

SUNDAY TIMES



Learning Curve

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PICTURE BY MAKI INOUE FROM THE NISHINIPPON NEWSPAPER

Shunya Susuki

LIFE AT WALKING SPEED

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When is a place people-friendly?

The current economic recession is a good time to reflect on the merits of "life at walking speed", a Japanese creativity teacher, architect and urban planner **FAEZAH ISMAIL**

“THE people-friendly village is (also) Earth-friendly” — that phrase expresses the aims and beliefs of Japanese creativity teacher, architect and urban planner Shunya Susuki.

He coined that motto after visiting Zermatt village — a car-free Swiss mountain resort with a breathtaking view of the Matterhorn — in 1999 and 2000.

The time spent in Zermatt exposed Susuki, an eco-warrior at heart, to the joys and benefits of living in an environment where the pace of life matches with the speed of walking.

“The environment in Zermatt, which matches with walking speed, reduces traffic accidents and crimes besides increasing the opportunities for members of the community to meet,” says Susuki, who teaches creativity to high school students. He is also a coordinating officer at UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific which is based in Fukuoka, Japan.

Zermatt residents are able to “conquer their environmental problems because they have been living (their lives at) walking speed”, Susuki tells *Learning Curve*.

He observes that time passes slowly in Zermatt. It is even slower than in some parts of Asia.

If the average walking speed

is 4km/h and that of a car is 40km/h, this means that the walking speed is one tenth of car speed.

If people in Zermatt could afford to take 10 years to solve a problem, Asians would have to address it within a year.

“We have only speeded up our economic cycle. It is 10 times more than that in Zermatt. I think it means that in a year Asians use natural and human resources and energy 10 times more than people in Zermatt.”

“Naturally, we need more time to solve our environmental troubles.”

Zermatt taught him the value of dealing with small environmental issues as they arise to avoid the snowball effect.

This basic idea is instilled into young children in the village.

His two trips — a personal visit in 1999 and an official one in 2000 to research Zermatt’s management policies from the viewpoints of natural resource, autonomy, finance and education in his capacity as an officer of Fukuoka City Hall — to the Swiss village made a strong impression on Susuki.

Nearly 10 years later Susuki continues to extol the virtues of “life at walking speed” and he views Zermatt as an ideal worth trying to achieve.

Indeed, people from all over the world come to the Swiss village to learn about its success story.

“I believe that urban

development coexists successfully with nature conservation in Zermatt,” says Susuki, who hopes that the Zermatt lifestyle catches on and spreads widely throughout the world.

Susuki’s eco message is accessible from his Earth Friendly website www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/ht-E.htm and www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/radi2-E.htm

His desire for a walker’s paradise (www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/teq-E.htm) at an appropriate region in his beloved Fukuoka City has yet to materialise but he intends to push ahead with his proposal.

In the meanwhile, he will continue to circulate his green ideas to people elsewhere and

considers it his mission in life to do so.

The Zermatt philosophy “is very useful in places where car use has not become a way of life”, says Susuki, who was an official of Fukuoka City Hall before being seconded to UN-Habitat three years ago.

He wants his message to reach those in rapidly-developing countries such as China and India and plans to translate his website into Mandarin and Hindi. It is currently in Japanese and English.

It is important that people in the Asia-Pacific region “match their livelihoods with their walking speeds” and he cautions them to be wary of development plans that allow “main roads for cars into residential areas of a village or city”.

Asia faces challenges which have important links with rapid urbanisation such as poverty, natural disasters, escalating prices of food and fuel.

Zermatt’s sustainable development model could be one answer to some of these concerns.

However, that does not mean that “we don’t need cars on Earth”, says Susuki adding that “life at walking speed” calls for the use of “green cars moving

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Nanjing avenues, as this public space on Sheng Zhou Road shows, are people-friendly and, by extension, environment-friendly — Pictures courtesy of SHUNYA SUSUKI, THE NISHINIPPON NEWSPAPER and MAINICHI DAILY NEWS