

PROF WILLIAM LIM:

Thank you, Dr Li.

In this short delivery, I wish to touch on four related issues. They are: Asian urbanism, the challenges ahead, conservation and memories and some selected examples of Hong Kong innovative urban instruments.

On Asian urbanism, in the last few decades, mainstream values based on Eurocentric modernity are increasingly being challenged. The present condition is mainly characterised by organising principles such as hierarchy, universality, conventionalism and conformity, as well as efficiency and predictability. Driven by unprecedented levels of rapid technological changes and dynamic information transfers, traditions and cultures and values need to continuously evolve and redefine in response to the plurality of contemporary society.

We have now arrived at a new era.

In the post-colonial period, modernist planning was offered and supported as a model for development in the non-West. However, this top-down and elitist-oriented approach of Eurocentric modernist planning is no longer equipped to deal with the complexity of urban life today.

Asian urbanism differs markedly from the West.

Asian cities bubble with vitality and dynamism that both puzzles and attracts many observers. This difference could be attributed largely to the embedded role of cultures and traditions of Asian societies. In Asia, chaos, uncertainty, pluralistic richness and evolving complexity are accepted as essential elements of its urban dynamism.

In Asian cities, the introduction of modern planning, spatial and usage separations are constantly contested and defied by the dynamic human interactions taking place on the street everywhere. This

fluidity and the rebellious attitude of Asian urban dwellers to interpret spaces in response to evolving demand is precisely what fuel the vibrancy and dynamism of Asian cities.

Notwithstanding exploding population and intrusion of major roads, the vitality of streets in Asian cities have continued to respond to the evolving needs and changing lifestyles of the local communities. Much of the old street networks, including those just off the main road, remain intact in cities everywhere. Traditional eating places, roadside stalls and many other mixed usages are all in charming, peaceful co-existence. The festivals continue to be staged and paraded through these crowded, bustling and exciting streets.

Asian cities, including those situated in the more developed economies, demonstrate key different characteristics from the West. They are pluralistic with visible chaotic disorder, an incredible mixture of multiuse space.

Singapore is perhaps the only exception as it has strictly followed the Western modernist-planning model.

Drawing comparison with the Chinese landscape painting, the Chinese as well as the Japanese and Koreans conception of urban spaces is multi-dimensional and unstable.

An excellent example is what we all have seen in the famous painting, "Riverside Scenery at Qingming Festival" the other night, which is currently in exhibition in Hong Kong. The viewer's attention must always move from one focal point to another. Western modernist planning is clearly an unsuitable tool to observe the effectiveness of Asian theories and practical applications.

What are the challenges ahead? Since World War 2, Western capitalism has aggressively penetrated most developing economies and greatly impacted the developing strategies in the rapid expansion of their cities. With the support of international institutions and aid agencies, selected theories and practices of

modernist planning are widely accepted, including last-scale urban renewals, car-oriented planning and single usage zoning.

To facilitate quick and easy adaptation of the changing stylism in the West, a commodified universal model in architecture, generally known as the international style, is made respectable.

This enables endless replications with minor modifications for the effective Western aesthetic recolonisation and cultural dominance which resulted in the production of generic architecture.

What is generic architecture? It is a regressive architectural attitude of accepting conceptual, spatial and visual replications which can be adapted universally anywhere, on any location, in any climatic condition and at any stage of economic development and level of technological know-how.

Generic architecture produces no new creative experiences but only the opportunity for a marketable product of past visual images.

Sadly, I must agree with Rem Koolhaas that this has resulted in an architecture like, and I quote: "An epidemic of yielding no longer through the application of principle but through the systematic application of the unprincipled."

As the late Eric Lye lamented during the presentation of Singapore architecture of the younger generation at the AA Asia architectural workshop in the late 1990s, quote:

"The design concepts are all the same and very familiar. Where is the architecture?"

The frenetic pace of economic expansion in developing economies has led to population explosion in many Asian cities where architecture is becoming commodities in the consumer-oriented culture and iconic symbols in the capitalist market. The race to construct skyscrapers and luxury condominiums is proceeding unabatedly. Superspeed delivery time is often demanded, resulting in massive replication of visual images of the new and fashionable

overseas. With the lack of fundamental knowledge of Western culture, aesthetic and modern architectural theories, indiscriminate replications are widely and unapologetically accepted.

Furthermore, historical cultural traditions are often sidelined by Western architects as they do not have much interest regarding in-depth understanding of local peculiarities.

But no one is complaining as long as buildings are constructed fast enough and affordable enough to satisfy the insatiable demand and appetite for quick profits.

Creative ideas and innovative design which can contribute to improve the quality of urban life and society's needs are abandoned as architecture is now predominantly being driven by the capital market forces of speed and greed. Current dominance of generic architecture has overwhelmed Asian skylines and much of the downtown areas of major cities, not for the love of copying but the acceptance of its inevitability. At least just for now.

On conservation and memories. Cities have enormously complex histories and memories. They are sites consisting of various social, political and economic spheres within which various forces such as money and power as well as ethnicity and gender collide and interact. These differences surface as a series of power struggles that determine in the end whose histories, memories and heritage are preserved.

Official history tends to reflect only what the rich and powerful have chosen to remember. However, memories of the community and the marginalised must also be given due recognition.

Individually, individuals are attracted to cities in different ways, depending on their moods and particular phases in their lives. Each city is unique and evokes different feelings in its residents and visitors.

Visual memories of traditional downtown areas often present chaotic historical layering. Memories are by nature abstract and unreal, as is life, which is full of absurdity, tension and contradiction. Furthermore, rural migrant and overseas diaspora often have stressful memories and multiple cultural identities. Sometimes it is as important to forget as it is to recall.

Heritage, which includes the preservation of the built and natural environment, the oral and written culture, the legacy of the performing and other arts, as well as the beliefs, values and lifestyles of individuals and the community is now increasingly being recognised as the people's cultural anchoring, as well as a counterpoise to the prevailing new global culture.

As the storehouse of our individual and collective memories and experiences, heritage gives meaning to the past and explains the present and provides internal strength and confidence for the future.

The richness of history, memories and local identities is often an indication of how much an urban environment is enjoyed by the people. We must consciously elevate the value of visual memories in our urban environment beyond the criterion of commoditification.

Nation states need to act responsibly as trustees of common rights and services for the whole community.

Fumihiko Maki of Japan commented that dreams give meaning to our existence in the city. "Familiar scenery in the city reminds us of a common past; it provides comfort and stability."

Examples include the trams and ferry in Hong Kong, which you all know. This past decade, Asian countries have shown increasing interest in heritage and conservation. Civic societies are more vocal and effective now. Governments are more supportive. But the selective actions are often attracted by tourist money rather than enhancing collective memories of the old communities. Examples include the gentrification of traditional areas to attract tourists for better return of investment. Fortunately, actions to support community interest are now more widespread and fast gaining importance.

Recent major examples include the reuse of the factory complex 798 in Beijing, located on the outskirts of Beijing, from a complex of abandoned factories to become now a famous centre for the arts, as well as the incredible restoration of the canal in Seoul which has been reclaimed from a road system.

Now let me conclude by just sharing with you my three observations of how the innovative urban instruments are important in our living heritage and these are three occurring right in Hong Kong today.

The first one is Compact Urban Central. The second is a second level pedestrian connectors and the third one is the Mid-Levels escalators.

The Compact Urban Central. Hong Kong's global city imagery, is signified by the harbour view with its significant steep hilly backdrop, but equally vital factor is the compact vibrant central which has been and remains as Hong Kong's political, financial and commercial core. Central is a zone of urgency and innovation created out of the immediate demands and pressure of rapid urbanisation, population explosion and hyperdensity. It exemplifies the most daring post -- planning exercise along the

main roads are haphazardly packed high buildings but with the width of the roads unchanged.

Behind the commercial skyscrapers are mixed-use residential blocks of various shapes, levels and signs built in inexplicable proximity. The small scale businesses and services occupy every gap and crack spaces. Small alleys and streets crammed with markets and bazaars have been spared from clearance and redevelopment and provide the life-blood of activities for the urban workers. The city negotiates all these pressures and manifests demands in astounding spatial preparation configurations.

The second level pedestrian connectors. To ease the pedestrian overcrowding on street level, influential building owners in Central decided to provide second -- level linkages between and within these buildings. The system has obviously been working well and has since been extended to cover a much greater area beyond Central. Recently a comprehensive pedestrianisation project is implemented with additional pedestrian crossway, elevated walkways and building connectors. The innovative urban instrument is invented in response to site-specific challenges and is tested and improved over time. It's now obvious that this urban instrument is effective and affordable and can be applied with modification up to critical urban conditions in many other Asian cities.

And finally, a word about the Mid-Levels escalator. It was officially opened to the public 1994. It's the longest outdoor covered escalator system in the world. This "thinking out-of-the-box" project using proven and affordable technology is an admirable device to provide an alternative mode of travel, particularly for urban workers and the marginalised. The whole system is 800 metres long with a vertical climb of 135 metres. This vertical people moreover cuts across sections of neighbourhoods and when possible, above existing lanes and alleys to reach the highrise residential district of Conduit Road. The total travel time is only 30 minutes.

The escalators run downhill during the morning rush hour and uphill during the rest of the day. Daily traffic is estimated to be 50,000 and the use of the escalator is also free.

Now I just conclude my observations. In the meantime, rigorous application of market-oriented modernism in planning and architecture, in developing economies, are still continuing unabated, including the near complete Tabula Rasa of Singapore as well as major demolition and reconstruction of traditional downtown areas in major cities from Shanghai to New Delhi. This elitist utopian vision to create an improved environment in the name of providing a better order future leads to the destruction of invaluable historical memories and of existing familiar environment that makes most citizens, ordinary people, feel at home.

The question that must be asked is what exactly is meant by "better" and for whose benefits? Let me conclude to say it is easier to build new iconic monuments than to preserve what should not be demolished.

Thank you.