

Committee III  
Human Beings and the Urban  
Environment: The Future Metropolis

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DISCUSSION PAPER

by

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on

Peter Wyss's

THE ASIAN METROPOLIS

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"The Asian Metropolis"

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Urbanisation is one of the most complex problems facing humanity. So far we are fighting a losing battle. This is mainly due to our failure to comprehend the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the problem. Many planners, architects, urban-sociologists, urban-geographers and urban-economists are still dealing with urban problems as if they were isolated static phenomena, similar to applying static laws of Newtonian physics to solve the dynamic behaviour of the particles in the sub-atomic world. It is quite clear by now that there is no ideal universal solution to urban problems and all large cities face similar crises in The Asian Metropolis as Dr. Peter Wyss pointed out in his paper. No matter what we do, it seems impossible to stop the growth of population, to prevent the influx of people to and from the city, to provide adequate services and housing, to limit the size of the city, etc. All these are indeed unsolvable problems if they are being treated as evils which have to be controlled or contained. But, if we recognise these problems as manifestations of the inherent dynamic forces of cities, they can become, if used sensitively, positive factors in the shaping of the ever changing metropolis. This would be like applying the new theories of Relativity, Quantum Mechanics and High Energy Physics in solving some of the mysteries of our dynamic cosmos.

As Dr. Wyss points out in his paper, some of the urban problems in Asia are in fact indigenous. This means that culture and traditions are

important factors in the shaping of Asian Communities. I can hardly disagree with him on this point. However, in Dr. Wyss's paper the Asian sense of community appears to be a negative force. I feel Asian mentality is only negative if it is not being dealt with positively. Surely, before our world is dominated by one super culture, there is bound to be differences between Asian and Western cities. These differences make the problems of Asian urbanization much more fascinating.

Dr. Wyss discusses 'lucky' Singapore and Hong Kong as exceptions. Dr. Sumet Jumsai in his discussion paper says neither Hong Kong nor Singapore should be used for urban comparisons. I feel this is wrong. In my opinion both cities represent the Asian mentality working at its best, for better or worst, which can be served as inspiration or guide line for other Asian cities.

25 years ago both Hong Kong and Singapore were underdeveloped like most other Asian cities. Today both cities have become two major highly developed and prosperous urban centres in Asia. The main reason behind the success stories of these twin cities is the result of two vital interaction forces: 1) a strong Government policy and 2) the hard working nature and ingenuity of the people. The first force is somewhat different between Hong Kong and Singapore whilst the second is more or less similar.

Hong Kong (population: 5.4 million, land area: 1,062 Km<sup>2</sup>): The Government adopts a laissez-faire policy of non-intervention for private enterprise on the one hand and provides adequate and efficient public services such

as: transportation network, housing, maintenance, education for the general mass population on the other hand. Things work and get done in Hong Kong. Because it is a British colony, there is no strong sense of identity and belonging among the 5.4 million people. In addition the uncertainty of the future has become part of the mental condition of the residents since 1949 when the Communists took over Mainland China; both the private sector and the Government practise a short-term planning policy in which quick profit and result dominate the decision making process. Such attitude, extremely versatile in its manifestations, has brought about an unprecedented rapid urban growth both in physical form and in economic structure. As a result, the even and continuous urban physical fabric of the homogeneous old Hong Kong is destroyed and replaced by uneven and discontinuous individual isolated developments mostly of poor design. Quantity and profit of investment are the measures of success in which quality has virtually no place.

Hong Kong becomes a casino where the majority cares of nothing other than making money. Like all casinos, Hong Kong is an exciting place. The city is full of life. It is, perhaps also because of such richness of life within a well managed semi-controlled self-contained environment, population growth, influx of immigrants, and other urban problems do not seem to be grave crises that cause social unrest as in other Asian cities.

Hong Kong has survived many crises in the past. However, the most serious problem is yet to come when China will regain the sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997. The dream of the casino has ended. Most of the money-making

developments have come to a grinding halt. Major investments are being drained overseas. No one can tell what Hong Kong will be like approaching 1997 or thereafter. One thing, quite apparant, is that for those who have confidence in Hong Kong, it has become a cheaper place to live than before.

The story of Hong Kong reveals to us the importance of a condition created both by the Government's semi-controlled policy and the versatility of the Asian mentality in which unique and dynamic pattern of urbanization takes shpae.

Singapore: (population: 2.5 million, land area: 618 Km<sup>2</sup>): This year, Singapore celebrates her 25th year as an independent nation. Singapore is about half the size of Hong Kong both in terms of land area and population. Although both cities have strong economy and predominantly Chinese population there are some fundamental differences to their success. The basic one is that Singapore is a nation and Hong Kong a colony. There is a sense of identity, pride and belonging among the Singaporeans and selfish individualism among the Hong Kong people. To the Singaporeans, their City State is the place to build their homes and the Government policies both in public housing and in private development reinforce such attitude. The ultimate objective of the interaction of Government and the private sector is for the common good.

The Government exercises strong control over private development and has a very well planned public housing programme. For example, Government has the power to resume private land to suit the Government's Master Plan. From time to time the Government releases resumed or new lands for

private development by way of public tender. The design merit of the submitted scheme is an important criterion of the award. This policy has encouraged the developers to engage quality architects. During recent years many foreign "super-star" architects have been successful in obtaining important commissions. This phenomenon has also caused some undesirable effects. Some of the ambitious "spectacular" proposals by the super-stars lack the understanding of the local conditions and are both inappropriate and uneconomical. Furthermore, the invasion of foreign architects upsets the local practices and creates an unhealthy myth of foreign supremacy. Because of the insular nature of individual large scale private developments, there is discontinuity in the flow of pedestrian movement from one large project to the other. Similar to Hong Kong, the old Singapore urban fabric was even and continuous. The physical pattern has now been disturbed, changing the horizontal skyline to a vertical one.

On the other hand public housing in Singapore can be rated as one of the most thoughtful in the world. It houses more than 76% of the population among which most of them own their homes. After almost 25 years of public housing programme, the Government has already successfully achieved the quantitative objective of housing more than 2/3 of its population. Now the policy aims to upgrade the qualitative aspects of public housing. Within a well planned policy, there are rules and regulations, environment support, services and enforcement support to ensure the quality of the housing estates. Incentive re-sale scheme also provides the possibilities for family mobility in different stages while retaining traditional values of family structure — a total integration of cultural, social and physical

community planning.

The success of Singapore is based on a strong Government control framework over private development within which private enterprises can make a reasonable profit return from the investment but can never be based on speculation and greed as in Hong Kong. In her public housing program it makes private housing development almost impossible except for the elite. The merit of this policy is to keep the majority happily settled, thus creating a stabilized and productive society.

Both Hong Kong and Singapore are city states with definite size, relatively controllable population influx, capable governments and versatile people. Perhaps these are the key factors for their success as workable dynamic metropolis. Most cities in Asia other than those in China have been modernised in one way or the other. It will be interesting to watch how major Chinese metropolis respond to problems of urbanization under China's determined modernisation programme. Certainly there are many planning and design theories, approaches, features from the Western metropolis and from the more developed Asian metropolis for China to learn. The question is will this great nation with five thousand years of civilization learn from mistakes by others and not to repeat the similar disaster as shown in history of city again and again.

Beijing: (population: 9.3 million, land area: 16,800 Km<sup>2</sup>): Surprisingly some of the basic conditions of Beijing are similar to those of Hong Kong and Singapore. For example, Beijing has a strong government capable of controlling practically every aspect of urban development including

population influx and then the citizens are Chinese. So far Beijing is still not a lively dynamic city when compared to Hong Kong and Singapore. Basically this is due to the political, economic and social systems of dogmatic Communism since 1949. But, the situation is changing rapidly in Beijing under the present pragmatic liberal leaders who are determined to modernize China.

Several major Chinese cities, including Beijing, are currently open for development of private enterprises by encouraging foreign investments. Economic gain is the first priority in all development projects. This can be good and bad at the same time. It is good because it helps to build up the city with more business activities and thus makes the city appear more lively and modern. It is bad because much of the indigenous qualities such as those in the ancient city of Beijing will be destroyed by the unsympathetic and unscrupulous development schemes.

China at the moment is very eager to transform from an underdeveloped country into an instant modern nation. Many decision making officials have fixed on the idea that a modern Chinese city must have a lot of tall glassy fashionable buildings regardless if they are appropriate so long as they look impressively modern. Such attitude opens an undefensible invasion of latest foreign architectural cliché.

Since zoning laws and building regulations in Beijing are still in their embryonic stage, they can hardly catch up and effectively control the fast pace new developments which are mushrooming under the pressure of economic development. So far most of these new developments are



fortunately being confined to the outer city boundary. But the pressure of developing the inner city near the Forbidden Purple City — the Palace is mounting up. Without a careful evaluation of these problems and a quickly formulated set of strong but imaginative zoning laws and building regulations, Beijing, once the jewel of the Orient, will soon become a Western architectural zoo.

Today officials, developers and architects in Beijing often debate the merit of high-rise or low-rise development. I personally feel this is not essential. The main problem is that Beijing is basically a horizontal city covering a large area with very wide roads. Beijing lacks the feeling of urban human scale. What makes the streets of Beijing pleasant are not the buildings but the beautiful trees along the sidewalks. It is surprising to note that there is only one short main shopping street, Wongfujing, in the entire Beijing located in the inner city near the Palace. This is the only street where it is full of lively activities and people and with a great sense of human scale. But how can Beijing become a dynamic modern Asian metropolis if there is only one short business street?

What Beijing needs in its modernisation development programme is the creation of a series of mixed-use sub-centres strategically planned throughout the city. Within each sub-centre, there should be a variety of elements and functions designed for the interaction of people and commercial activities on the lower pedestrian levels. The relatively passive functions such as housing and offices can be accommodated above

the pedestrian levels in taller buildings. Occasionally some tall point-towers can pop up in some of the selected sub-centres like the function of pagodas to give visual accents and serve as landmarks of the city. The incremental development of such well planned self-contained sub-centres will act as magnetic poles to build up lively attraction throughout the city. This will, if planned and maintained properly, spare the city from city-wide redevelopment and destruction which has proven to be uneconomical and unmanageable in other Asian metropolis.

Another important consideration in developing large scale complexes in Beijing is to take growth and demand into a part of planning and design policy, so that the scheme is economically viable in various stages of the development. This, however, does not mean that if ten blocks of buildings are to be developed in a large development scheme, only one or two blocks will be built at a time. The alternative proposal is to create a network of flexible building types consisting a mixture of active functions: commercial, recreational and passive functions: residential, office, institutional. The former are to be located on the lower pedestrian levels and the latter on higher levels. Such system of building network should be planned throughout the entire site. The architectural design of the network, consisting of a flexible system of supporting services, is capable of developing horizontally and vertically in various phases in a flexible and adoptable manner to meet the market demand. However, this system is so designed that it allows balanced provision of both active and passive functions at each phase of

development so it is a livable community at any given phase. This scheme is, in fact, conceived as a growing organism.

When it comes to more detailed environmental and architectural design, indigenous factors such as the contrast of hot and cold Beijing climate, life style of the residents, movement pattern: spatial sequences through interplay of formal and informal courtyards of traditional Beijing architecture should be taken into consideration. Within such a strong but flexible architectural network system, it is possible for traditional cultural values to flourish within a semi-controlled environment but in a modern context. Such an approach, in my opinion, is modernisation based on one's cultural roots. A city like Beijing, with its political system, is entirely capable of achieving such goal whilst fulfilling the economic objectives. Otherwise, indiscriminate imported foreign modern building technologies will soon ruin Beijing and turn it into yet another characterless modern metropolis.

In conclusion, each Asian metropolis faces a different future. Both Singapore and Hong Kong have already established an urban identity which will most likely not change much in their growth patterns. The growth of Asian metropolises other than those from China will depend a great deal upon the effectiveness of the respective local governments in implementing planning policies on the one hand and the mentality as well as integrity of the developer on the other. The fate of metropolis in China will be a fascinating subject to observe in the coming years. Nevertheless, the main issues of this paper are:

- 1) A strong Government policy and control in a city is essential.  
Such policy and control must be handled by capable hands sensitively allowing certain degree of flexibility to meet people's needs and the development of indigenous life styles.
- 2) The success of a city depends a great deal on the keen participation and involvement of its people. Ingenuity, versatility and hardworking nature of the people play an important role in creating liveliness of the city. Citizens must have a sense of pride and belonging.
- 3) Asian metropolis are facing foreign architectural invasion. Preservation of heritage and modernisation must be carefully implemented and balanced. If the response to the challenge is weak, Asian metropolis will soon lose their indigenous characteristics.
- 4) The characteristics and quality of a city form rest upon who has the final say — either the Government or the powerful developers. It is almost impossible for architects and planners to change the megatrends of today's metropolis especially in Asia both in form and in content due to strong political and economic forces. The impact of the latter is getting stronger. Architects and planners can only try their best to introduce good design and inspiring ideas in their individual projects and hope these may have some influence on the overall picture in the future metropolis.
- 5) Both in design and in policy making, multi-dimensional nature of urban problems should be taken into consideration in an integrated manner so that the end-result will be richer and more dynamic. A dynamic city is one where there is an order within which there is allowance for chaos — an orderly chaos.

6) Asian metropolis is not a problem of whether it should be consisted of high-rise or low-rise development. It is a problem of how to design an inspiring environment incorporating human scale, activities, viable economy, climate, political factors and indigenous life style into a unique architectural and planning synthesis.

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