

BOUNDARIES OF SUSTAINABILITY

As Malaysian Architects, we questioned ourselves how successful have we, who are mostly trained in Western Architectural schools, been able to address this issue of sustainability in a country obsessed with economic growth and a relentlessly desire to become a ‘Developed Country’ by the year 2020. Our western architectural training tucked at our architectural conscience reminding us that sustainability of our architectural designs must be one of the key determinants of our works. Yet, the overwhelming materialistic objective of most of our clients and their ‘instant result’ mentality, usually relegate our responsibility to ensure the incorporation of sustainability to the background, or in most instances, we will tell ourselves that due to time and our practice’s financial constraints, we will do it in our next project. Fortunately, in Malaysia, there is a slow but growing awareness among our Architects that sustainability is no longer a luxury in the designer’s wish list. It is fast becoming a necessity in today’s globalised economy where international development standards are linked to project funding and the target users of our creations are more educated and better informed in the global context on such issues.

The focus of sustainability in Malaysia is a hybrid of two areas of sustainable development, ie,

- 1) Ecologically sustainable development
- 2) Economincally sustainable development

In Malaysia, to talk about ecologically sustainable development will usually attract an attitude of indifference from virtually all quarters of Malaysian society as the country is still 70 percent covered with pristine rainforest. However, there is a growing concern and awareness by both the government and the professionals to address issues pertaining to sustainability. There are some notable attempts to address this issue in sub urban and remote natural environment by drawing inspiration from traditional architectural forms to explore symbiotic relationships between man built shelters and the natural environment. However, most of them are only ecologically sustainable in flavour and are mainly driven by economic sustainability. We in Malaysia have not seriously dealt with truly ecological sustainable projects but lately a lot of interest is shown in trying to develop such projects but in smaller scale development involving mangrove swamps and local wetlands. There were also some attempts made by a few Malaysian architects in exploring designs incorporating ecological and economical sustainability in the urban environment.

As I have said earlier, our interest in sustainable development be it ecological or economical is very much at its infancy. Perhaps, with impending globalisation of the world economies, we will need to address these sustainable issues more seriously as it will eventually affect all mankind.

At this juncture, I wish to share with you all a very sobering topic in sustainability that is so fundamental yet conveniently forgotten by most architects in their relentless search for diversity and uniqueness in their quest to leave their stamp in our built environment.

Last year, our practice was approached by a client to organise an international consortium of masterplanners, landscape architects, design architects and engineers to design a new city in Malaysia. The city will be located 7 minutes away from the KL International Airport and it is adjacent to the internationally renowned Sepang F1 motor racing circuit.

You may ask what is so unusual about this request, every architectural practice will at one time or another be given this opportunity. However, in this project, the client requested us to design for him a new city that will function like a 'Earth University', so that it can be used to teach the future generations of humanity how to;

- behave and respect each other
- to be fair and honest in their everyday dealings be it business or social or leisure
- to care and love each other so that we can live in harmony and in peace
- to try to honor the almighty in all we do “

We were stunned with this request but upon further inquiries, the client explained ;

Mubin City is a spiritual vision to use the built environment to teach the proper 'Way of Life' based on common universal principles of humanity that transcend religion, culture, race and politics.

To realise this vision, it has been shown through the ages that teaching by 'word of mouth' has its limitations and effectiveness. From the dawn of time, we can see the works of Buddha, Moses and then Jesus and Muhammed that it will require magic and miracles to move the spirit of man. However in this new millennium of science and technology, we can no longer rely on such methods to teach these basic principles.

Therefore I want you to design a city using man's ingenuity in science and technology combined with the beauty of nature to create a Cosmopolitan ambiance where people will automatically behave and conduct their daily life be it business, social or leisure in a peaceful and happy manner. This city must be a beacon for all mankind to emulate so that it will bring back the harmony for man's future development.

This client believes that the built environment is one of the keys to the 'Sustainability of Humanity' that will ensure the ultimate survival of the human race.

In today's world of mutual self destruction be it by wanton destruction of man made environment through carpet bombings or illogical self destruction and collateral damage to properties and innocent lives for whatever cause or reasons will only lead to the eventual doom of mankind if left unchecked.

Reflecting on what my Prime Minister, Dr. Mahatir Muhammed said about the importance of understanding the root cause of terrorism and the emotional plea of my

client to put the brakes on our mutual self destruction, perhaps we as architects must also go back to our roots and relook at the meaning of architecture and its role for humanity.

Perhaps, the role of sustainability in development should logically begin from the foundation of the 'Sustainability of Humanity ' as outlined by my client, i.e. to design the environment to teach man how to behave , how to respect each other, how to live harmoniously and in peace. Then, the other aspects of sustainability such as ecology, economy, cultural and others will naturally follow.

Perhaps as architects, we should seek common values in mankind as a source of inspiration to create environments that will unite mankind rather than dwelling on our differences and uniqueness. If we all move in this unified direction, it may compel the rest of society to converge on to a common platform to bring out the best of humanity and direct our energies and creativity to propagate our kind to new frontiers in the universe rather than thinking of ways to destroy ourselves.

Hopefully, with the completion of our project in 5 years time; Mubin City, the eternal city, will be a symbol of peace.