

Editorial

The Emerging Generic Cities

Cities everywhere have experienced dramatic changes in their size, density, demography and economy in recent decades. With rapid urbanization and globalization of trade and employment, the impact of these changes is all the more apparent in many of the fast growing South Asian and non-western cities.



While the likely impact of 9/11 on the design of large and tall buildings in western cities is still being assessed, the enthusiasm for huge buildings and ever taller skyscrapers in non-western cities seems to be in full swing. China alone has 22 of the world's tallest buildings - and also eight of the world's ten most polluted cities. Within a decade, Pudong - Shanghai's new business district - has acquired the skyline which nearly took a century in New York, LA and Chicago. Instead of the usual flat roofs, the skyscrapers for export now come with a variety of fancy and often outrageous hats: cones, lozenges, triangles, chamfers, sails, ziggurats or enormous circular holes. The Jim Mao tower in Shanghai has something resembling a pagoda on top, Kowloon's MTR tower - soon to be the world's tallest - is topped with a giant prismatic obelisk. In the skyscraper race, at present 1,483 feet twin Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur are the world's tallest soon to be overtaken by the near completion 1,667 feet Tower 101 in Taipei and the Freedom Tower - replacement of the World Trade Centre - currently planned at 1,776 feet. Even in London - not often a skyscraper-friendly city - the recently approved 66 storeys / 1,016 feet London Bridge tower will become Europe's tallest when completed in 2008, and the present plans are to build at least one tall building in the city every year.

In the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, Beijing seems awash with the world's most famous and expensive architects. Enclosed in twisting concrete hoops, the new Olympic stadium designed by de Meuron and Herzog from Switzerland has been variously labelled as a 'post-Blade Runner city' or a bird's nest. Even more extraordinary perhaps is the State Television building with its gravity defying offset towers with a huge hole in the middle designed by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, recipient of this year's RIBA Gold Medal. Zaha Hadid, recent Pritzker Prize winner, is designing an enormous ten million square feet residential and office complex in Beijing. "They want to have more extreme buildings or buildings which will put them on the map", according to her, "it's a brave new world where it's possible to maybe test ideas and develop ideas which in some other places may not be possible." (Lim, 2004)

As often, concentration of developments of such a scale in the cities brings in their wake other consequences including increasing numbers of cars, traffic jams and pollution. While western cities are trying to reduce private cars and encourage greener public transport and bicycle paths, Beijing - once the world's bicycle capital - has started to get rid off its cycle lanes, and there is already daily bumper to bumper gridlock along the enormous Ping'an Da Dao in the city. Concentration of building and resources in showcase areas of the cities has widened the gap between the rich and the horribly poor even within downtown Beijing and the disparities between the rich cities and the impoverished countryside have become even

more acute - in the last four years, 25 million former state employees have lost their jobs (Morrison ,2004: 3).

And again as elsewhere, such developments always have a habit of sweeping away vast areas of urban history, and Chinese cities seem to be no exception. Under current proposals, old factories and warehouses used by Beijing's thriving artists' community in Dashanzi are facing demolition. The historic area of Hongkou along the North Bund waterfront in Shanghai - used in Spielberg's 1987 film *Empire of the Sun* – is similarly under imminent threat.

But while tall buildings may produce glamorous images from distance, they make dismal places to live and work in. In the cluster of Hong Kong's regimented 38-storey 'harmony towers' - each housing 2,000 people – the only view is the surrounding blocks of the same design while Verbena Heights does makes an effort to humanise public housing by adding a few balconies. Essential form of tall buildings has not much changed in a long time. Now a new generation of giant skyscrapers promises to create 'vertical communities', each housing up to 55,000 people - by comparison, Chicago's Sears Tower has a daily working population of 35,000. The new self-contained 'cities in the sky' will include shops, schools, cinemas, hospitals - even 'parks' and public green spaces as well as solar panels to generate their own energy

Meanwhile, in Dubai, in another part of the world, a number of new off-shore islands are in the making. The larger two - Palm Jumeirah and Palm Jebel Ali - are in the form of a palm tree where the fronds provide the building land, and there are plans for a further 200 smaller islands arranged to read like a map of the world from above. Last year saw the completion of 7,000 apartments in 36 towers on Jumeirah Beach where further developments will include luxury villas, shopping malls and a green golf course in the desert. Even where nothing has been built yet, the speculative demand is such that the plots have already changed hands a few times (Emmet, 2004: 20).

With a total population of one million - only a quarter of them citizens - Dubai was visited by 3.5 million tourists last year. To diversify from oil and to capitalize on its sunshine and duty-free shopping, £35 billion have been allocated for 'Dubailand', an enormous tourist development now under construction. When completed, it will boast the world's longest marina, the largest shopping mall, the first ever air conditioned ski slope and an under-water hotel. Centre-piece of all this will be the world's tallest skyscraper - the 150 storey Burj Dubai - costing £630 million. Located in the centre of an artificial lake and based on a Y-shaped plan inspired by the desert flower, Burj Dubai will have vast areas of shopping, hotels and apartments of varying sizes. Allowance has been made for its 2,300 feet height to be increased just in case another taller rival emerges during its construction(The Sunday Times, 2004: 8).

On the face of it, it would appear that, firstly, most of the major fast developing non-western cities have become a playground for some of the most fashionable and famous western architects and their ideas developed elsewhere, and secondly, that these cities seem to have set their priorities on overtaking the western cities in the race for ever taller buildings and mega projects. On the whole, the emphasis is on way-out individual statements and iconic gestures rather than on a broader urban and environmental vision or meaningful debate about these cities and their inhabitants. We seem to be in an age of computer generated 'blobs', vectors and fractals making fragmentary statements ever more detached from culture, context

or social relevance. Increasingly, every large project seems to become a single big statement devoid of local colour and complexity of urban life and experience, and in the process - with mono-functional business centres, a few left-over pockets of urban history, ubiquitous slums and endless suburban sprawl – every city, like junk food, is on the way to becoming the same. Is this the only possible urban future for the emerging non-western cities, and is this the beginning of the end of rich architectural and urban diversity evolved through history? Are there really no other ways to building humane, sustainable and experiential living environment for those in the non-western world? The debate has yet to begin, but according to Koolhaas - this year's RIBA Gold Medalist and current designer of three huge projects in China - in architecture the 'big' by itself has now become beautiful and that big buildings are entering an 'amoral domain' in which their impact is independent of their architectural quality or social relevance. For him, 'bigness' is not part of any urban discourse - it just exists. So in this pursuit of irrelevant theatricality and 'bigness', the fast developing non-western cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Dubai and elsewhere have become 'generic' cities – they start off with some sort of a master plan which, under pressure from politics, international competition, profit and glamour, soon become subjected to a free-for-all. "Anything that doesn't work is replaced in a continuous cycle, allowing for just enough 'retained' history to keep the tourist amused. One city is like another - generic." (Evans, 2004: 24)

And now to this eighth issue of GBER online, and this time it comes with special good news. During his recent working visit to Amsterdam, the GBER founding editor Tasleem Shakur was informed that in a recent ratings review of a large number of journals, GBER was awarded a C in a ratings scale of A - E. This is indeed very satisfying news for a new journal and encouraging for the editorial team as well as its many contributors and supporters, particularly considering that many other journals of much longer standing and with far more resources were also given the same rating.

Most of the papers in this issue focus on the problems and possibilities at the opposite end of what has been discussed above. While most of these relate to Bangladesh, they have much wider relevance for other countries and cities facing similar problems of how to deliver basic services and facilities for millions of those living in the ever increasing slums and economically and socially deprived areas.

Not unlike many other countries in South Asia, population increase and continued migration from rural areas has led to rapid urbanization in Bangladesh resulting in vast areas of un-serviced slum and squatter settlements within and around the existing cities. As a part of urban poverty reduction and environmental improvement programme, various efforts have been made to extend water and electricity supply and drainage and waste collection in these areas. Taking the case of Khulna, the third largest city in the country, *Improving the Living Environment of Khulna City Slum Area* by Bushra Shamsad (University of Hong Kong) and Sadah Shamsad (Khulna University) examines the before and after problems of the slum dwellers and the impact of these improvements on the ensuing social and physical developments. They conclude that, to produce sustainable improvement, such efforts must go hand in hand with education and environmental awareness of the issues not only within the development organizations but also of the slum dwellers themselves.

On the same theme, *Water for the Urban Poor* by Mahbubur Rahman looks at the many socio-economic and physical problems including disease and early death faced by enormous number of urban poor in the third world because of the lack of clean water. Rahman's paper

deals with the sustainability of the water services in urban areas and refers to a model developed in Bangladesh where the public sector is the only provider. It briefly examines the scale of the problem and, using a case study, discusses various aspects of water conservation and affordable supply to improve the environment and health of the *basteebashis* – the slum dwellers.

Continuing the theme, Suman Ghosh from Lancaster University reviews *Low Income Housing: Multi-Dimensional Research Perspectives* edited by K Iftekhar Ahmed. The book is a collection of eight research reports covering various aspects of low income housing in the context of Bangladesh. The main thrust of the research is on regional identity and appropriate technology so that people can use easily available local materials to themselves build safe and durable housing.

Built environment has always been shaped by the ever changing human needs, skills, materials and technology as well as by climate, culture and the world view of the people who build it. In their paper, *Evolution of House Form in Dhaka City*, Nizamuddin Ahmed and Nayma Khan from Buet, Dhaka carry out a detail study of the house form within its own *genus loci*. Their work is part of an ongoing study to explore the roots of historic and contemporary house forms and also to find ways to save at least some of the urban heritage in this fast expanding city spread over 400 square miles.

In his commentary, *Development Dynamics in India: Two Examples, One Film: A Reading of Satyajit Ray's Kanchenjunga*, Suman Ghosh from Lancaster University deconstructs the well known director Satyajit Ray's 1962 film to explore its underlying critique of the prevalent development ideologies in post-independence India and how these might have influenced the ensuing architectural, demographic and economic developments in the country.

A variety of approaches have been tried in European countries to regenerate economically disadvantaged and socially deprived areas in their cities. Focusing on Bijlmermeer, a large housing estate on the outskirts of Amsterdam, Karen Leeming and Tasleem Shakur from Edgehill College examine how the particular approach taken in this case effected the lives of the mostly immigrant population of the area and what can be learnt from the experiment.

This issue of GBER has an even larger section at the end covering major events, news, conferences, architectural projects, and exhibition and book reviews. Please feel free to send the team or to me any news which you would like to be included in the next issue.

Finally, it remains for me to thank our editorial team, particularly Michelle Atherton who, despite her own demanding commitments, has work so hard in getting this issue online. And thanks also to our readers and contributors for their support – your papers and other contributions as well news and views are always needed and most welcome.

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London April, 2004