

Impact Leader Excellence Award

Green design is GuocoLand CEO's passion

Cheng Hsing Yao is personally involved in checking the sustainability credentials of all the property group's projects. *By Annabeth Leow*

As chief executive of GuocoLand, Cheng Hsing Yao still rolls up his sleeves for the dirty work. The trained architect personally vets the drawings for the property group's projects, right down to back-of-house elements such as refuse collection.

"Even with our existing buildings, I still participate a lot with the facilities management – to talk about how to maintain (them) properly," he added.

It is this interest in the nitty-gritty of design that has helped Cheng, 53, clinch the Impact Leader Excellence Award in the individual category at the 2024 Sustainability Impact Awards jointly organised by The Business Times and UOB.

At GuocoLand, sustainability goes beyond the simple definition of saving the planet. Instead, Cheng said, the company prefers to approach sustainability through the principle of designing buildings "from the inside".

"It allows the building to be relevant for longer... and then that preserves the longer-term function," he added.

The benefits of such an approach are evident at Guoco Midtown in Bugis, which was conceptualised with hybrid and flexible work in mind. "That was before Covid," Cheng noted.

GuocoLand broke ground on Guoco Midtown – which spans land parcels along Beach Road and Tan Quee Lan Street – in 2018. The mixed-use development is being launched in phases, with the office tower component receiving its temporary occupation permit in January last year.

INSIDE-OUT DESIGN

One signature feature of the project is an annexe that GuocoLand has dubbed the Network Hub: a purpose-built clubhouse with business and meeting spaces such as office suites fitted out for short-term leases, a seating plan for hot-desking, and soundproofed teleconferencing pods.

In the company's 2023 annual report, Cheng called this business hub "key to our 'flex in core' leasing strategy that better supports the dynamic nature of workspace demand of our tenants".

Space optimisation is just one aspect of sustainable development. "The other aspect is really the building material, the way we design, and also the technology we use, that will support reduction in the consumption of resources," the chief executive added.

GuocoLand puts its blueprints through simulations that study factors such as air flow and sun exposure, which affect resource use and sustainability.

This attention to detail extends to the "longer-term life-cycle maintainability point of view", such as having extra space to include future upgrades for what Cheng dubs "unseen things" in buildings.

"The way we design can make it very hard to maintain and clean, or can make it relatively easy," he said, citing spaces for air-handling units and other mechanical and electrical systems.

He also highlights the use of landscaping. "We always have a deliberate intention to use native species," he said. "We try to put back a little bit of the nature and biodiver-

sity."

Guoco Midtown was designed to feature 3.8 hectares of gardens, with Cheng pointing to the inclusion of more than 350 plant species in the greenery.

He has given serious thought to how to drive change in the built environment – an energy- and water-guzzling sector that he noted is "one of the biggest contributors (to) emissions".

Guoco Midtown is not the only project that demonstrates this thoughtfulness. Properties across the company's Singapore portfolio have clinched a slew of Building and Construction Authority Green Mark certification labels for their resource-efficient design features.

An upcoming residential project in Upper Thomson, near the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, will take a "biodiversity-sensitive approach".

Said Cheng: "Sustainability has a close relationship with how we can have buildings that are greener but also serve as spaces to support more sustainable lifestyles and behaviours."

DISTRICT PLANNER

Cheng joined GuocoLand Singapore as its chief operating officer in 2012. He became group managing director in 2014, and eventually took the top job at the company in 2021.

Before entering the corporate world, he spent more than a decade in public service – including stints as deputy director of urban design at the Urban Redevelopment Authority, as well as deputy executive director at the Centre for Liveable



Cheng says: "Sustainability has a close relationship with how we can have buildings that are greener but also serve as spaces to support more sustainable lifestyles and behaviours." BT PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

Cities (CLC).

He continues to serve as a member of the Land Transport Authority board and the CLC advisory panel, among other roles.

Cheng credits the public sector with instilling a "more macro" quality in his perspective and reminding him to think about projects in more than simply quarterly terms.

His experience translates into considering developments from a precinct or neighbourhood level. To that end, Cheng champions collaboration across the various stakeholders in the vicinity of his developments – whether through connectivity or other design elements. He helped set up the Discover Tanjong Pagar business association, which aims to promote that neighbourhood as a community destination. Guoco Midtown, he said, was also built with connections to other nearby projects in mind, such as Suntec City, South Beach, and Shaw Tower, which is now undergoing redevelopment.

"We shared our design with (other architects) and said: 'Look at our

design and see how best we can make an attractive neighbourhood."

Cheng summed up his belief as follows: Everybody wins together.

"Being defensive against your neighbours doesn't help," he said. "You are trying to draw people to your building; but, in the first place, they must want to come to the district."

As part of its green journey, GuocoLand set up a green finance framework in 2023, setting out internal expectations in association with its financing plans.

Cheng said business decisions are not made specifically to tap green financing, as GuocoLand had been greening its buildings "long before the availability of green financing".

Still, he takes the growing availability of green facilities as a sign of progress in the financial sector, and welcomes this option for real estate developers, given the industry's capital-intensive nature.

As for what's next on his to-do list, Cheng mentioned strengthening GuocoLand's portfolio in over-

seas markets – which include mixed-use and residential developments in China and Malaysia.

"We're reviewing a lot of things right now," he said.

"What is it that we can do, and what are the capabilities we can leverage on synergistically across the different places?"

Green buildings, sustainability and biodiversity-friendly design are aspects from the group's experience in Singapore that can be "quite transportable to the other markets".

The highlight of his career, Cheng said, is "doing something that I'm passionate about, and having a very great team of people that I can work with".

"You reflect upon your life and think about, oh, you know, what's so special? It is not necessarily because of this building and that building," he said. "The fact that my team and I have a very strong rapport – wanting to try, but also wanting to make sure it succeeds – that is, for me, very valuable."

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