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Headline: People need to rethink how to live, work in post-COVID-19 era: Singaporean forum

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COVID-19 will create a fundamental shift in the way people live and do business and they will need to learn to be flexible and adapt to changes quickly, said speakers at an Institute of Policy Studies online forum here Wednesday.

Titled "Bouncing Back from COVID-19", the forum explored what the public, business and community leaders can do to ensure that short-term responses for survival also prepare society for longer-term resilience and growth.

The panel was led by Gillian Koh, deputy director of research and senior research fellow of Institute of Policy Studies.

Already, some business models and industries have seen "radical changes" amid the COVID-19 pandemic, said panellist Loh Lik Peng, founder of Unlisted Collection, an umbrella group of over 20 restaurants and five boutique hotel properties.

For instance, the restaurant industry -- which is traditionally viewed as manpower-intensive -- has tapped on technology to survive, such as high-end restaurants which now tap on online platforms to allow for delivery, said Loh.

Going ahead, there will be more changes, such as segregated kitchens and hotels adopting "zero-touch" technologies such as RFID locks (RFID is a tracking system that uses intelligent bar codes), automated check-ins with QR codes and so on.

"The old way of operating is going to disappear, at least for the next year," he said.

The future design of cities will also evolve in different ways, said fellow panellist and architect-planner Cheong Koon Hean.

On a national scale, countries will see more travel bubbles, while within the country, there will be more decentralisation and more self-sufficient regions at a more "local level", she said.

Singapore has already developed satellite towns. These large scale satellite housing developments are designed to be self-contained, with workplaces, amenities and parks located closer to homes. This minimises public transport travel and thins out the density in the city and commercial hubs, she said.

Offices are likely to incorporate more sensors and spaced out work stations, while more co-working and shared conference facilities are likely to spring up to ensure remote working. Communal living spaces such as foreign worker dormitories, nursing homes and student hostels will have to be redesigned to allow for greater segregation, she added.

Parcel delivery by drones and drone parks, self-driving vehicles, real-time seat management of buses and trains to minimise crowding were also some of the futuristic ideas she listed out.

Beyond innovative urban design solutions, good leadership, inter-agency collaboration as well as "social buy-in of safe distancing measures" by citizens is needed, said Cheong.

In this evolving situation, businesses need to be agile and rethink the old way of doing things, said Neo Boon Siong, former dean of the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University.

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Panellist David Chan, director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University, said that in future, citizens have to be prepared to live alongside the COVID-19 virus and an uncertain world.

This means not just adapting to changes, but to "learn to do the same thing in more than one way," such as workers being prepared to switch between working from home and the office, or offices being converted into mixed-use developments, he said.

Vernon Lee, associate professor at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at National University of Singapore, noted that until a vaccine is available, Singaporeans will have to adjust their lifestyles to cope with the new normal, and adopt safe management techniques.

"We have to adapt to the virus and change, because the virus is not going to change for us," said Lee, who is also the director of communicable diseases at the Ministry of Health.