

POSTCARD FROM THE EDGE

Introduction

Conferences on the theme of sustainable urban development seem to be sprouting up everywhere these days and event organisers have their work cut out trying to convince potential attendees why they should attend one symposium over another. Eco Edge 2, which was held in Melbourne in February, relied on an impressive list of international speakers to attract registrations. This was perhaps at the expense of a more clearly defined vision for the conference, despite all good intentions. The event brochure gave lengthy bios for the speakers, but the overarching aim was left to Melbourne's Lord Mayor, John So, to articulate. His introduction stated that Eco Edge's goal "was to ensure our cities remain sustainable and will explore the design challenges facing major urban centres".

There may be some of you out there wondering just when cities became sustainable in the first place, and by what standard of metrics, but to judge a conference by its PR gumph would be short-sighted. Because there was, in fact, a great degree of interest from professionals at large trying to meet the urgent design challenge of building sustainable cities. In the longer term, one would imagine that sustainability within cities is everyday practice, however, in the face of increasing urbanisation, rampant consumerism and an inexorable increase in population this is far away.

Having just recovered from the possibility of a 'Go for Growth' strategy prepared by an outgoing federal government, and set against a backdrop of the Stern Report which induced alarm on my part, there was a general consensus among Eco Edge attendees that 2008 marks a tilting point in the urbanisation of our planet. According to conference speaker, Xuemel Bai from the CSIRO, this is the threshold year that our urban population is greater than our rural population – the first time in human civilisation.

The challenge for architects and urban designers is how do we address this profound shift in the occupation of cities? If the current rate of urbanisation continues at the same trend, 80% of the world's population will live in cities. In countries such as China, the Long March is now to the city, with 65% of China's population living in cities by 2020, compared to 43% at present. So with a constellation of invited speakers from around the world and a standing-room only list of attendees, the question on everyone's lips was,

"Are we spiralling into oblivion or are there glimmers of hope around the globe that we can learn from?"

Among many snippets of hope, two are worth reporting briefly. Neville Mars gave a presentation on how we might address the environmental possibilities (sic) of building the equivalent of all of the current building stock in the EU in China within the next 20 years. This was not conjecture, but rather China's likely path of urbanisation over the next two decades with 900 million new urbanites needing to be accommodated.

As the result of a grant from the Dutch government, Mars set up the Dynamic City Foundation to better understand the trends of rampant urbanisation and address ways of dealing with this so-called 'flash urbanism' where cities appear to spring up overnight. Mars' work showed fascinating polycentric ways of densifying major cities and the presentation was at times a bit like postcards from the edge. The liberating compactness of the Dynamic City Foundation's modelling, however, is perhaps something that can only be achieved in quasi-communist China. It also relies heavily on a movement of greenification, not ESD but rather a 'Garden City foreground' to most of its cities.

Mars' images also gave a visual reminder of the question put to Peter Davidson the previous day: "What can Australian governments do to address the urbanisation and likely environmental problems in China?" His answer: "Export urban designers and architects to China." With so much expertise already being exported from large Australian practices to the instant urbanism of the Middle East I wasn't sure if this was the most appropriate answer... and indeed wondered why the same questions were not asked of Australian cities and our fascination with suburbia.

Bernard Khoury's presentation was a wonderfully obscure overview of creating underground nightclubs in bomb sites in Beirut, prompting murmurs among attendees as to his why he was invited in the first place. However, to view the work in a different light, his work is about minimal intervention (which is perhaps the most appropriate environmental intervention of all) and the promotion of juxtaposition in a destabilised and disconnected environment. There's a lesson there for all of us...