

A deserted Shenton Way in the Central Business District in April, during the circuit breaker period. Even as Singapore gradually reopens its economy, it seems many employees, at the urging of the authorities, are in no rush to return to their offices. The coronavirus pandemic has sharpened the need for workplaces to be located closer to homes, while increasing the recreational and residential options in the city centre.  
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KUA CHEE SIONG



## Primer

# Pandemic highlights need to move offices closer to homes

This is the 10th of 12 primers on current affairs issues that are part of the outreach programme for The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz



Michelle Ng

Most Singaporeans have never spent so much time in their homes as they have in the past two months, when everyone hunkered down to stem community transmission of the coronavirus. Dining tables turned into makeshift offices while grocery runs, limited to within the immediate neighbourhood, were kept brief.

The once bustling and glittering Central Business District (CBD), which has come to represent Singapore to the world, became virtually deserted.

Even as Singapore gradually reopens its economy, it seems many employees, at the urging of the authorities, are in no rush to return to their offices.

In a survey conducted during the circuit breaker period by EngageRocket, an employee engagement and performance software provider, around 90 per cent of 9,000 respondents indicated interest in continuing with flexible working patterns.

After all, many white-collared folks have had their first taste of work life outside of the rigid 9-to-6 day and reaped the benefits of turning their usual commuting time into spare time to exercise, bake or catch up on sleep.

One may even wonder why homes and workplaces are so far away from each other.

If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has sharpened the need for workplaces to be located closer to homes, while increasing the recreational and residential options in the city centre.

### BUILDING HOMES IN THE CBD

One way to do so is to decentralise the office-dominated CBD, by relocating jobs and offices near residential neighbourhoods.

Industry players and urban thinkers said this is made even more urgent and relevant as commuting and lifestyle patterns change, as a result of more people working from home.

Singapore's drive to diversify workplaces by revitalising its city centre and developing key gateways and regional hubs across the island is not new.

Since the early days of national development, the Republic has adopted a long-term planning approach.

A Concept Plan maps out Singapore's long-term plans for strategic land use and transportation over the next 40 to 50 years to build the future city.

These broad strategies are then translated into a more detailed Master Plan with medium-term land use plans for the next 10 to 15 years. It is reviewed every five years.

Even prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, one of the major moves to rejuvenate the city centre by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) was the CBD Incentive Scheme, which was introduced together with the Master Plan 2019.

The scheme encourages developers and building owners to convert older office buildings into mixed-use projects such as residences, hotels and creative lifestyle developments.

The Master Plan 2019 will populate the office-centric CBD with more people, as 20,000 homes could be added in central Singapore, on top of the current 50,000 residential units.

This will, in turn, keep the area lively, even after office hours and on weekends.

Nearby, around 9,000 housing units – both public and private – will be built on the site of Keppel Club as part of the future Greater Southern Waterfront on the southern coastline of Singapore.

The major 2,000ha development – six times the size of Marina Bay and twice the size of Punggol – was described by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech last year as “a new place to live, work and play”.

Said PM Lee: “People can work

## THE STRAITS TIMES

### Ministry of Education

# NATIONAL CURRENT AFFAIRS QUIZ

## About The Big Quiz

On Mondays, for 12 weeks until July 13 in the Opinion section, this paper's journalists will address burning questions, offering unique Singaporean perspectives on complex issues.

The primers are part of the outreach of The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz, or The Big Quiz, which aims to promote an understanding of local and global issues among pre-university students.

The primers will broach contemporary issues, such as the necessary skills that will count in the post-pandemic world of work and journalism in the age of disinformaton.

Other issues include the rise and future of e-sports and an examination of how technology

is being used to help vulnerable groups in Singapore.

Each primer topic will give a local perspective to help students draw links back to the issues' implications for Singaporeans.

For the third year, The Big Quiz will be online, allowing all pre-university students to take part in the current affairs competition, this time over six online quiz rounds – on March 30, April 13 and 27, June 15 and 29 and July 13.

The online quizzes are based on the primer topics and will be available for two weeks from the start date of each quiz.

This nationwide event is jointly organised by The Straits Times and the Ministry of Education.

The fifth round of The Big Quiz begins today.

near where they live, and live near where they work. This will create life and activity during the day and at night.”

### BRINGING JOBS CLOSER TO HOME

On the flip side, workplaces have also been brought closer to homes.

Today, Singapore has vibrant hubs in fringe locations located near residential neighbourhoods, such as one-north in Buona Vista and Changi Business Park in the east, with more in the works.

These industry-focused hubs have attracted like-minded communities of businesses, venture capitalists, innovators, students and researchers to forge successful partnerships.

For instance, at one-north, sectors, such as biomedical sciences, infocommunications technology and media, and start-ups are supported by nearby educational and research institutes such as the National University of Singapore (NUS), Insead and the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

Likewise, the upcoming Punggol Digital District supports Singapore's efforts to build a Smart Nation and prepare workers for a digital economy.

The 50ha district, slated to open from 2023, will create 28,000 jobs in fields such as cyber security and data analytics. It will also be an educational hub, with a future SIT campus that can accommodate 12,000 students.

Professor Lam Khue Poh, dean of NUS' School of Design and Environment, said such designated focused features of each hub could be helpful for people when deciding where to live and work.

He said: “Such planning strategies offer differentiation in the overall function and character of each district, as well as location choices for different people with different career interests.”

Another major project to look out for is the upcoming Jurong Lake

District, a 360ha area comprising Jurong Lake and the area around Jurong East MRT station.

Billed as Singapore's second CBD, the district is set to provide more than 100,000 new jobs in sectors such as maritime, infrastructure and technology, as well as a further 20,000 homes, when it is built in 2040 and beyond.

It will tap the large live-in population for its talent pool – there are more than a million people living in the west – which also reduces the reliance on commuting for the workforce.

A substantial proportion of the land has been zoned as “white sites” by the URA, which gives developers the freedom to erect a range of building types, from residential to commercial.

A major plus is the abundance of “green and blue spaces”, in the form of parks, sky-rise gardens and lakes, to offer respite and breathing space.

In short, Jurong Lake District was planned to be adaptable to situations precisely like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regionally hubs are not a new concept.

Globally, similar activity hubs have sprouted outside of city centres, such as Brooklyn in New York City, Parramatta in Sydney, and Canary Wharf in London.

Architecture and sustainable design assistant professor Peter Ortner from the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) said these regional hubs are growing in popularity and number as the notion of “live, work and play” evolves.

He said: “These regional hubs will not diminish the CBD, but will grow the pie for everyone and help to create a more varied and resilient city.”

### PEOPLE-CENTRIC DESIGN

For a polycentric city – where jobs are distributed and located near residences and other social

functions – to thrive, industry players say designing around people is key.

These days, regional hubs have extended beyond their initial commercial and business set-up to accommodate a variety of functions, including retail, food and beverage, education, leisure and entertainment, and community services.

Ms Karen Tham, managing director and global lead of master planning at Surbana Jurong, said an integration of building uses creates “vibrant and sustainable places that resonate with the community”.

She noted that because of the Covid-19 outbreak, there is also a new awareness of personal space that planners will need to incorporate in the design of future public spaces.

For instance, she said public transport infrastructure such as train and bus stations may need to be longer and wider so that commuters can be spaced out.

Larger weather-protected spaces such as wide covered walkways and waiting areas would reduce potential overcrowding while not getting in the way of community interaction.

NUS' Prof Lam agreed, noting that cross-disciplinary studies between planners and designers and social and behavioural scientists are critical when designing the built environment.

“Start with the basic holistic need of the individual in his or her daily routine in terms of space and time. Then extend that to the family and the immediate community. The physical planning and design must respond to these needs accordingly,” he said.

Factors such as the ease of mobility also play a part, said Professor Stephen Cairns, director of the Future Cities Laboratory at the Singapore-ETH Centre.

“Citizens need more choices in how and when they move around. Walking, cycling and emerging mobility-as-a-service systems, such as ride-sharing, will be very important,” he said.

By 2023, Singapore's cycling path network will be doubled to 800km across all Housing Board towns.

The goal is to have eight in 10 HDB residents live about 250m away from their nearest cycling path.

But SUTD's Assistant Professor Ortner said that while adding bicycle paths improves accessibility, the authorities have to also take a holistic approach.

He said: “Not only do we need to understand where commuters need bike paths, but also how increased use of bike paths could help feed local business and improve quality of life for residents.”

While the built environment can have an impact on the way people live, work and play, ultimately it is the human touch and interactions that bring life to the inanimate.

As Winston Churchill once famously said: “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

Prof Cairns said: “Big ideas do not always emerge from planned interactions. Cultures of innovation require lateral inputs that are not always planned but happen through serendipity, accident, chance and play.”

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