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SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS,
AT THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS' ANNUAL DINNER ON FRIDAY,
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The Institute of Architects has come a long way since its establishment in 1958. Now, with more than 400 members, it is one of the foremost professional organisations in our Republic. As the Institute celebrates its two decades of establishment, it is timely to reflect on the role of the architectural profession in Singapore over the past twenty years or so.

In the fifties, the architect occupied a pre-eminent position in the building project team comprising also the developer and the contractor. His advice was then respectfully sought. His view was highly regarded by virtue of his professional knowledge and standing. It was a time when many of the contractors were self-made builders without any formal education and training. The developers too were mostly unseasoned. Construction activity very seldom ventured beyond shophouses and terrace rows. Higher or more complex structures were rare occurrences.

Then came the sixties when the Government began to embark on a gigantic public housing programme which continued to gain impetus in the seventies. With the simultaneous offer of sites for sale by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore began to witness a new dimension in its urbanisation programme.

It was the first time that the developers, the architects and the contractors were all heavily involved in putting up high-rise buildings one after another. We experienced a spectacular growth of the local building industry both in the private and public sectors covering all forms of developments ranging from housing estates to large industrial and commercial complexes. These have changed not only our skyline but also our life-style, and have contributed much to our nation's progress. Official records show that the total cost of building projects was about \$106 million in

1965, it increased to \$211 million 1970, and went up to \$1,259 million five years later. Last year, the total cost reached \$1,884 million.

In this unprecedented rush to build, inevitable shortcomings were revealed. Pushed to correct their inadequacies and prompted by the challenge to provide more sophisticated and more complex structures, many developers have come into their own and become more knowledgeable and seasoned and confident of their roles. The contractors too have changed. They no longer work their way up doing the little jobs on building sites. The new generation of contractors have mostly been through a formal education and are more conscious of their rights and responsibilities and more conversant with the workings of the conditions of contract.

How about the architects? Have they responded to the challenge in the style and tempo of the new building scene? Have they become more competent in the discharge of their professional duties? On the whole, the scenario of Singapore's high-rise buildings are evidence of our architects' abilities to rise to the occasion by providing aesthetic as well as functional complex structures. In the past few years especially, there have been fine examples of such architectural attempts to imbue each individual building with not only beauty and character but also a permanent quality relevant for the future.

However, this is not to say that all is well within the architectural profession. While many in the profession have succeeded in translating concepts into realities, there are some who are unfortunately found wanting in the field of contract and project management, resulting in a sizeable number of work stoppages and some cases finding their way up to arbitration or ending up in expensive liability suits. For the past few years, the Board of Architects and SIA had to arbitrate an increasing number of disputes. The record shows that the number of cases in 1977 has doubled that of 1974. There were, of course, other cases that have not been referred to either the Board of Architects or SIA.

Whether they are arbitration cases or liability suits, they are all by nature involved processes. Of the two cases that went up to SIA for arbitration in 1975, for instance, one dragged on till 1977. Out of the four cases handled in 1976, three are still pending.

As for last year's five cases, only one has been settled. It is clear that because of this long drawn-out process, no party concerned stands to gain.

As the contract, or rather the interpretation of the contract, is usually the bone of contention, it is time that architects pay greater attention to contract management in its entirety.

It is well to remember that the architects today are operating in a different milieu; his partners in the building team, namely, the developers and the contractors, have become more knowledgeable and sophisticated than they used to be; architects would have to respond to the change.

Of course, this is not to suggest that only the architects need to improve. Developers and contractors likewise need to improve on their style of operation and management skills. There are still some developers who insist on demanding the highest quality at the lowest cost, setting a constraint impossible for total compliance. The new breed of younger contractors who are better educated and trained should be encouraged to treat building contracting practice as a profession and not as a fly-by-night operation.

In keeping with the progress and aspirations of our Republic, you may wish to consider organizing mid-career courses, perhaps in conjunction with other related bodies, to promote greater professionalism. There is definitely a need to foster better understanding of your common problems and to encourage healthy interaction within the building industry. Towards this end, you could explore the possibility of holding joint seminars and talks on a regular basis.

In a three-legged race, if your team falls by the wayside or gets into difficulties, the remedy is not to apportion blame but to seek to restore mutual confidence in one another so that the race may continue. On this note I would like to extend my best wishes to the SIA for another eventful year.