

Tan Sri Teo Chiang Kok | Bandar Utama City Corp Sdn Bhd

Building holistic townships is his forte

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Before we begin the interview, Bandar Utama City Corp Sdn Bhd director Tan Sri Teo Chiang Kok leads us to the Secret Garden on the rooftop of 1 Utama Shopping Centre. He is clearly very proud of the lovely and lush 35,000 sq ft garden, which is filled with more than 500 species of exotic flora. In fact, this writer remembers interviewing Teo six years ago, just before the Secret Garden was unveiled to the public.

"The Secret Garden is the largest rooftop garden in Southeast Asia," Teo beams as we sit down for the interview, adding that the garden was started in 1998 as an experiment in cultivating temperate plants in a controlled environment.

"Fortunately, our botanist Dr Francis Ng was so passionate about the garden that it continued to expand in area and plants. Since this experimental patch blossomed, it was decided in 2009 to share the garden with 1 Utama's shoppers and the public. Coincidentally, rooftop gardens are much desired and encouraged as part of the greening phenomenon because they act as insulation against the heat from the sun. This consequently reduces the need for air conditioning. Rooftop gardens also act as landscaping for buildings," he explains.

Teo is the recipient of *The Edge Malaysia* Lifetime Property Achievement Award this year.

"My first memory of property is when my father (the late Tan Sri Teo Soo Cheng, executive chairman of See Hoy Chan Holdings Group) was building our home. I was around 16 then," starts the man behind the success of the Bandar Utama township, reminiscing about his journey in property development.

"At the time, my grandfather was still around. He didn't know how to read the house plan, so my father asked me to explain it to him. I built a model of the house, using balsa wood, for my grandfather instead." Clearly, Teo was not your typical 16-year-old.

"It was the easiest way to illustrate the plan. That was the first time I dabbled in property. When the house was under construction, I visited the site frequently with my father. At the time, my father worked seven days a week. He would schedule all his site meetings for Sunday and I would follow him. Perhaps that was how my interest in property began."

"When I returned upon graduating in England, I was one of the rebellious ones. I refused to work for my father. I worked elsewhere for more than a year. Then in 1971, there was a property boom

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MOHD SHAHRIN YAHYA / THE EDGE



MOHD IZWAN MOHD NAZAM / THE EDGE

in Malaysia and eight of my father's workers left for better prospects. So he told me, 'Son, this is the time. You either come in now or not at all'. I took a salary cut and joined the company, taking over the property development portfolio. My father made me start at the bottom. I was a site supervisor first and slowly worked my way up," he recalls.

Teo was 24 when he started working for See Hoy Chan Holdings Group.

It was not a big issue to market properties back then. "I was very lucky as I joined the property development industry when it was booming. Secondly, my father had built a reputation, so instilling confidence in the people buying our brand was one of the easier battles to fight.

"At the same time, there was demand for properties. The first wave, I clearly remember, came in the early 1970s from people living in Kuala

Housing and Local Government Deputy Minister Datuk Raja Kamarul Bahrin Shah (third from left), with (from left) The Edge Media Group chairman Datuk Tong Kooi Ong, Teo and The Edge Media Group publisher and CEO Ho Kay Tat

Lumpur. These postwar babies were moving out to the suburbs from shophouses. At the time, that was very popular. Most of them lived in the shophouses where they worked or ran businesses from the ground floor.

"Residential units were in demand then. It was expectation-driven. People were just starting families and not operating businesses (most of them were professionals) and most didn't need big houses. We tried to understand the market and produced what would fit their expectations."

The Bandar Utama story

The Bandar Utama township was the fifth built under Teo's stewardship, after Paramount Garden, Damansara Utama and Damansara Jaya in Petaling Jaya, and Berkeley Gardens in Klang. "I had four townships to make mistakes in and learn from. So I had a head start when it came to planning Bandar Utama. And I was very lucky as within a few years of joining the company, my father let me run the whole thing. I somehow won his confidence, I guess," says the eldest of the family.

The original size of Bandar Utama back then was 1,400 acres but Teo says 395 acres were acquired for a tactical base for the Air Force, which were eventually developed into Mutiara Damansara.

"We acquired the land around 1978 for land-banking purposes. I remember how I used to drive my four-wheel drive to (what was then known as) Effingham Estate. It was a great quiet natural retreat.

"Effingham was on the edge of Damansara and I loved driving through it. It was a winding

CONTINUES ON PAGE 52

**FROM PAGE 50**

country road, yet so close to the city. Once in the late 1980s, while I was driving around late at night, I saw two bright lights and I didn't know what it was. It turned out to be a wild boar," he laughs.

Interestingly, there was also a very old but tame tiger. The rubber tappers and the tiger co-existed. It would walk past and nobody would be worried, he says.

"Back then, I saw a 20-year project. Because of the way we had to get our land converted and layout approved, it was very important to have a layout that was relevant for 20 years and that was the challenge. For smaller projects, even if their layout gets outdated, you can still manage it. For Bandar Utama, the time horizon was a bit longer, so we had to be more careful."

Planning the township was both from lessons learnt from previous townships as well as understanding trends. "I was lucky I did some travelling and understood the trends in developed countries. For instance, in Bandar Utama, instead of building a monolithic housing scheme with many crossroads, as seen in SS2, we decided to build neighbourhoods. I read somewhere that the best neighbourhood has about 500 residences. So what we did with Bandar Utama was to carve different neighbourhoods, each with 500 to 600 units. Then, we put in the main roads, and the neighbourhood roads became residential streets. So, you won't need to go into a residential street if you're not going to a particular neighbourhood. That took away all the crossroads," Teo explains.

"I am not sure if it is coincidence or foresight but now, all our neighbourhoods are very easy to secure. You just need to have three guard posts for a gated neighbourhood of 500 units. This number is large enough to build a community. So in each neighbourhood, we have an open space where people can gather and get to know one another. Each neighbourhood is a cluster around services — neighbourhood retail centre, school, a mall nearby. All within walking distance. Those are the things we learnt to improve in the township."

Bandar Utama is an integrated development that includes residential (landed and high-rises), commercial as well as a neighbourhood mall and the popular 1 Utama Shopping Centre. Today, Teo walks around the five million sq ft mall on weekends.

"I do walk around the mall. It is a fact that if you walk every day, you won't notice much. There is a group of retired people who walk around the mall every day for exercise. They are my best supervisors as they tell us which bulb is not working, which tap is leaking ... so, I told our mall manager to buy them breakfast once in a while. Most of them are Bandar Utama residents and they come here to walk when the air conditioning is not even turned on. They say it is because it's safe. From one

Top: Overwhelming response to the first launch of 2-storey houses in Bandar Utama in 1991

Top right: The first phase of 1 Utama Shopping Centre

Right: Each neighbourhood was designed to have an open space for the community to gather

end to the other, it is about 1km. That means they walk 6km every morning," he says.

According to Teo, the Bandar Utama layout is still relevant 20 years on and the township is 80% completed. "What we did with the layout was to have two distinct zones — linked house zone and the hilly areas where I built the condominiums and a nine-hole golf course while fronting LDP is our city centre zone. Now, we have practically exhausted all the landed properties except for another 150 villas to be built. As for the condominiums, we have seven more phases to go, so there is still quite a lot of work to do," he says.

"Early on, we started to plant a lot of trees so the township would have a lot of greenery and also to stop erosion. That's why people may not know or realise that we still have areas to build. As for the city centre, I planned it as an integrated city. I always pride myself on the fact that you can park your car at one corner of the city and walk through the whole city without having to cross the road if you don't want to — that's the concept.

"In the developed cities, we see that the emphasis is on reversing the suburb sprawl. Bring city-living back so that the city is alive 24/7. This trend sits well with an integrated township and we're pretty lucky we have three LRT stations, two of which are connected to our city centre. We now have the opportunity to develop the areas within the stations as transit-oriented developments. We will introduce a residential component to the city centre."

What does he feel when he looks at how far Bandar Utama has come? "To me, it's that I've been given this opportunity to develop something that is physically there. That's the difference between a doctor and a developer. When a doctor makes a mistake, he buries the mistake. When a developer makes a mistake, it is standing there, reminding you for the next 70 years," he laughs.

Another interesting point is that Bandar Utama City Corp was the first developer in Malaysia to be licensed to distribute electricity. This was in 1994. "Instead of building many substations around, we applied to the electricity commission to let us take bulk electricity and distribute it so that it is easier for us to manage the substations. This way, I could put the substations in more

logical locations instead of the substations being determined by the layout. We are now distributing electricity to all our commercial properties as well as our condominiums," he says.

What matters most

Teo says it is very important to build credibility in the market. "Credibility is important. And delivering on your promises. It gets harder as expectations are getting higher and our workforce is getting less skilled," he says.

With over 40 years of experience in property, Teo says the designs have changed. Homebuyers are more knowledgeable and they know what they want. Looking nice on the outside is no longer a selling factor. It is what is within that is more important, he adds.

"What I look forward to is when people invite us to their house warming — they give us the best feedback. Small things like, 'why didn't you open the door in this direction instead of that?' If you moved the door six inches more, can add switches. That's how we learn — they live in it and can give us feedback."

Teo is an avid gardener who has a 25,000 sq ft space at home to keep him busy. "I also spend some time in front of the 'idiot box', watching a lot of news and National Geographic as it is interesting to see how the animal kingdom relates to the human being. How they survive and do things. I love gardening but I'm a bad gardener. My flowers don't flower. Weeds grow wild," he laughs.

Teo is also happy to spend time with his four grandchildren.

He is involved in quite a number of associations and in terms of personality and conduct, he names Lion Group executive group chairman and founder Tan Sri William Cheng and IOI Group executive chairman Tan Sri Lee Shin Cheng as people he looks up to.

"I work closely with both of them. Tan Sri William Cheng is a successful man and yet he is able to talk to anybody. Despite his stature, he is very humble. Tan Sri Lee is also a very humble man from very humble beginnings and with no airs. This is something I admire in people. I find a lot of people are very pretentious and that is not my cup of tea," he smiles. **E**