

Searching for green solutions

JAPANESE eco-warrior Shunya Susuki still vividly remembers the evening of Sept 3, 1989.

The six-month long Asian-Pacific Exposition: Fukuoka '89 (Japan) was coming to an end.

As the evening wore on, he became more and more worried. Then a deep sadness engulfed Susuki, who was an architectural engineer with Fukuoka City Hall at the time.

People were enjoying themselves at the party following the closing ceremony of the exposition but Susuki, who was in charge of the project from beginning to end, was only thinking of his next task: to supervise the removal of "all temporary buildings" at the site. Then he saw his work destroyed before his eyes and it was hard to take.

"I strongly felt *mottainai* or a feeling to cherish something," says Susuki, alluding to the concept of *mottainai*, an ancient Japanese belief of wasting less, conserving more and using resources modestly.

That heart-rending event was one of several episodes in Susuki's life which would shape his attitudes towards the environment.

The discovery of traces of black rain on the bonnet of

his white car shortly after that would also affect him profoundly. It hit him then: the severity of air pollution at Toyohama Town, where he has been living with his family for more than 38 years now.

He "began to think about how to get rid of car exhaust pollution" and an idea came to him at home after watching *The World Solar Challenge*, an Australian television programme. It became "his mission to produce a car (which would run) without petrol".

Not long after that he visited France and saw pre-schoolers walking with their teacher along the traditional buildings in Paris and recognised the wisdom of that field trip.

"I thought it was impossible to teach Japanese children *mottainai* during the bubble economy in Japan because adults were breaking usable buildings in front of the youngsters," says Susuki, who is now a coordinating officer with UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific which is based in Fukuoka.

His next trip was to Australia where he chanced upon a building with only outer walls at Sydney's monorail and realised that "this was the way to rebuild

Shunya Susuki in S-2 — a solar electric car he had crafted from recycled products — as featured in *Mainichi Daily News* on Feb 3, 1997



the interior of a building (in order) to preserve its exterior". Suddenly it dawned on him that Australia "had been cherishing old things too".

On the flight home, he was troubled by the possibility that Japanese children "might not cherish old things including their elders in future" and he admits today that this is his greatest fear.

Susuki was spurred into action by the above experiences and he became an environmentally-active individual.

He began to focus on finding solutions to green problems and "educating children on the environment".

A visit to his Earth Friendly website (www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/susuki-E.html) will reveal his green-related visionary endeavours, among other works of art.

Susuki created his website on June 9, 2003 and five years later it became the first item you would see out of 33,700,000 references when you search for Earth Friendly in Japanese.

An English version appeared on Jan 9, 2008.

Susuki, who is also a teacher of creativity at his former senior high school, has produced solar electric cars, recycled artwork and kites of unusual designs (see pictures on the left).

A professor at Kyushu University where Susuki studied modern and traditional architecture as well as urban planning once praised him as "the man who was born to make new things", an apt description of the multi-talented Japanese, who constantly innovates new ideas and products. His creations have attracted

Shunya Susuki strongly identifies with *mottainai*, an ancient Japanese belief of using resources modestly

the attention of the Japanese media and they are conversation pieces among those who are familiar with his work.

Future projects will include "making a new type of machine such as a car or robot" or "robot legs to assist walking".

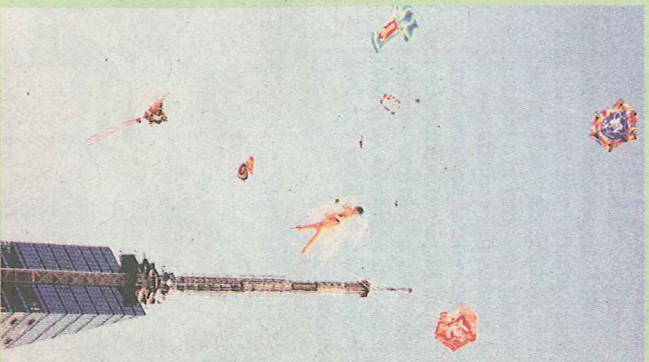
He is also mulling over the prospects of converting sea water to fresh water.

Susuki has the elderly in mind when he talks about "simple vehicles or robot legs".

When these become readily available "to assist the elderly, people will not have to use cars in their neighbourhoods".

Susuki's Utopia — an area without conventional cars moving on its roads such as Zermatt village in Switzerland, Venice in Italy, Disneyland and the site of the Asian-Pacific Exposition: Fukuoka '89 before the structures were dismantled — now seemed a distinct possibility.

The 54-year-old father of two believes that children hold the key to tackling the world's environmental issues. He is a champion of



MISCHIEVOUS Angels grabbed first prize at Fukuoka City Seaside Park Kite-Flier Contest in 1997. The kite is designed to show an angel on the shoulders of another, and they are imitating Cupid



MESSAGE from Nature won a prize at Fukuoka Recycled Art Contest in 1993. When the device, which is made from the front wheel of a used bicycle, rotates, hundreds of tiny plastic balls move about inside its wheel frame when they hit the plastic egg carton attached to the frame and produce sounds of the waves

environmental education and especially likes the way the subject is taught to children in the Swiss ski resort of Zermatt. "I think we should learn how to teach students about it sensitively, like the Swiss." Environmental problems are neither purely technological nor purely economic. They are also ethical and it is critical to understand all their dimensions. Susuki calls on communities everywhere to use the opportunity the current economic recession offers to imagine creating wealth which addresses both social concerns and environmental limits.

As he philosophically puts it: "I think money is nothing but a means to self-realisation. Making money should not be the sole purpose of one's life. One is happiest when one utilises one's inborn talents for one's society.

"Teachers, parents and societies are obliged to discover children's natural talents and nurture them."

— **By FAEZAH ISMAIL**
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slowly in only residential or commercial zones", among other things.

In Zermatt "electric cars are permitted for business use only and people cannot own cars".

The "zero-emission" electric car is gaining many fans who are against the idea of personal mobility by the conventional private vehicle which depletes too many resources and reduces quality of life by its noise and air pollution, dirt and vibration, among others.

Susuki, 54, concedes that it is unrealistic to expect Japan which has a large ageing population to be totally car-free.

He reminisces about his childhood in Japan when "few cars were running in my neighbourhood" and he could play with other young Japanese on the road.

"Nowadays most Japanese roads have been occupied by cars. It is very difficult for children to play on them."

He visualises small electric cars travelling unhurriedly on the roads of Japanese neighbourhoods so that children can play in peace there as they do in Zermatt.

Zermatt is, by all accounts, a "special" and "bizarrely mesmerising" place.

Its car-free status makes the place "welcoming" and the sight of people on foot including tourists is a breath of fresh air.

The "silence" is striking and the absence of motor vehicles allows the village to "retain a charming, relaxed feel".

Quite simply, Zermatt embodies features of a people-friendly place and, by extension, an environment-friendly place.

Susuki defines people-friendly spaces/places as those that offer comfort for all including the disabled and aged besides being safe and harmonious through the



Island City, Fukuoka is ideal to raise children for life at walking speed. — Picture by SHUNYA SUSUKI

sensitive use of greenery and bodies of water.

On a recent visit to Nanjing, China the soft-spoken eco-warrior discovered avenues which have yellow-textured paving blocks and pathways for the exclusive use of two-wheeled vehicles.

Large trees in the vicinity provide shade for all.

"People use electric two-wheeled vehicles without pedalling. These vehicles are especially very useful and kind to the elderly. This means that Nanjing avenues are friendly

towards everyone."

Visit www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/Nanjing/st-1-E.htm and www.geocities.jp/shunya_susuki/Nanjing/st-2-E.htm for more details.

The current economic recession which will force countries to reassess their development priorities is a good time to reflect on the merits of "life at walking speed", says Susuki.

Zermatt has shown that the challenge is worth taking up.

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Link between climate change and obesity

THE findings of the Institute for European Environmental Policy show sympathy with the opinions of Shunya Susuki, a Japanese architect and urban planner.

Mail Online (www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-475049/) **Car-free-zones-schools-beat-obesity**; hml) recently quoted the institute as stating that "increased car use is encouraging the twin crises of obesity and global warming".

It suggested that "car exclusion zones be set up around schools to force children to walk to lessons".

The institute's report entitled *Unfit for Purpose: How Car Use Fuels Climate Change and Obesity* backed its findings with statistics.

"In 2005, the average parent notched up 132km a year doing

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Car-free zones around schools can beat obesity



Car-free zones around schools can beat obesity

the school run — up from 88km in 1989.

"At the same time, the number of fat children doubled, with one in four aged 11 to 15 classified as obese — so overweight it threatens their health.

"Walking an extra hour a week could stave off a weight gain of 12.6kg over 10 years.

"This would also reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 11 million tonnes — 15.4 per cent of the current total released by passenger cars."

Going without cars with pride



GEOGRAPHIC, physical or economic conditions may prevent people in many parts of the world from relying on motor vehicles, says architect and urban planner Shunya Susuki.

Geographic restrictions such as mountains, seas or rivers act as natural barriers to cars entering a locality.

Examples include Zermatt village in Switzerland, Venice in Italy and small islands.

It is also difficult for cars to go into a village or city with physical limitations such as narrow roads, stairs, small parking areas or walls.

Think tiny villages, old city

zones, parks and Disneyland. Villagers in some Asia-Pacific regions may also live without cars if they are too poor to own them. Then there are those who wish to avoid a car-dependent lifestyle and Zermatt is also a good example of this.

Susuki hopes that dwellers in these places "will continue to live without cars with pride", saying that they are making a meaningful contribution to environmental preservation.

Visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_carfree_places and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedestrian_mall_for_car-free_zones.

