops. They want to go to shopping complexes complete with one-stop shopping facilities. It is therefore incumbent upon our planners, whether they are in Government or private sector, to keep themselves fully aware of the likely social and economic changes and the increasing aspirations of our people. They have to remain receptive to these changes and in their work exercise a degree of flexibility that will enable these changes to take place

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which will result in improvements in their planning efforts and therefore yield results that will achieve the objectives laid down. In order to do this effectively, planners must maintain and improve their communication with those who are in one way or another affected by their planning decisions, including architects, engineers, developers and Government administrators who are in charge of various planning agencies. Better communications make for more efficient monitoring of the changes that may occur and therefore less pain encountered in arguments that may ensue. I am not sure whether there now exists effective communication amongst planners, architects and developers. This is probably a matter which is best solved by those in the Ministry of National Development. At the risk of passing the buck, I would like to end my address and thank you for inviting me to participate in your Institute's 8th Anniversary Dinner.

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