

**SPEECH BY THE HON TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
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**“The Branding of a City”**

I would like to thank the International Mayors' Forum of the People's Republic of China for this invitation to speak on the subject of “The Branding of a City”.

2. The world is experiencing a phenomenon that is unstoppable i.e. the urbanisation of countries. We are seeing a massive migration of people from the rural areas to the urban centres. Villages are disappearing while towns grow into cities and cities into mega-cities. The mega-cities spread into the surrounding countryside and coalesce with the spreading neighbouring cities to become urbanised areas with tens of millions of inhabitants without any countryside in between. There will be no green fields, farms or forests to separate these urban conglomerations.

3. In many instances these cities would be bigger than many countries, in terms of population and at times in area. As can be expected these urban people will be very sophisticated. Their needs would be enormous. They need to be fed, to be clothed, to be housed and to travel to their work places which may be at the other end of the city, dozens of kilometres away. They need to be entertained, to relax in open spaces and to leave for their week-ends to places away from the maddening crowds and traffic jams of their cities. And as their cities grow they will have to travel further and further to be out of the cities. And they would be very vocal and demanding; conscious of their rights and frequently challenging the authorities, sometimes violently. There would be street demonstrations and riots. There would be all kinds of crimes, civil and criminal.

4. All these and more will put a tremendous strain on city-Governments. The water and electricity required would tax the abilities and finances of the Governments. Removal of all kinds of waste, prevention of urban pollution can no longer be catered to in the normal way. New and more efficient ways will have to be found.

5. Inability to deal with all these will lead to the city dying. The death will not be total. Parts will die first. Slums will spread. City Governments will try to ignore them while concentrating on the richer areas and the down-town. But soon the problem would get bigger and bigger, and slums would be juxtaposed with commercial downtown areas and the prosperous residential districts. The value of these areas would fall and the occupants would move out. And when this happens these areas would slowly deteriorate into slums. Crime would increase and law and order difficult to maintain.

6. The urbanities, conscious of their rights would demand better service but at the same time would refuse to pay increases in the taxes and rates for their higher cost. The facilities cannot be maintained. And everything deteriorates.

7. We are already seeing this in some of the great cities of Europe and America. Urban decay is universal. Roads are full of potholes, bridges are rusty and unsafe, and pipes leak and the smell of sewage pollute the air everywhere. The poor would roam the streets and sleep on park benches. In winter many would die from exposure.

8. Many parts of these cities are unsafe. Even travelling in cars with wound-up windows is unsafe. The police force cannot be everywhere, the city is too big. Robbery, murders are common. These cities of Europe and America are in fact dying slowly.

9. The cities of East Asia are relatively new. The decay has not set in yet. The problems have not yet surfaced. But they all will come. Because of the bigger population of the Eastern countries, the problem will become bigger, more acute, more insoluble.

10. We in the East are very fond of copying the Europeans and Americans. Our cities are already becoming copies of their cities, with high-rise buildings, with cramped multi-storeyed flats. There is a McDonald's restaurant at every corner. Down-town the working population converge in the hundreds of thousands in the daytime and leave empty in the night, deserted, and dangerous.

11. We see the same hotels, built in the same way and frequently making the same mistakes in their design and their location. Such are the designs of these hotels that once you are inside you will not know where you are. You could be in China, Japan, France, the USA or Kuala Lumpur as there is nothing to indicate the country or city you are in.

12. The streets used to be lined with shops with people strolling along the side-walks to do their shopping. Today the streets are full of cars so tightly packed that they are unable to move except at speeds slower than walking. Why we use cars at all is a mystery if we can get to places faster by walking. But every year more cars get on the roads. The side-walks are no longer filled with shoppers. The shops have largely disappeared. They are now in the shopping complexes, frequently far from the work place down-town. To drop in from the office to do a little shopping is no longer possible. Perhaps this is a good thing. But the centre of the city would die, especially at night.

13. To cater for the cars and buses we now build elevated highways. And the beauty of our buildings disappears, blocked by these massive elevated concrete structures, purely utilitarian, without any attempt to beautify. But then the modern buildings of our cities are, like the ones in America, mere glass boxes. There really is nothing to see.

14. As Eastern people we are concerned about our culture. A hundred years ago Eastern cities looked eastern. The curved roofs, the pagodas or domes of mosques, the quaint narrow streets and lanes, the whole architecture was distinctive. One could tell whether one was in Bangkok, or Beijing or Tokyo. Now we cannot. All these cities look the same. They do not reflect the culture of the country or the people. We may try to revive some aspects of our culture to give identity to our Eastern selves but they are obliterated by our cultureless cities of identical high-rise glass towers which reflect the sun and blind the eyes.

15. Some may say that the obliteration of our cultural identity as we surge forward and modernise cannot be helped. How can we have a modern city without skyscrapers and clogged streets? How can we avoid pollution and the daily inflow and outflow of city workers? The business district must be for business. No one should live in the city-centre. They should all be sleeping in dormitory districts on the outskirts of the city, in identical blocks of high-rise flats. How else can they live?

16. The cities of China had populations of a million inhabitants when London was a small town of two or three hundred thousand people. We can be sure that they did not look like London then. If we care to study we should discover the lay-out and the architecture of Chinese cities of old. Maybe they were not very efficient, did not have the services that we take for granted today, did not have the problem of mass ownership of motorcars. But they were distinctly Asian, Eastern and Chinese. Is it possible for the Eastern cities to grow and accommodate modern needs without being copies of American cities? The Europeans have tried to retain their old town layouts, their narrow streets and even their city-walls. But in the East we are not trying very hard. Instead of cleaning up the old cities and providing them with modern amenities, we often tear them down to make way for skyscrapers.

17. Perhaps it is too late. But if we are indeed concerned to preserve our culture we must think of other ways of developing a modern city which will leave our identity as intact as possible. Maybe we should recreate the old town plans but on a larger scale and design our high-rise to reflect our architecture more.

18. Cities grow because there is a need for people to achieve greater efficiency through a division of labour. First the town collects the produce of the countryside to redistribute to other parts of the country. Transportation of products, storage, sorting, processing, packaging, and redistribution create jobs that draw people into these towns.

19. The concentration of people needs to be serviced. Shops opened up to sell general goods which later began to specialise. Industries start to provide for the living needs of the urbanites. The town builds up as more shops open to sell more goods, to cater to the needs of the town people and to travellers. And the town grows into cities simply because where people gather to live and to work, opportunities for business increase. By and large the cities grow without proper planning. The cities that we are copying now are not the most intelligently designed cities. They are more responses to early needs.

20. Can we think of better ways to build cities which can cater to the needs of modern times? We want intelligent cities but cannot intelligent cities be built which reflect the individual culture of the people and countries? Is it necessary that we should have what is called a down-town area devoted to commercial activities and residential areas as dormitories for the workers in the down town areas? Can we avoid the traffic jams as every morning the workers converge on the down town area to work, the shoppers converge on the same area to shop? In today's wireless world when business can be done without leaving our homes, can we design towns that meet these technological advances?

21. In a hundred years' time the population of China will be 2 billion. If the present trend is continued China would look like America, with expressways criss-crossing the country linking cities of skyscrapers of glass and concrete. They will have no culture, no soul and no identity. All the cities will look like each other. There would be no point going sight-seeing because your own city will look like all the other cities.

22. We all try to plan our cities but we must know that cities cannot be planned in isolation. As the cities grow the villagers will shrink and disappear. Some will be swallowed by the city. The character of the country will be monotonously the same everywhere. This will happen if the planning of the city is left to the city authorities alone and the National Government is not involved.

23. In Malaysia the city of Kuala Lumpur is in the Federal Territory, excised from the State of Selangor. The Federal Territory is small and the demand of Kuala Lumpur in terms of buildings and housing is more than can be accommodated by the small area of the Federal Territory. That demand spills over into the territory of the state of Selangor.

24. The authorities controlling the City of Kuala Lumpur and the State of Selangor are different. In fact that part of Selangor which surrounds Kuala Lumpur is under local authorities, intended really to administer rural areas with villages and farms. The expansion of Kuala Lumpur beyond the Federal Territory into the local authorities' areas resulted in city-type development with all the complexities and services which local village administrations are not equipped to handle.

25. The result is lack of proper urban planning in the Selangor part and also lack of coordination with the plan for the development of Kuala Lumpur city.

26. Had there been close cooperation and coordination between the Selangor State Government and its local authorities with the Kuala Lumpur City Government, the development of

Kuala Lumpur and those parts of Selangor adjoining it would be better planned and the services more coordinated. Of course the character of the whole urbanised areas could be made to conform with the cultural heritage of Malaysia.

27. But normally City administrators like to be independent. It is not easy to be subservient to or coordinate with other authorities. If it is appreciated that joint planning would be good for both then cooperation and coordination would possibly be accepted.

28. As I said earlier our cities tend to duplicate the cities of Europe and America. If we want to avoid this, the preservation of heritage buildings and the old towns where the city began which distinguish it from other cities and from the Western cities is absolutely necessary. Additionally the development of the new towns and parts of the cities must reflect the character and cultural heritage as reflected in the old towns.

29. And so to retain the culture and to brand our cities require that we attend to three major challenges.

30. Firstly, we have to deal with growth, which in our East Asian cities will be faster and greater than in Europe or America. Apart from the normal population growth from within there is the constant and often massive migration from the rural areas. Rapid growth without control will convert the old parts of the cities into slums.

31. The question is whether we should grow upwards with more and higher high rise buildings which will result in overcrowding or we spread out into the surrounding countryside. If we tackle the problem of transportation well, limiting the use of private vehicles and providing efficient public mass transit, which will not clog up our streets and destroy the beauty of the city with elevated roads blocking the sun and the beautiful buildings, then our cities need not be confined to a small overcrowded area. There would be an urban sprawl but it would have little towns scattered about which can be beautiful.

32. The best form of public mass transit is the underground but light surface or overhead transit systems, especially monorails, will minimise the obstruction to the beauty of the surroundings and yet move a lot of people from one small town to another.

33. Perhaps town-planners can design a city layout with this spread, with specialisations of sub-centres, minimal high-rise and public transportation system that meet the needs of the citizens and reduce the use of private vehicles. This will then develop a culture of its own and brand the city. This approach is best when building new cities.

34. The second challenge is to revive the architecture of old Asia, modified to suit present needs. Instead of tearing down our old towns we should preserve quite a number of the old city streets lined with wooden shop houses. The front facade can be maintained while the back part built up with medium-height buildings which reflect the architecture and style of the fronts. Asian cities must try to look Asian wherever possible.

35. The third challenge is to colour the city with flowers and colourful plants. The city must be landscaped so as to look like a park. Some of the cities of China are already doing this. Together with the landscaping must be the lighting. Street lights are no longer meant only for lighting but also for beautification. The countryside with its green and farms should also be preserved between the urban centres. Parks should be scattered throughout the city.

36. It is not possible to brand a city if they all look like New York. I realise it is not easy to come up with unique layouts and designs for different cities. But our town-planners and architects should try. Perhaps an international competition can be held and handsome prizes given for the best designs and layout incorporating the traditional architecture of the city, or the

country or East Asia. I am sure given the proper incentives our town-planners and architects can come out with the right kinds of designs which can be used to brand the cities.

37. Our towns are still growing and new towns are being developed. So the opportunities to innovate are there. The national Governments and the city authorities must cooperate so as to change the cities and make them more attractive and liveable. The brand should be pre-determined if possible and the city designed to emphasise the brand. If the cuisine of the locality is special this should be exploited to help with the brand. It is desirable that the well-known international fast-food restaurants be made less prominent. Instead the local cuisine should be promoted, with restaurants which are unique in architecture.

38. The branding of cities is more important now than ever before. This is because modern cities tend to look similar and to have facilities common to every city in the world. Hotels, banks, shopping complexes, restaurants, traffic jams all look the same and are the same everywhere. Travelling is becoming less and less interesting. There is nothing to see that you cannot see at home.

39. It is time that we try to break this monotony. Asia has a rich heritage in culture, architecture, landscaping etc. We must revive our heritage and build our cities to reflect them. Given the variety of our heritage our cities should look different from each other and will not be boring.

40. When cities look different and are different then branding would be easy.

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