



By LEE SIEW HUA
SENIOR POLITICAL
CORRESPONDENT

THIS is a nation of exceedingly pragmatic souls. So it is remarkable when a man of much purpose like Mr Mah Bow Tan says he reflects on the concept of loving Singapore.

The National Development Minister was profoundly struck when he first heard this line on love and the city:

"Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her."

That was in April 2005. At a seminar, Mr Mah was listening intently as developer Philip Ng singled out "love" as a vital missing ingredient in Singapore's quest for the X-factor.

Mr Ng, chief executive of property giant Far East Organization, then quoted G. K. Chesterton, a London writer and thinker who penned that memorable line in 1908.

Mr Mah tells Insight: "Philip is known to be a businessman and developer, yet he was talking about love."

Mr Ng went on to say in his speech that love results in rootedness. It motivates people to "make a difference for Singapore", he reasoned.

Mr Mah, 60, discerns the big question embedded in those comments: What kind of place do we want Singapore to be?

The minister readily supplies his own answer, in an interview with Insight: "A place that people can really feel connected to, rooted to, bonded to."

My New Singapore

SO, HE hopes people will take time in this recession to discover the new Singapore that is springing up downtown and all over the heartland. He also hopes they will re-visit old places, which may have changed.

Out of this rediscovery, a new love can arise, he believes.

But how possible is it to embody this ideal in the physical landscape and entrench it in personal experience?

First, there will be no campaign, he says emphatically. Instead, he relies on a matrix of events, plus dogged long-term strategy. So last week, Mr Mah presented a string of activities under the tag, My New Singapore.

The programme showcases the city-state in a variety of ways to Singaporeans - from roving exhibitions of neighbourhood changes to tours of the new Marina Bay. This will take place from now to next year, making for a period of exciting developments.

A quick scan of the horizon:

■ **Marina Bay primed for the upturn**
The new financial centre will be up in time to catch the future upturn. The integrated resort will open. The new waterfront promenade offers a continuous walking loop. Above, a new signature skyline appears. Reclaimed 30 years ago, Marina Bay will be reborn, creating jobs and opportunities.

■ **Shopping, Sentosa and a stroll in the heartland**
The revamped Orchard Road will be replete with malls like the ION and street-side cafes. Over at Sentosa, another integrated resort will open. The remaking of the heartland continues, with one milestone being the tiered boardwalk and park in Punggol Point.

■ **The world in Singapore**
The Republic hosts the first Youth Olympic Games next year, while the F1 race will return.

Mr Mah himself has rediscovered the island since 1999, when he assumed the national development portfolio.

Since part of his job involves land use and planning, he has traversed Singapore, from the heart of the city to the HDB heartland. He also pops into remote corners like Lim Chu Kang and Chek Jawa. Once, he invited his Tampines grassroots leaders to view the landfill in Pulau Semakau. It was eye-opening, and fun.

"For the first time, they realised what happens when they throw rubbish down a chute. A little bit of it eventually ends up in Semakau," he says.

Looking at the island and mangrove swamps, and even riding on the boat - it was a day of discovery.

"I could draw up a few weekend tours," he says, beaming. "I discovered how much there is in Singapore. I'm sure



Mr Mah, in front of the Double Helix Bridge, with the Marina Bay Sands in the background. People may deride Singapore as a Little Red Dot, Mr Mah says, but "everything we do as a Government is really about how we make this place a better home". ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

LOVE AND THE CITY

Love Singapore? Yes, says National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan, who thinks the first step is to rediscover the city. He discusses the political meaning of loving Singapore, its quick transformation and the places that anchor him here.

if people saw all this for themselves, they will say, wow, this is really something special."

But here he inserts a strong note of realism, saying: "In case you think I'm painting too rosy a picture, I want to say that we're not perfect."

"Many things annoy me sometimes. Many things annoy Singaporeans, whether it's noisy neighbours or rude motorists or dirty hawkers centres."

But a historical perspective helps. "We became self-governing in 1959. If we look at our lives 50 years ago and today, I think we will appreciate that many things have been changed for the better."

"These annoyances really are part and parcel of life's little irritations."

A historical view is also applied to landmarks and icons so people can hold on to memories, a facet of loving Singapore.

"Heritage is very important because I think memories keep us rooted to a place," he observes.

The power of memories

IN THIS light, Singapore planners blend the old and the new, he says.

He offers the example of Singapore River, where some old godowns remain. Behind them, skyscrapers soar in the financial district. So in a single glance, visitors have a sense of Old Singapore - and a powerful picture of its future. This co-existence of old and new makes Singapore very attractive.

"It is very much part and parcel of our transformation plans."

The same principle of saving heritage in dynamic places is at work in the heartland. In Dawson, which is in Queens-town, the old barrel-shaped wet market will be revived as a community centre.

The Pinnacle@Duxton, with 50-storey HDB flats, stands on the same site as an early generation of 12-floor flats.

There, two trees planted many years ago by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, a long-time Tanjong Pagar MP, will be



The changing face of public housing can be seen in the new apartment blocks, like this one in Queenstown's Dawson Road, coming up. PHOTO: URA

saved. A Heritage Corner to recognise the significance of the place will be added.

Further away, Old Punggol Road will become a heritage road.

But it is not possible to save everything, he continues. And here he gamely wades into the lingering controversy surrounding the loss of the National Library.

"The tunnel unfortunately went straight through the foundations of National Library," he says.

With the city and congestion growing, the Fort Canning Tunnel was built, opening in 2007.

"I tried very hard. I remember looking at shifting the tunnel but unfortunately we couldn't," he recounts. "Frankly, I felt sad that the library had to go."

The old library held memories, too, for Mr Mah, who went to school at St Joseph's Institution around the corner.

"We used to go to the library, not necessarily to study, of course. It was a nice meeting place."

But, he looks ahead. "I hope and I believe that the new National Library will one day evoke similar memories for the younger Singaporeans."

A memory of old Singapore is also at play, subtly, in futuristic Marina Bay.

Childhood jaunts

HE SAYS: "When we were doing the redevelopment of Marina Bay, I told the planners my story of how I used to go down to Queen Elizabeth Walk."

That was long before the Merlion arrived and land reclamation began.

"One of my vivid memories is of my uncle bringing me for a walk there during Chinese New Year," he recalls happily.

"Many other families were there. I would have an ice-cream, go to Cathay cinema and watch a show. That was a big thrill for Chinese New Year."

Families will once again walk along a waterfront promenade, in a new era, this time at the redeveloped Marina Bay.

So the whole city is transforming. Just as public housing was an early success for the People's Action Party, is the revamped Singapore its equivalent today?

And is there a political and national meaning in rediscovering and loving Singapore?

Love and the General Election

"EVERYTHING we do as a Government is really about how we make this place a bet-

ter home," he replies evenly.

"That's what this Government is all about. So we've done so for the last 50 years because, most importantly, we've received strong support and the mandate of the people continuously for the last 50 years."

People may deride Singapore as a Little Red Dot and toss more derogatory terms, he says. But the island's transformation involves long-term plans that depend on continuous voter support, he asserts.

"So to that extent, yes, you could say that what I'm talking about is about politics. But then isn't everything that we do about politics? Isn't it what it's all about?"

Probe him on whether shining a spotlight on the transformation may be an early sign of a General Election, and he responds: "We're always preparing for GE. You ask every PAP minister, every PAP MP, he tells you that in fact the message after every GE, the next morning is, okay, let's start preparing for the next GE."

That is not a cliché, he continues. "That's really what we do. Everything we do is about continuing to maintain the trust and consequently the support of the people and the mandate of the people for the next round."

And so he is analytical about issues - yet also relaxed enough to address the personal dimension. Unfortunately, he says, some places where he grew up are no longer on the map.

"I grew up in Kim Keat, (with the) old three-storey Singapore Improvement Trust flats. It's a little bit like Tiong Bahru."

"I grew up in a combination of places - kampung in Hougang, a shophouse in High Street, SIT flat in Kim Keat which is no longer there, and later on, HDB in Toa Payoh."

With some of these markers of his early life erased, does he feel the pace of change is too rapid in Singapore?

"Some places are changing fast, yes," he says. "But if you look at it in another way, is it for the better?"

"If we don't change, I would be back staying in the SIT flats."

It is a balance between making sure the change is for the better, then trying to keep the old in some way, he indicates.

Sunday breakfast in Changi

WHEN he married Dr Sheryn Kaye Von Senden, she worked at Changi Hospital and they lived for some time in old British quarters.

"It was a small, little place but enough for two of us," he remembers. "One of my fond memories is of walking to Changi Village every Sunday for breakfast, and then just taking a walk around."

He returns to his theme of rediscovering Singapore: "Changi Village is one of those places worth visiting. We've built a boardwalk so that you can actually walk closer to the water."

His favourite spot is the well-loved Botanic Gardens. "When it's six in the evening, just around dusk, and the weather is cool...it's so very therapeutic."

It is abundantly clear Mr Mah loves Singapore. But even he finds it "hard to put it into words".

He draws a parallel with New Yorkers, who do not go around saying they love their city.

"They hate the potholes. They hate the traffic jam, maybe the rush. But if we ask them, do you love New York? They say, yes, of course."

He muses: "What is it? Is it the culture? Is it the lifestyle? Is it Central Park? I think it's the sum total of all those things. Maybe the pluses outweigh the minuses. But there are minuses."

He does not intend that Singaporeans should go around talking about loving Singapore. But it would be wonderful to see their love in action.

"When you feel for this place, people will think twice about littering, about dirtying the place. They will think about how they interact with fellow Singaporeans."

"It's that sense of being part of this place, being part of something special."

As the interview wraps up, he goes to the window. It is a gorgeous day. From the 22nd floor of the MND Complex in Maxwell Road, his point about Singapore being a city in transformation is captured in the vista. It is a panorama he loves showing visitors, for in one frame they see the old and the new, transformation and heritage, the Icon condominium and the Pinnacle@Duxton public housing.

He says: "I hope one day people will say what a great little city we have."

siewhua@sph.com.sg

'Singapore is always a work in progress'

SPECIAL NATION, BUT WE'RE ALWAYS IMPROVING OURSELVES

Singapore may have been transformed radically as a city, but Mr Mah Bow Tan believes it is always "a work in progress".

His mandate as the National Development Minister is clear: Singapore is to be a distinctive global city.

"We have to be a special city. We have to be part of a network of cities that people want to live in and visit, and that our people want to stay in as well."

The country is resolutely moving in that direction. "But the moment we feel that we've arrived, that's really when you start to go downwards," he says.

"Philosophically, Singapore is always a work in progress. We're always improving ourselves. Yes, we've done this, but we can always do better."

This ethos touches every realm of national life: "Whether it's public housing

or social policies or physical infrastructure, there's always something better that we can do and we will do."

CONCERNED ABOUT JOBS, BUT WE ARE FANTASTICALLY RESILIENT

How realistic is it to focus on the New Singapore rising around us when Singaporeans and the Government itself have made jobs the prime focus in this recession?

Jobs are the priority now, he affirms. "But being in a recession really doesn't mean that we wallow in misery and we just react to things that happen."

What distinguishes Singapore is not only how it copes with the downturn, but also its plans that reach far into the future, he says.

"Many countries are scrambling around trying to cope with the recession. But what happens when things get better?"

Three "Ps" position Singapore for the upturn, he says.

■ **People** who are "fantastically resilient".

■ **Policies** that involve very long-term planning beyond election cycles and that are well implemented. This strength is evident whether in Marina Bay or Tampines.

■ **Place**, for Singapore is being re-made into a distinctive city.

Set up infrastructure in good and bad times, he says. "Then you catch the upturn, and you are ahead of the others."

END OF THE EN BLOC FEVER? GOOD!

Mr Mah is very cool about the end of the en bloc fever. "Personally, I'm not unhappy that people are taking a step back."

En bloc legislation gives owners an incentive to rejuvenate private estates, or they may turn into "slums", he adds. This will not happen in public housing,

which is kept "fresh" with constant upgrading, he points out.

The Government cannot do that for private estates, but the owners can.

"En bloc in itself is a right thing to do. As far as the MND (Ministry of National Development) is concerned, we are very supportive," he says.

"But unfortunately, because of the run-up in prices, the fever caught on and there were a lot of things that should not have happened."

New rules are now in place to prevent abuses, he notes, adding: "Let's not dump the whole en bloc policy, but let's refine it further, if necessary."

For now, the battered state of the economy has stopped the en bloc race.

Perhaps one happy aspect is that fewer communities will be disrupted?

"That's an important objective," he says.

Public housing, for instance, has the Selective En bloc Redevelopment Scheme, or Sers.

"When we do a Sers in one area, we try to rebuild in an adjacent area."

Displaced residents can buy a new flat in the adjacent area at subsidised prices.

"So, it's en bloc but with an emphasis on maintaining the community," he says.

"You may ask: Why can't the private sector do that? The answer is: They can." He elaborates: "They could actually rebuild, for example, where they are and then maybe pass some flats or sell them back to the developer..."

"So, preserving community is well within the ambit of the private sector or sales committee."

LEE SIEW HUA