

13 December 2019

Speech by the Honourable Justice See Kee Oon

Presiding Judge of the State Courts

Symbolic Closing Ceremony

Distinguished guests, fellow Judges, ladies and gentlemen,

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Thank you for joining us this afternoon. This symbolic closing ceremony marks the last day of operations in our current courthouse. We are honoured to have with us members of the Bar, court volunteers, colleagues from the various agencies – everyone who has spent a significant part of their careers working together with us here. Today, we look back with nostalgia as we bid a fond farewell to this building where many memories were made, milestones crossed, and friendships forged.

B. HISTORY OF THE STATE COURTS

2. The then Subordinate Courts commenced operations on 15 September 1975 in this building, consolidating the various courts that were formerly scattered throughout various locations. The eight-sided building's uniquely modern and commanding presence stood in sharp contrast to the neighbouring buildings in Chinatown.
3. Looking within, the distinctiveness of the building was even more obvious – from this iconic eight-storied atrium which we are standing in, to the double-volume high-ceilinged courtrooms. The ingenuity of the building design was particularly evident in how its functional areas were laid out – with separate circulation paths for different users, large courtrooms for

complex cases with multiple parties, and ample space to support the needs of our court users. This building was clearly a modern courthouse of its time and it has certainly served us well over the last 44 years.

4. A building with distinctive character no doubt also presented some challenges. Navigating its spaces took some time to get used to. The seemingly maze-like passages caused a fair number of us some confusion and perhaps even mild panic. When I first joined the Subordinate Courts in 1991 as a young judicial officer, I would become slightly anxious trying to make sure I did not get lost looking for the next meeting venue. Once, I even guided some foreign visitors down the wrong passageway and made them walk almost a full circle around the building. I am sure that almost all of us will have our own anecdotes to share of how we had gotten lost in these corridors, but these stories are very much part of what made our personal experiences here special and memorable.
5. The building received conservation status on 10 July 2013, recognising its value as a historical landmark. Even as we move to the new State Courts Towers, this building will continue to serve the judiciary and the community, as the Family Justice Courts prepare to move in in due course.

C. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

6. Being the primary courts of first instance undertaking a voluminous and varied caseload, it is unsurprising that the State Courts are often described as being the “engine room” of Singapore’s judicial system. In 1975, not all of the 26 courtrooms that were originally planned for were actually needed. The situation rapidly changed, and we had to construct additional courtrooms to cope with the increased caseload. It soon became clear that the existing infrastructure would not be sufficient to meet growing demands in the longer term. Thus, preliminary work began by the 1990s

on planning for a new courthouse. These plans eventually bore fruit with land allocated for our needs and approval for the requisite budget. Piling work began in 2014 and by October 2019, we had obtained the TOP for the new State Courts Towers.

7. It was envisioned that our new courthouse would be furnished with a larger physical space, innovative technological capabilities, and brand new amenities. Apart from increasing capacity in the form of the number of courtrooms and hearing chambers, smart technology is also harnessed in various ways. Process improvements have also been introduced. All these will help us to remain adaptive and responsive in this disruptive age and serve our court users better.
8. For example, to afford our court users greater convenience, the Central Registry located at Level 2 serves as a ‘one-stop service centre’ for general enquiries and common registry functions such as the filing of fresh appeals and applications for court records. The Business Centre, located on the same floor, provides facilities such as computers with Internet access, and printers and scanners available for all court users to prepare their documents or make their online applications when filing their claims.
9. The State Courts Towers will be fully operational from next Monday, 16 December 2019. Court users will have full access to our brand new suite of services then.

D. CLOSING REMARKS

10. As we in the State Courts close the final chapter marking our time in this building, we must never forget our core values and never waver from our commitment to delivering justice to the community.

11. We will continue to review and renew our existing practices and processes to meet the new demands of an ever-changing legal landscape. We must also continue to develop our people, as it is the human experience – the empathy demonstrated towards court users, and the capabilities of our officers – which will enable us to deliver quality justice and retain the high public trust and confidence in our judiciary.
12. In time to come, we hope that we will be able to look back upon today, and see that the State Courts have not merely moved from one building to another, but also entered a new era in being even more effective in administering justice and upholding the Rule of Law.
13. Today, we take a final look and make one last walk around our courthouse. I would like to invite you to reflect on your time and experiences here and how you have evolved and progressed in your journey with us. These memories will stay with us and sustain us as we move forward and embark on a bright, new future.
14. I would like to invite our guests to join us as we proceed to our new home in the State Courts Towers. Our procession will end at the atrium of the Towers, where Deputy Presiding Judge Jennifer Marie and I will be unveiling a pair of murals which symbolise our people in unity as one State Courts family, dedicated to our mission to serve society at the heart of justice in Singapore.
15. Thank you.