TIME FOR A CHANGE
Chew Tuan Chiong, CEO of the manager of Frasers Centrepoint Trust, moved from managing a science centre to running a Reit

INTERVIEW_SUKI LOR PHOTO_JOH HENG

RUNNING A SCIENCE CENTRE and managing shopping malls may seem worlds apart. But for Chew Tuan Chiong, chief executive officer of the manager of Frasers Centrepoint Trust (FCT), there are similarities. The former CEO of the Singapore Science Centre said: "Both are trying to give people a certain experience and to create a certain mindset in them. In the case of shopping malls, it's to get people to make purchases. For the Science Centre, it is for them to like science."

He was appointed CEO-designate of Frasers Centrepoint Asset Management in January this year, and assumed the post on March 1. Mainboard-listed FCT, a real estate investment trust (Reit), has four suburban malls in its portfolio: Causeway Point, Northpoint, Anchorpoint and Yew Tee Point.

His name became synonymous with the Science Centre in the 14 years that he was at its helm. Dr Chew, 52, brought science alive to visitors through the experiences that he created at the Science Centre, including bringing in blockbuster exhibitions. Annual visitor numbers doubled from 331,000 in 1995, when he started work at the centre, to more than a million by the time he left.

Perhaps he was destined to join the Science Centre. He had a penchant for the stars from a young age, writing in a school essay of his dream to become an astronomer. "I was fascinated by astronomy. Probably, I was on the road to science."

But 14 years is a long time to be with one organisation and the time came for him to leave the statutory board. "I thoroughly enjoyed my job but at some point, it is good to make a change so that the brain cells don't get stale." Dr Chew, who is a chartered engineer, also wanted to see leadership renewal at the centre, he told Pulses in an interview.

Exhibiting the same sense of wonder that visitors to the Science Centre might feel, he described his dramatic role change as interesting, refreshing and fun. "It's really opened up my mind. And it's pretty exciting to see how things work."

One major challenge that he faced in making the switch was "to embed myself in a new ecosystem", he said. While joining a Reit was not like moving to another planet, there are major differences.

For one thing, his job scope was diverse at the Science Centre. "A typical day could involve meeting contractors, hosting dignitaries, holding staff meetings and even writing scientific articles - many things in one day. There could also be diplomatic functions to attend at night."

"Plus you've got to be constantly coming up with new ideas, thinking about how to titillate people's minds about science. Here at the Reit, in property, it's a lot more focused."

While there are fewer parameters to navigate at a Reit, some aspects of the business require him to be astute and exact, such as when dealing with capital markets.

But he still finds plenty to draw on from his past job. "Fortunately, when it comes to high-level management, a lot of the soft skills are transferrable. For instance, leadership skills, strategic visioning, ability to see the big picture - those are portable skills." Coming from a different sector, he can also bring a fresh perspective.

In any case, he had been window-shopping at malls here and abroad even before he got his new job. "I like to observe people ... and I can do that at shopping malls. It helps me because I'm very much a left-brain person, with not very high EQ, so I have to think hard and observe to become a little bit more human," he said self-depreciatingly.

He was able to hone his people skills at his old job too. "The Science Centre has a lot of the human element in it. It's all about people."

Speaking of people, he was full of praise for his colleagues at the Fraser & Neave group, who helped him make a smooth transition with their unstinting support. "That takes away most of the hurdles in joining a new organisation."

One bar he cleared was the Capital Markets and Financial Advisory Services examination that he took in February to fulfil the licensing requirements set by the Monetary Authority of Singapore. "I hadn't taken exams in 30 years. That was quite fun actually - I love exams," he said,
Dr Chew, a chartered engineer, has sat for more examinations than most. A former government scholar, he holds a doctorate from the University of Cambridge, a Masters of Science from the National University of Singapore (NUS) where he focused on solar energy, and a Bachelor of Engineering (with first class honours) from Monash University, Australia.

At Cambridge, Dr Chew’s area of speciality was combustion, where he was conferred the Sugden Award by Britain’s Combustion Institute for work in statistical modelling of flames.

He put his knowledge of combustion to good use when he joined Mercedes-Benz in Germany where he researched engines, and later on at British Gas. Before joining the Science Centre, he was associate professor at NUS for a few years.

Dr Chew’s expertise in flames, however, does not extend to the kitchen. His one attempt at cooking ended in dismal failure. “At Cambridge, I tried to fry hoo hoon – quite ambitious. It was a disaster. The kitchen was filled with smoke.”

Continuing to pose patiently for the photographer while being quizzed about his favourite food, he said that he likes Japanese cuisine and English breakfasts, a taste acquired in his student days in Australia and the UK. “You know, those soft-fried eggs ... you pierce them with a fork and the yolk oozes out,” he said with relish.

As for local fare, he confesses that he cannot resist peanut mee kiau kiau (a pancake with peanut filling) and black glutinous rice. “It’s a childhood thing,” he said.

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Asked what it was like when he was growing up, he said with wry humour: “During my first seven years, I was staying in a waterfront landed property. It was this attap shack – no electricity, no water.”

The hut was located along what is now the Toa Payoh canal. It did not even have an address. “Then we got upgraded to a three-room flat in Queenstown. It was like the Ritz Carlton. There were doors in the house!”

Dr Chew is the youngest of four boys in his family. Recounting his schooldays, he said that he wasn’t studious and found school to be “lots of fun”. He went to three primary schools and received his secondary school education at Raffles Institution.

His father ran a confectionery stall at a primary school until sweets were banned from canteens.

Dr Chew and his homemaker wife have two children: a 21-year-old son who is an economics undergraduate in France, and a 19-year-old daughter studying real estate management at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

Dr Chew sets aside his weekends for the family. In his younger days, he played racket games. And he represented Singapore in bridge as the captain of the
junior team of players aged below 30.

For exercise these days, he takes brisk walks. His current hobbies include gardening and watching movies. The latter began as a professional interest as he needed to choose titles for the Omnimax theatre at the Science Centre. Dr Chew also enjoys travelling with his family, and they have visited the popular tourist spots as well as more unusual destinations such as Greece, Egypt and Israel. His work at the Science Centre also took him to exotic places such as Brazil and the Arctic Circle.

With science being his passion, Dr Chew also finds time to conduct courses in scientific exploration and society as an adjunct professor at the Singapore Management University.

At FCT, his vision is to double the Reit's asset size in the next five to seven years, from its current $1.5 billion.

Apart from the shopping malls in Singapore, FCT also has a 31 per cent stake in Hektar Reit, listed on the Malaysian stock exchange.

Dr Chew said that FCT's expansion will continue to centre on Singapore, where opportunities abound. "Malaysia is very similar to Singapore, and it's a fast rising developing economy so it's worth considering. But our main focus continues to be the solid foundation of Singapore suburban malls."

He was upbeat about FCT's prospects. "FCT is a bit like a lucky child. It was brought up and nurtured in a very nice environment. It has good parents and was born under an auspicious star," he said. By parents, he was referring to Frasers Centrepoint, the property arm of Frasers & Neave. FCT is able to tap Frasers Centrepoint's strong pipeline of assets.

The Reit has enjoyed growth every year since its listing in 2006, even during economic downturns. "The reason for that is quite clear. The assets it holds are all suburban malls which are highly resilient, very stable assets. During a downturn, people still need to go to suburban malls for their necessities. So even during those difficult months last year, there was quite healthy growth. Of course, now that the economy is picking up, we're enjoying the fruits as well. FCT's prospects, going forward, should be just as good."

For its second quarter ended March 31, 2010, FCT reported a 31 per cent surge year-on-year in income available for distribution of $15.9 million. Gross revenue jumped 34 per cent to $28.3 million, boosted by maiden contributions from Northpoint 2 and Yew Tee Point, which were acquired in February. A strong recovery in Northpoint's performance after enhancement work on the mall was completed also helped.

Dr Chew reckoned that the Reit's performance over the past three years is sustainable for the foreseeable future. FCT has at least two new properties in the pipeline, one of them being Bedok Point, he said. It also plans to start asset enhancement work soon on Causeway Point, its biggest asset.

"I'm blessed because I come into this job with a very strong team already in place. Whether it is financial planning or AEI (asset enhancement initiative), the expertise here is comparable to the best in Singapore," said Dr Chew.

Elaborating on the Reit's positives, he said: "We've been a very responsible Reit. We are stable, we deliver good returns, good DPU (distribution per unit) that's growing every year. That would be our cornerstone philosophy."

At the time of the interview, the Reit was yielding more than 6 per cent. Companies with comparable yields and the same level of stability are hard to find, Dr Chew said.

But FCT is not focused solely on profits. Malls have become an important part of people's lives here. A Singaporean visits a Fraser Centrepoint mall about 20 times a year on average, and an FCT mall 13 times a year, said Dr Chew.

Apart from improving the bottom line, "we have this responsibility to make the experience pleasing or memorable", he said, adding: "It isn't just for business. It's like trying to build a legacy."

For instance, FCT sacrifices some lettable area to provide more spacious walkways in its malls. In renovating Northpoint, it added play areas at the roof-top terrace. Such amenities are also on the cards for Causeway Point.

"We owe it to our shoppers to make it a good experience for them. With that, we also differentiate ourselves from many other malls ... A mall touches everyone's lives and that's the fun part, that makes it meaningful," Dr Chew said.