

URBAN PLANNING

A neglected profession

Much as Asia needs to invest in educating urban planners, it really must put plans into action in addition to making them, writes **FAEZAH ISMAIL**



Skyscrapers stand in striking contrast with old European-style buildings along the Huangpu River in this photograph of the Shanghai Bund, China, taken in March 2007 from the Oriental Pearl TV Tower at Pudong Park in Lujiazui. — Picture by Shunya Susuki

Asia needs more trained planning professionals to manage its rapid urban expansion. Apparently there are not enough qualified urban planners in all countries.

India, for example, produces some 300 graduates every year from the 10 planning schools in the country but the number is insufficient to maintain more than 5,000 towns and cities.

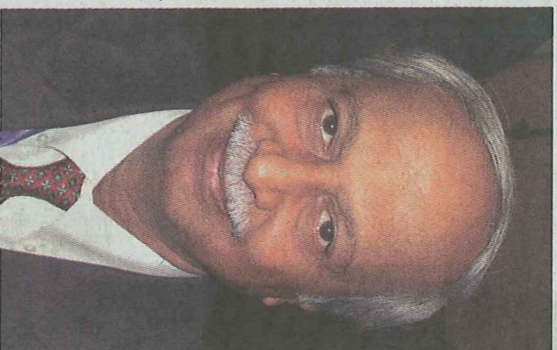
This was revealed by Indian academic Professor Emeritus Dinesh Mehta, who is from CEPT (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology) University, School of Planning, India.

Given the scarcity, "the tendency is to hire professionals from outside; so we are replicating Western models of planning rather than what we would call the Asian approaches to planning".

"I think we are now in a state of flux," he says.

Mehta is author of the upcoming State of Asian Cities Report 2008 from UN-Habitat.

He presented "key messages"



Asia needs to invest in educating planners, says Mehta

(see box) from the report, which will be released early next year, at the recent Third Asian City Journalist Conference which was held in conjunction with the fourth session of

the World Urban Forum in Nanjing, China.

Journalists from China (*Dalian Daily*, *Shanghai Daily* and *Guangzhou Daily*), Japan (*The Nishinippon Newspaper*), Indonesia (*Kompas*) and Malaysia (*New Straits Times*) attended the meeting which was jointly organised by the Japanese Government, UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and *The Nishinippon Newspaper* which is based in Fukuoka, Japan.

"Asia needs to invest in educating planners," Mehta told *Learning Curve*.

The basic premise of Mehta's argument is simple arithmetic.

"The Association of Asian Planning Schools has only 25 members (there may be other planning schools in Asia that are not members of this association); we are only talking about 750 to 1,000 planners graduating each year to service over 30,000 cities and towns in Asia.

"In India, the 10 planning schools graduate 300 students — there are 5,000 towns in India and each needs at least one planner, with large cities

CHANGING FACE OF URBAN ASIA

Creative and productive

Urban areas in Asian countries have been spearheading the economies in the region. With the economic crisis, there will also be a "crisis of prosperity" in Asian cities.

Coexistence of tradition and modernity

Asian cities are rooted in the past but focused on the future. Traditional and modern cultures seem to be in perfect harmony in Asian cities.

Resilient

Quick recovery in city economies after economic crises or natural disasters.

Harmony of the opposite

Informal and formal economies work in tandem.

Inequality

The prosperity in Asian cities is not well distributed. The growth stories of Asian countries have not been transformed into inclusive cities. The poor will be most affected in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.

Poor environmental quality

Asian cities dominate the list of most polluted cities of the world.

Poor governance

Asian cities do not practise principles of good governance. Cities need to adopt participatory, open and transparent governance.

Source: *State of Asian Cities Report 2008*

URBAN PLANNING

Living in urban harmony

The term 'harmonious cities' is the latest buzzword in the urbanisation process. **FAEZAH ISMAIL** finds out more

THE word "harmony" — a state of peaceful existence and agreement — evokes a variety of images.

Some associate it with lush greenery, bodies of water and solitude, among others.

It is little wonder that illustrious figures throughout the ages have offered their fascinating insights into the state of being harmonious (see box).

The United Nations' choice of the "harmonious cities" theme to commemorate World Habitat Day this year has put the concept on the radar screen.

The recent fourth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF-4) in Nanjing, China reinforced the message by examining the issue of harmonious urbanisation.

The idea was also taken up by the recent Third Asian City Journalist Conference (ACJC) which was held in conjunction with the WUF-4.

The choice of theme stems from anxiety following the grim assessment of the problems of rapid urbanisation — impact on the environment, growth of slums and urbanisation of poverty as millions migrate to the urban areas in search of a better life.

The point was driven home by Indian academic Professor Emeritus Dinesh Mehta at the ACJC when he presented findings of the upcoming report on the State of Asian Cities 2008 from UN-Habitat (see H2).

According to the UN, a harmonious city is one where distribution of social wealth and coordination of social interests are considered along with wealth creation.

Cities share the challenge of building societies that harmoniously combine economic growth, environmental sustainability, poverty reduction and good governance.

It is disappointing that the State of Asian Cities 2008 report, which will be released early next year, did not iden-



ACROS Fukuoka Step Garden and neighbouring Tenjin Central Park in the centre of Fukuoka City, Japan provide a space for citizens to relax — this feature is an important element of a harmonious city — and draw many visitors. — Picture by Shunya Susuki

tify any harmonious cities in Asia.

"We are saying that it is an ideal but there are cities in Japan that are closer to what we would call harmonious and I think many others should be reaching there," says Mehta.

"It is too much to conclude that none of Asian cities are harmonious because much depends on how the definition of 'harmonious cities' is framed," says Dr Shobakar Dhakal, executive director of the Global Carbon Project, National Institute for Environmental Studies, Japan.

As Dhakal explains it: "There are always opposing views for such definitions and choice of indicators. If an index is prepared there are always difficulties with such indexes — GDP is a useful or good indicator for describing and comparing market-based economies but is it a good indicator for human development we should aspire to? No!

"Often, experts' opinions of choice of indicators for definition differ from people who live (in a particular locality)."

Japanese architect and urban planner Shunya Susuki has spent a large

part of his life reflecting on what makes a city harmonious.

To him, a harmonious city is one which harmonises with its surroundings where buildings ("I think buildings should be long lasting and able to withstand natural disasters, not those that are disposable"), nature (greenery, rivers, ponds and mountains) and people coexist happily. He holds that the line between the artificial and the natural is getting obscure.

"For example, many Japanese tourists believe that the forests in Switzerland have been in existence from time immemorial.

"In fact, the Swiss have been planting many trees on their barren mountains as protection against avalanches for a very long time and they are useful for the tourism industry now," he says, adding that the efforts of the Swiss government and the private sector are not only financially rewarding but are also a fine example of nature conservation.

"The Swiss forest is the most successful example of coexistence between mankind and nature. It's just sustainable development," says Susuki, who now serves as a coordinating officer with UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

From the viewpoints of administration and maintenance, says Susuki, keeping a community together is crucial to preserving harmony in a city.

"Breaking it up would be the worst thing to do. Highway construction serves to link cities but roads that go through communities have broken them up."

For more insights into elements of a harmonious city visit http://www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/radix2-E.htm and <http://www.geocities.jp/>

shunya.susuki/aqua/index-E.htm

Malaysia's leading environmentalist Gurnit Singh questions the wisdom of coining the term "harmonious cities".

"What is this harmonious concept? Who decides on the balance — is it the experts or the people living in a (particular urban area)?" asks Gurnit. Like Dhakal, Gurnit thinks the term "harmony" is subjective and much depends on those on whom an opinion on the matter is sought.

"To me, it is an artificial concept to justify a new process," says Gurnit. And what has happened to sustainable development which is 'supposed to be harmonious'?

"Sustainable cities should be harmonious cities, at least as far as this phraseology is concerned, because sustainable development requires practitioners to balance social, economic and environmental concerns."

Dhakal's observations in his article *Creating an Urban Movement for Sustainable Living* (www.globalasia.org Vol. 3 No. 3 Fall 2008) sum up the apathy among many.

"The debate in Asia over what constitutes a sustainable city is actually rather paltry. Development professionals often revert to the key mantra of sustainable development coined at the 1987 conference of the World Commission on Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission.

"In the commission report, 'Our Common Future,' the goal became 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

"In reality, as popular as sustainable development has become as a slogan, scholars often display greater

Pearls of wisdom

● The Tao is unpredictable to those that live according to plans. Only those who have no agenda are in harmony with the Tao. — *The Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tze

● He who lives in harmony with himself lives in harmony with the universe. — *Marcus Aurelius*

● Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony. — *Mahatma Gandhi*

● But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads. — *Albert Camus*

● Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment. — *Oscar Wilde*

affection for the romantic jargon of the concept than the real-life work of achieving sustainable development."

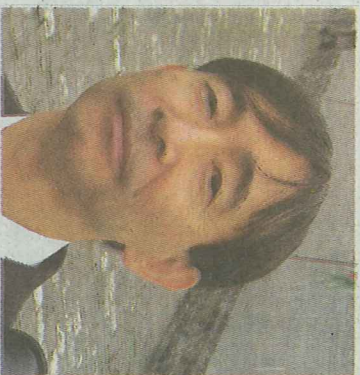
Given the indifference, will harmony (for those who insist on applying the theme) ever prevail in Asian cities? Dhakal chooses to be optimistic saying that Asia has the wherewithal to fix its problems.

He talks about the role of the media and civil society "to help create an environmentally friendly urban culture," among other measures.

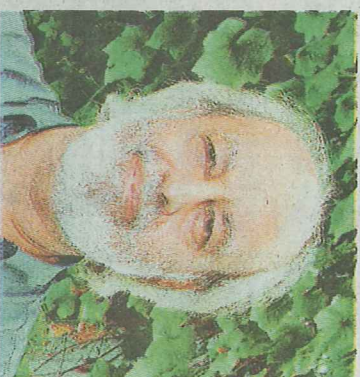
"Informed urban dwellers create positive pressure for entrenched establishments to act."

His prescription reads: "raise awareness, give people better choices and create political will".

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