

## FUTURE PERSPECTIVES OF ASIAN URBAN SOCIETIES

By

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### 1. The rise of megacities in Asia

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be an urban century and Asia will be a continent of megacities. In 1990, there were only 12 cities in the world with population of more than 10 million in each and Asia had 7 such cities, in 2000 there were 19 such cities and Asia had 11 of them and it is projected that by 2010 there will be 21 such cities and Asia will have at least 12 of them. According to the United Nations amongst the top 30 cities in 2010 with Tokyo at the top with 26.4 million there will be 18 cities from Asia, (UN 1999). The European cities will disappear from this list except Paris and only New York and Los Angeles from North America will be included.

Except in India and China largest city in many Asian countries contain most of the urban population and as per 1995 estimate, Dhaka had 33%, Tokyo 28%, Bangkok 55%. Such megacities are like dinosaurs. But unlike dinosaurs they will not be extinct. The megacities will live with poverty and pollution, health and hygiene problems and increasing deficits in services, and infrastructure. The megacities are in many Asian countries where rate of urbanization is low and often such city is an oasis in the desert of rural poverty. The face of Asian city has contrasting picture. Many of these countries achieved freedom from colonial rule after the Second World War and there were years of conflict and confusion. Dr. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist in the prologue to his book 'Asian Drama' painted the Asian scenario in 1968 (Myrdal, 1968) with inner conflicts, aspirations, harsh reality, desire for change etc. More than three decades have passed and the cities have changed physically very rapidly though slowly socially, and inner conflicts still remain.

There are diverse, economic, social, demographic, spatial and environmental conditions in Asian cities. There is a long laundry list of environmental problems.

The divide between the rich and poor is quite open and the conflict is expressed not only in the townscape and socio-economic strata but also in cultural identity.

The noted architect from Singapore William Lim (Lim, 1999) said that: "While Asia has changed perceptively, it is also deeply influenced by traditions and heritage as well as by its own values and lifestyles".

In a large city human beings were gradually replaced by buildings - all kinds of buildings for rich and poor. There are two faces of the city - one legal for which architects and planners work and for which building rules and land use zoning laws are applicable. But there is another city - the illegal city, built by the people out of

waste materials, often on encroached land and often without sanitation at sites vulnerable to disasters but informal sector is connected with this. Lewis Mumford (Mumford 1961): said that visible tangible city was full of imperfection.

## 2. Globalization and Asian City

In the conflicting situation the globalization has come, though slowly in some cities. In Asia globalization is not new in Asian cities as the colonial rulers brought an architecture and culture of their countries.

Bernard Hamill, Director of Centre for European Studies speaks critically about globalization (Hamill, 1998) because of polarization of rich and poor. His prediction that "small islands of wealth will emerge in the oceans of poverty" can already be seen in megacities of Asia.

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The growth rate in Asia in 2000 on the average was 5.71%, which was higher than industrialized countries, and per capita GDP growth in East and South Asia was 6% i.e. higher than other regions (McAndrew 2000).

Liberalism, privatization and globalization have started to grip the economy and society, Structural adjustment to market realism was the key theme but poverty and inequality continue to grow, despite poverty alleviation programs and despite upliftment of poor. Population living on less than \$1 per day in developing and transitional economies (1987-88) has declined but in South Asia it has increased because of increase of population. Poverty is still a priority agenda. One United Nations Report says. (UNCHS, 2001) that globalization has generated a spectrum of changes but there is social exclusion and there are economic and environmental problems.

The issue or the conflict between the conservation and modernism can be seen throughout Asian cities. There is destruction of historic building for real estate reasons to build modern hotel, office towers, shopping centers, banks etc. The globalization with the arrival of international financial institutions and development organizations requires new kind of space.

Many Asian nations took up industrialization and economic development and a consumer oriented lifestyles sometimes alien to the cultural and ethnic characters, modern, post modern and international style of architecture and western style of town planning were adopted. Schools of architecture and planning followed the western syllabus and the brain drain continued. But the rural migrants who built their own homes tried to keep the rural lifestyle.

Fukuyama mentions about the Asian values and relation to economic rise and recent decline and says that Asian social distinctiveness has eroded though family structure has remained stable compared to the west (Fukuyama, 1998). Chinese leader Deng Xiao Peng said, "Color of the cat is not important so long it catches mice". Many Asian cities are following Euro-American thinking.

Most of the megacities have followed the similar pattern of development. Urban development has been demonstrated both vertically and horizontally. Horizontal sprawl has filled up water bodies damaged agricultural cover and destroyed forests while vertical growth at the heart of cities has created congestion, pollution, strain on services, depletion of underground water and loss of historic buildings and areas. In many cities economic boom has led to ecological doom and 30 to 40 percent of people live in slums and shanties.

Idea of 'Manhattanisation' spread with replica of American Architecture, office towers and high-rise apartments and suburban development of housing estates, new towns and large shopping centers. Statutory town planning regulations try to control land uses in many cities but cannot check the land value. Urban development is taken up, flyovers and highways, underground sewerage, drainage, transport terminal etc. Despite narrow and winding lanes and pockets of diversity, there is gradual disappearance of Asian character and flavor. Most of the projects became uncoordinated and remain unfinished. Despite tourism promotion of ethnic culture, the globalization with cola generation has brought a consumer oriented cityscape alien to the culture (Ghosh, 2000).

### 3. Architectural and planning trends

Architectural profession till recently concentrated on designing new buildings and new townships until conservation of some historic buildings and areas were taken up. Often the old historic area has been neglected. Redesigning an existing city especially a megacity is difficult; Kenzo Tange the famous Japanese architect proposed a high level megastucture for Tokyo in 1960s. There were other visionary schemes, mostly architecture-urban design oriented and mostly academic.

The secession movement in Vienna in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was highly influenced by Asian culture and on the other hand Asian modernization was largely influenced by western concepts. On the occasion of centenary "Cities on the move - the Asian cities in the nineties - between "Apotheosis and apocalypse" - was an exhibition of contemporary art and architecture of Asia opened in Vienna in November, '97. The Vienna secession says that a typical city does not exist and there is no collective Asian identity. On the contrary there are a wide number of highly diverse urban concepts sometimes too artistic, visionary and individualistic. Many ideas have been mentioned and some are listed: Agglomeration city, Bubble city, Fuzzy city, Garden city, Global city, Hybrid city, River city, Symbolic city, Tropical city, Water city etc. (Hanru and Obrist, 97).

In Asian cities, the old city or even old historic city was neglected till the conservation movement came followed by environment movement. Conflict with modernization was evident everywhere. Historic central area became the prime real estate. A report on Dhaka, Bangladesh states (Ali, 1996) how the transformation has taken place.

Writing about Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Christiane Blancot mentions about destructions of buildings of colonial period by speculators greedy for large sites to build tourist hotels. While Michael Pinches writes about Manila, Philippines (Pinches, 1994). "The encounter with the pursuit of modernity in Manila, evident in the variable character of the city's architecture and spatial form, attests to a phenomenon and ideology that are largely contradictory".

There is break up of joint family system, individualistic space will likely to dominate with car, computer, cell phone etc. Some Japanese architects propose hyper building - very high building with small apartments and other facilities and high-tech vertical transportation system - in fact a typical Asian city's land use on the two sides of a road is put vertically. There are opposite ideas with eco-villages where community living with shared facilities and public transportation will be with low rise development with greenery, fruit trees etc. This may be low rise high density with passive use of solar energy, use of recycled building products etc. with the concept of 'Recycle, reuse, restore or rehabilitate'. The architectural vocabulary will be changed.

#### 4. Sustainability and Vernacularism

To the millions of urban poor sustainability is survival. There are definitions and examples of green building and sustainable architecture - focusing on low energy, eco-friendly building materials, recyclable waste etc. Urban systems are not in ecosystems and the metabolism of cities produce waste. The concept of environmentally sustainable development starts with recycling of waste of all kinds.

There are however, some planning issues. The current practice of land use regulation based town planning practice is to be replaced by ecological planning. The education and training of architects and engineers require changes. The present practice of construction of high density high-rise buildings at the center of cities and low density suburban sprawl both are expensive and unsustainable, with more energy and transport costs. Alternate solutions are to be found.

There is growing awareness for regional vernacularism in Asian cities. Suh A Ozkan of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture says (Ozkan, 1985) 'Neo-vernacularism ... has emerged as an approach to bringing a new life to vernacular heritage for new and contemporary functions'. Regionalism can have global relevance and Louis Khan's Assembly (new Parliament) building, Dhaka was designed to develop an all embracing culture-linking indeed global architectural language intended to reach for into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gast 2001). Laurie Baker, a British architect who came to India more than 50 years ago to work with lepers and poor has developed architecture with the local masons and local materials. His social commitment and creativity have been admired. (Baker, 1999).

There are many architects in Asia. The urge for traditional cultural values is now everywhere in Asia together with an urge for balance between modernity and regionalism or contemporary vernacularism.

#### 5. Conclusion

Asian cities were united by common colonial background of the elite (Jorgensen, 2001). With advent of information technology these will be united again. But eco-friendly sustainable development will be new goal. The information technology revolution in architecture and cities is yet to be assessed fully. Asian countries missed the industrial revolution but not information technology revolution. When the physical barriers are removed from the minds and access to information becomes easier culture will be more developed and expanded and quality of life more enhanced (Schmitt, 1999). The next century will bring new hope for urban Asia.

The Dinosaurs have gone but megacities will remain. They will live with dragon's fire – poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, etc. Architecture and city planning will change and Asian cities are waiting to see not replicas of European-American Architecture but a sustainable development. The making of a megapolis into ecopolis will be the great challenge to Asian architects and planners.

Asian city with cultural pluralism, economic diversity and physical disparity requires new vocabulary in architecture and how it will fit in with the environment.

Dr. Ismail Serageldin (Serageldin, 1997) of the World Bank compared it with the puzzle Rubik's Cube, " It takes patience, dedication and imagination to reach it but solutions are possible.

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