

THE BIG IDEA IN ACTION: Using space to foster inclusiveness

IF YOUR neighbour wants to build a condominium and you cannot bear the resulting dust and noise, there is currently no formal way for you to object to his plans.

“It’s entirely in the hands of the authorities,” says law don Jack Lee of the Singapore Management University, a public law expert who has given talks on spatial justice.

Planning how space is used in Singapore is very much a “top-down” affair, he notes, because while you have to leave your neighbour be, the law here compels urban planners to invite comments from the public on the nation’s masterplan.

Spatial justice is mainly about, but not limited to, physical space. Pioneering Singaporean architect William Lim says that the Government, and Asians in general, should make the idea a plank of public policy to foster inclusiveness.

“We need to measure the inclusive benefits of successful governance, not just by the often insensitive and flawed measurement of GDP (gross domestic product), but by how well we satisfy basic human needs, minimise unhappiness and foster dignity,” he says.

Best of all, he stresses, spatial justice can be practised immediately. For example, he says, the Housing Board should

leave the void decks of HDB blocks void for residents to gather and interact there freely, and not rent decks out as shop lots.

But Assistant Professor Lee says that while the Government has not flagged spatial justice as a key to inclusiveness, it is already very much into engaging with Singaporeans on such prickly points as building old folks’ homes on residents’ doorsteps.

That said, he cautions: “Things could get messier and less efficient if the Government has to consult all regularly.

“Consultations take time, and you won’t be able to rush things through any more.”