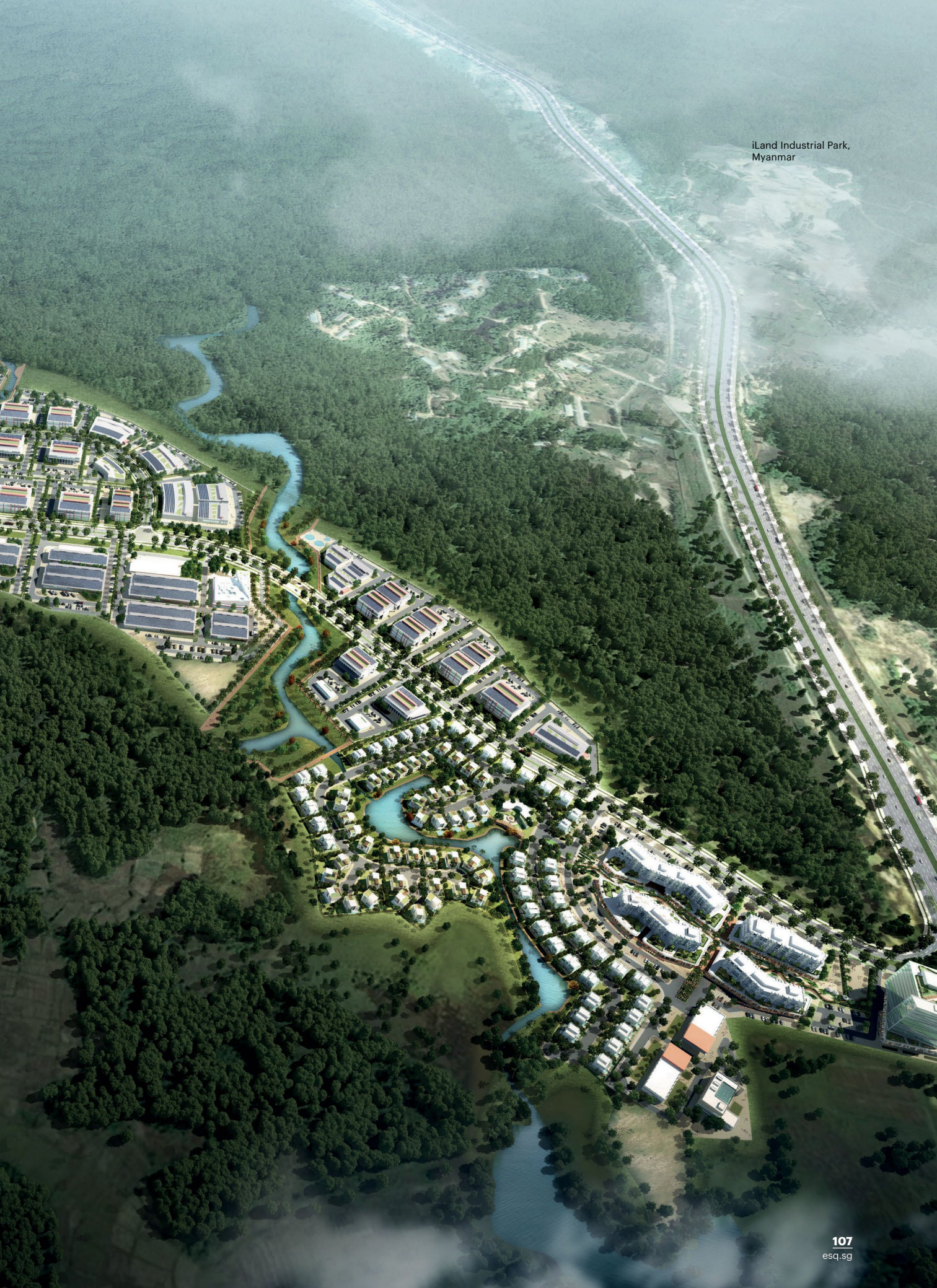
Singapore Inc

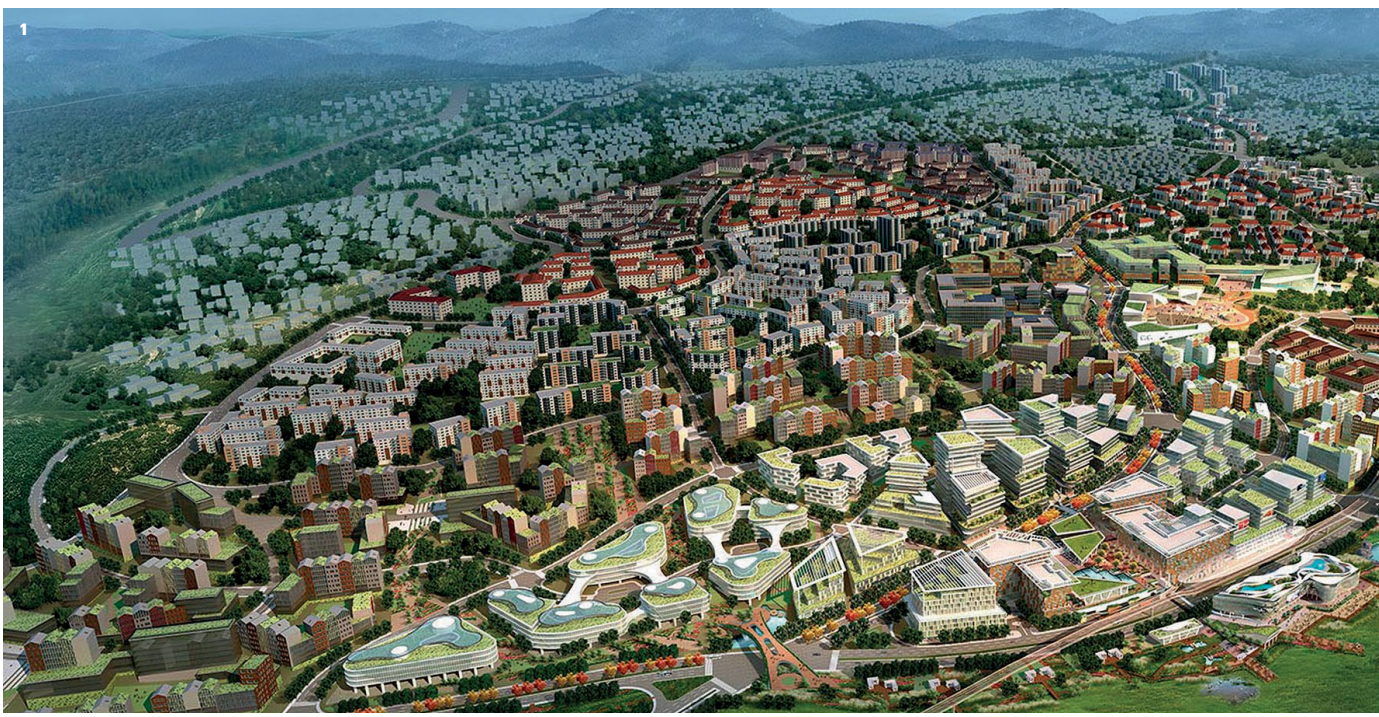
After the golden jubilee last year, the young nation continues to be seen as a poster boy for urbanised development. Its model has been replicated for an eco-city in China to a capital in India 10 times the size of Singapore. But as its counsel is sought, Kirsten Han investigates the intrinsic cost of it all—to the people, the class and the culture parlayed by a bureaucratic order. Has no one played *Sim City* before?



iLand Industrial Park,
Myanmar

Hollywood isn't the only one who wants a piece of the Lion City though; governments across the world regularly approach the envied city-state for urban solutions, even entire masterplans.

1



2

It finally happened in February, in a blaze of fire and smoke. The familiar Singapore skyline—with its expressway, skyscrapers and Marina Bay Sands integrated resort—collapsed in slow motion against a deep orange exploding backdrop. "*INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE*," blared the 44-second video.

Singapore had reached a new milestone of success at last: a cityscape both impressive and distinctive enough to be destroyed in a Hollywood film.

Hollywood isn't the only one who wants a piece of the Lion City though; governments across the world regularly approach the envied city-state for urban solutions, even entire masterplans. And, with a mixture of pride and belief in established practices, Singapore seems more than happy to deliver, even as others wonder whether such a state of affairs is even desirable.

"I think the Singapore government is recognised as being able to do things correctly," says Jeffrey Ho, a Senior Director of Surbana Jurong Consultants. "And of course, we built up a good reputation over so many years under Lee Kuan Yew's time: that we are reliable, trustworthy... all these characteristics of our system, our government."

Building on its history as a division within the Housing and Development Board, that oversees public housing in Singapore, Surbana International positions itself as an experienced "urbanisation consultant", taking care of the planning and the design of townships and homes. On the other end, Jurong International Holdings touts its years industrialising Singapore. Together, Surbana Jurong is a force to be reckoned with.

"These are two very important elements: one is about creating housing for the population, the other is about creating good jobs for the population. And we feel that both are very, very important elements of nation-building," says Teo Eng Cheong, CEO (International) of Surbana Jurong.

1. Masterplan of Kigali City, Rwanda. Nicknamed, "Singapore of Africa".
2. Artist's impression of Kigali City, Rwanda.
3. Jeffrey Ho, Senior Director of Surbana Jurong Consultants.

The company's tendrils now stretch across the world, leaving their mark in over 30 countries, such as China, India, Qatar, Bahrain, South Africa and Rwanda. It's enough to produce a book entitled *Red-Dotting the World*, with another, this time focusing on African projects, on the way.

One of Surbana Jurong's latest big projects is also a massive government-to-government endeavour: the planning of Amaravati, the new capital of Andhra Pradesh in India following the city's split into two in 2014. Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh's old capital, is now part of a new state, Telangana.

It's a bold undertaking: Amaravati has been reported to be 10 times the size of Singapore itself, with a price tag of about USD16.5 billion. According to Dr P Narayana, Andhra Pradesh's minister of urban development, the core area of the city—where the government buildings will be housed—is meant to be completed by 2019.

Jeffrey Ho, brisk and matter-of-fact in manner, has had long years of city-planning experience. His office in the Surbana Jurong building is cluttered with folders, pamphlets and paperwork, masterplans of projects stacked one on top of the other.

"I started off as a young architect, then when I was involved in new town planning, I found that actually doing things on a larger scale, like a large new town, is more interesting because you look at more issues," he tells us. "As an architect, you only design a building. But when you design a city, it's not one user. It's many, many users."

Creating a city from the ground up is a mammoth undertaking. Ho, who also worked on the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city, remembers when the Chinese site was nothing more than salt flats. Today, thousands of homes have been built, and Ho says progress is steady.

"I guess it's always the case when the Singapore government is involved. There's always a will to move, to succeed," he says. "I think that's why most governments like to work with Singapore, because they know that there is this drive to complete. Not just having a *rah-rah* show, and then nothing hap-

pens after that."

The thought of building a city out of a green-field site evokes images of a truly epic game of *Sim City*, but it's, of course, a complex process that requires plenty of consultation and research.

"I think the first stage is always to take into account the geographical surroundings, so we know what are the natural limits or advantages," says Teo. "Number two is to think of the history. What is this place in history? What is the historical significance? You don't want to destroy it. Third is the cultural significance: what are the traditions and the cultural stuff that people do in the area. You also want to preserve that. So taking all this into consideration, plus your objectives, which could be economic development and so on, you try to combine it in a way that is compatible."

The intangible is also just as important. A truly great city isn't just about its buildings and architecture, but also its soul—the energy and the buzz of a space that draws people back to it again and again.

"The whole idea is that you must be able to create that feeling for the person walking in the city. The person must remember your city. The person mustn't only remember it when he is there, but remember it when he is away," Ho explains. "For the people living in the city, if they can see and remember all this, they'll have a sense of ownership of the city. And that sense of ownership of the city is very important. If the people love the city, take care of the city, then the city will succeed."

The masterplan for Amaravati has been completed, and things are ready to proceed to the next stage. Surbana Jurong, along with other local and foreign companies, are in talks with the government in Andhra Pradesh to work out the role that it can continue to play.

But Singapore doesn't just limit itself to providing services and consultation; it actively positions itself as a hub of urban solutions and a platform for

4

5

4. Teo Eng Cheong, CEO (International) of Surbana Jurong Consultants.
5. Masterplan of Amaravati, capital of Andhra Pradesh, India.
6. Tianjin Eco-city.
7. Kigali City.

6

7

A truly great city isn't just about its buildings and architecture, but also its soul—the energy and the buzz of a space that draws people back to it again and again.

shared learning about the running and the management of cities.

The World Cities Summit is a prime example. Inaugurated in 2008, the biennial event bills itself as a platform for governments, mayors, academics, businesses and other industry experts to meet and discuss challenges and solutions to the development, the maintenance and the running of cities. It also runs the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum and the World Cities Summit Young Leaders Symposium.

"By 2050, two-thirds of the world population will be living in the city or the urban area. So what does that mean? That means we'll have lots of megacities coming up in Asia and much more smaller cities, but they will be going through kind of the same challenges," says Larry Ng, Managing Director of the World Cities Summit. "So we thought it would be great to share our story, so cities that have similar issues could learn a little bit from us. We're not imposing on anyone, but at least they understand the whole transformation of Singapore."

It's not completely altruistic, of course. On top of the plenary and forum sessions, the summit is also very much a trade show, where companies and consultants are able to display their wares and hawk their services.

"The World Cities Summit is really a platform for buyers and sellers," says Ng. "The mayors are the ones who

are maybe looking for good initiatives, looking for great vendors that can help them to improve their initiatives. We then have the business experts, the business vendors who will provide the urban solutions."

Both the organisers of the World Cities Summit and Surbana Jurong make no secret of where they feel the credit for Singapore's shiny success should go. A portrait of Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, presides over a large meeting room in Surbana Jurong's office, where we meet Teo Eng Cheong. Meanwhile, Larry Ng is quick to describe Lee as a "visionary" who transformed Singapore from "nothing" to the gleaming metropolis that it is today.

"Our city planning is by default, designed to be unintelligent. Which is perfectly in sync with the political agenda. We don't want intelligent people. We want skilful people,"
- Tay Kheng Soon

Suzhou Industrial Park, Suzhou, China.

When it came to inaugurating a prize, it was obvious whom it would be named after. The Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, now onto its fourth laureate, is described by Ng as a "Nobel prize for cities". It's a tribute to the man—along with the Lee Kuan Yew Water Prize, and suggestions of more to come—but also a clear signal that Singapore sees itself as authoritative enough on the matter of urban planning and development to bestow awards upon others.

"There are many people who say that Singapore is well-positioned to present the award," says Ng. "Not that we are so proud or anything; it's just that we have gone through the transformation so we understand it better. For us to present the award, it's really another platform for learning and sharing."

Yet the legacy of Lee Kuan Yew—even if we want to lay all the credit for Singapore's rapid urbanisation at his door—can't simply be confined to urban planning and architecture. The man was, after all, also known for wide-ranging policy reforms and "knuckle-duster" politics that have shaped Singapore and Singaporeans as much as HDB estates and manicured parks have. When people look at Singapore, they're not just seeing the clean streets and the orderly traffic, but also the effects of decades of rule by Lee's People's Action Party (PAP).

When Singapore entered into an agreement to work on the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park, Lee had stipulated that the work would go beyond the construction of infrastructure, or "hardware". Policy—often referred to as the "software"—would also have to be imparted.

"He made it very clear that [the Suzhou Industrial Park] must have special regulations, must operate things differently from the rest of China," says Teo. "So the software project office's job was to transfer our government policies to them, which included how we build public housing, our CPF [a forced savings scheme], how we regulate waste management so that Suzhou becomes clean. All these government policies were transferred to many, many Chinese officials in Suzhou. So that was one way to ensure that the government policies also benefitted from the Singapore model."

It's this intertwining of politics and urbanisation that interests architect Tay Kheng Soon the most. For him, interest in Singapore's masterplans cannot be divorced from interest in the way the government has managed its people. Any analysis of Singapore's attractiveness to other governments would have to include scrutiny of power, class, democracy and inequality.

It's no surprise that Singapore might appeal to the world's political elite: it is a prosperous, orderly city that has managed to remain in high esteem globally while also enjoying the support of a largely compliant population. Although dissenting voices might point out authoritarian laws or cry foul over the repression of civil liberties,

the majority of the Singaporean electorate—about 70 percent, according to the last general election—continues to endorse the PAP's rule. It's the stuff politicians' dreams are made of.

"When we say Andhra Pradesh, or Shanghai, or Jakarta, or Manila, we must be clear that we're not talking geographically. We're talking about the class perception of a certain group of people: the urban, industrial, commercial elite and their aspirants," Tay tells us while sipping *kopi* in a HDB coffee shop. "So when people talk about stakeholders, whose stake? The stake of the elite and their aspirants."

He looks around the public housing estate that surrounds him. There are tall blocks, uniform and clean with fresh(ish) paint. The grass has been neatly trimmed, the roads of the car park wind between the buildings. It is placid and structured.

"The way our blocks are designed, what is the embedded meaning?" he muses. "First of all, that you own a patch of sky for a period of time—99 years or whatever—and you have no say about the ground. When you buy a flat, you're buying a lease on a piece of sky. And that piece of sky is within a block, which is defined by the state, which is surrounded by roads, which are controlled by the state, on land, which is controlled by the state. You are thereby sufferance. That's the message. And so long as you behave yourself, you will enjoy that special space, that piece, that precious patch of sky. That's it."

"Our city planning is by default, designed to be unintelligent. Which is perfectly in sync with the political agenda. We don't want intelligent people. We want skilful people," he continues. "It's perfectly consistent with the duality, you see, between marketisation and social protection, but without emancipation. So the neoliberal elites of India and Asean, Indochina, they love this!"

It's a commonly held belief—certainly one underpinning events like the World Cities Summit—that the future is in megacities and other densely populated urban centres. We have learned to see the move of rural populations to urban areas as progress, telling ourselves that transitioning from "rural" occupations like farming to "urban" jobs is an improvement.

Yet cities are also sites of inequality, and the problem is growing, not just in huge global cities like New York or London, but also here in Singapore. This is why Tay rolls his eyes at the mention of "red-dotting the world". For him, the solution is not in more Singapores sprouting across the globe, but an overhaul in the way that we think and develop.

"What is important for the world now is to break the stranglehold of the neoliberal economy, and to increase aggregate demand," he says.

This would involve investing in infrastructure not to create dazzling mega-cities, but to support the livelihoods of the poor, even—or especially—those who live in rural settlements and are engaged in agricultural activity. Instead of focusing on constructing more and more steel-and-glass urban centres, Tay believes that Singapore could better direct its efforts and resources to coming up with solutions that support rural and impoverished communities around the world.

"We must play a role. We must become a training centre [for the development of rural infrastructure and facilities]. We must ally ourselves with all the progressive forces in the middle class and below. That's Singapore's future," he says emphatically. "It's a totally different vision from the Surbana vision, which is simply serving the class interests of the rich and the aspiring middle class."