

A tale of many cities

THE WORLD NEEDS TO GROW IN A WAY THAT IT CAN MEET THE NEEDS OF TODAY while preserving the resources for tomorrow. Global City 2009 held in Abu Dhabi recently highlighted some seminal issues confronting urban development – and the ways cities must tackle them. By **Feby Imthias**

When it comes to introducing dynamic new concepts, the UAE is probably one of the most proactive countries in the world. A top-of-the-mind recall of some of the most progressive projects: First Zero Carbon, Zero Waste city Mazdar; the tallest building in the world Burj Dubai; the world's most inclined tower Capital Gate... This dynamism has ushered in a happy chapter in the UAE's event calendar as some of the world's top names in practically every field come to its shores regularly to discuss, debate, strategise and implement new vision and wisdom.

'Global City 2009 – Sustainability: Our Vision, Our Future' is one such example.

The event found its first home outside Europe in Abu Dhabi recently and showcased a stunning sweep of intellect and ideas on the symbiosis between urban development and its dwellers in the 21st century.

"Cities have never been so important. Over half of the world's population lives in cities. They are going to be instrumental in shaping our future," said Frédéric Theux, president, Reed Exhibitions Middle East, which organised the event. With such a massive shift in the living



From left: Mohammad Rashid Al Hameli, Deputy Director General and Senior Adviser to ADCED; Frédéric Theux, president, Reed Exhibitions Middle East, and Gino van Begin, regional director, Europe, Local Governments for Sustainability.

choices of people and the consequent lifestyle changes, the protean entities of cities are not only changing by the day, they are being moulded and reshaped by the hour as people and their needs and wants, environment and its needs and wants parry, adjudicate and eventually adjust to their mutual growth imperatives.

The question to ask of ourselves, and of each other, is: how sustainable is this kind of an unprecedented growth?

The term 'sustainability' was first used by the Brundtland Commission. [The Brundtland Commission is the formal World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) convened by the United Nations in 1983. It was created to address the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and its consequences on economic and social development. The UN General Assembly found that environmental problems were global in nature. It was decided to pursue policies for sustainable development in the common interest of all nations.]

The commission coined the now ubiquitous term 'sustainability', based on the idea of development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

In other words, though not entirely outside the scope of comprehension in its basic meaning, it has now matured to include the viability of urban places and

their populations in creating a way of life that sustains generation after generation. Either of the elements, that is, humans and nature (environment and other species), in this relationship should not dominate the other in order to survive. Because, ironically, true and healthy survival of both is dependent on a healthy respect for each other's role in the evolution of this planet.

However, don't be fooled by the simplicity of the term. It carries an extremely complex balance of the conceptual constituents of environmental, economic, cultural and sociopolitical elements that together move toward a higher quality of evolution for mankind.

Who is your city?

During the last two decades the pace of growth, both technological and social, has made it seem natural to call ourselves global citizens, rename our economy as the global economy and stitch up the whole world to fit into a single concept, the global village.

But according to Richard Florida, even that is not enough to enable us to simply choose any one place in the world to live in based on the growing acceptance of the commonality of our urban life experiences.

And Richard Florida should know. He is one of the world's leading public intellectuals, Professor of Business and Creativity at the University of Toronto and the author of award-winning books, like *The Rise of the Creative Class* and *Who's Your City?*

He is also the founder of the Creative Class Group, an advisory services firm, charting new trends in business and community. "The key to understanding our time," he said, "is to know that wealth and knowledge come from our latent creativity. It's the economic engine of our age."

The fact is, though the world has shrunk to a single point of reference, where all stand on common ground in terms of lifestyle references, economic imperatives and technological universality, the place we choose to live in matters a lot.

Why?

Because it parentheses our career, social network, family, lifestyle choices, the wealth we accumulate and our overall happiness ratio within the general sentence that describes our overall modern-day living methods. This parenthetical respite makes us feel cocooned in an otherwise terrifyingly diffuse modern life.

Speaking of the city in which the conference is being held, he said, "To compete and prosper in the new global economy, Abu Dhabi must continue to expand and foster creativity. This extends beyond the Creative Class, to harness the resourcefulness of larger segments of service and manufacturing sectors."

Planning a city comes first

"Building in sustainability from the outset is easier than attempting to make an existing city sustainable because you can plan and design your city in order to achieve the most efficient use of resources," said Paul Bevan, secretary general of Eurocities, Belgium. He breaks down the formidable, and often fudgy, concept of city planning into comprehensible ideas like "minimising the need to travel long distances between home and work; installing collective heating and cooling systems for whole districts; planning neighbourhoods and facilities around public transport routes and building homes and workplaces with the most sustainable materials and techniques." These, he said, are "the [desirable] options".

Though the numbers and details of city planning are monumental, at the core of it is a very simple consideration: how easy is it to live and work and eat and play in the area you live?

What materials are you wishing to use in building your slice of the city? Will these materials require more than double the energy to be maintained or will they cut down on energy requirements?

One of the fallouts of modern urbanisation has been the overwhelming realisation that sustainability is increasingly being seen as a challenge (at least for today) rather



From left: Paul Bevan, secretary general of Eurocities, Belgium; Richard Florida, Professor of Business and Creativity at the University of Toronto; Mona Serageldin, vice-president, Institute for International Urban Development and Saskia Sassen, a Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology.



than a natural byproduct of development. For example, today, people often argue that implementing green building standards adds to the final price of a property.

But one of the strongest recommendations by green building experts is that factoring in environmentally friendly features in a building or a freestanding house reduces operational costs in the long run due to reduced maintenance and increased energy efficiency. It is ultimately the indisputably cogent logic of all time - 'A stitch in time saves nine'. Bevan stresses this point, "It is likely to be more costly to 'retrofit' higher standards to buildings at a later date, and in the meantime running costs are saved on energy and water, for example."

World Cities

The term "global city" is believed to have been coined by Saskia Sassen, who is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and Member of 'The Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University', in her 1991 book *The Global City* when referring to London, New York and Tokyo.

What is a global city?

A 'global city' is a central node in the global economic system created in strategic geographic locations governed by global operations in finance and trade. These important spots of global affairs, also known as 'world city', have a direct effect on all world operations through socio-economic means. Cities like London, Tokyo and New York are archetypal 'global cities'.

"Cities can be shown to be in the frontline of many of the environmental challenges," said Sassen. "Because of this, many cities had to develop capabilities to handle these challenges. Cities like Tokyo and London had

to address environmental issues in the 1980s even before the Kyoto agreement appeared (eg, for car fuel efficiency and zero emissions). Cities today are confronting the environmental challenge directly and acting to overcome it."

As far as the UAE is concerned, Sassen said, "The project of greening cities should be enabled by the fact that global cities around the world actually value the specialised differences of cities. Thus Abu Dhabi marks its difference by its environmental aims, compared to all kinds of other cities around the world.

"In a huge international study of 70 global cities around the world, using over 60 data measures, a very interesting trend that emerges is that even the most powerful cities, such as London and New York, do not get the highest score of 100 for being a global city. In fact London, which has the highest score, gets 79 - which if you were grading student work, for example, is not so great a score!

What this tells us is that there is no perfect global city.

"Each city is different in its own way. Abu Dhabi can stand out for its own specialised differences, notably its serious engagement with the environmental challenge."

Think wider

"Developing and managing competitive and sustainable cities in the 21st century is more than a planning issue or a government issue," said Maria Sillanpaa, founding director, Sustainability Advisory Group, who is one of a small number of people renowned internationally as a leading practitioner in the fields of corporate responsibility and sustainability management.

"Ten years back, there was not so much awareness of sustainable development. Nowadays the policymakers themselves incorporate this vision into their plan. If there is a bit more coordination between the various development authorities like municipality, water, electricity and urban planning departments at a higher

level, so that plans do not clash or contradict, it would bring in greater results," said Sillanpaa. "At the same time, scrutiny of business should lead to an expectation that corporate responsibility should extend to encouraging responsible practices at every step in a value chain - wherever it may be in the world. Our aim for this region should be to make profit stem from responsible business practices. A lot of officials from city planning divisions will definitely list the lessons from Global City leaders and try to implement them," she concluded.

A PAT ON THE BACK

The growing status of Abu Dhabi as a global hub for business and tourism received a major thrust when the world's top urban planners, decision-makers, mayors and international media from more than

40 world cities descended in the capital to participate in Global City 2009.

Mohammad Rashid Al Hameli, Deputy Director General and Senior Adviser to ADCED, said that local authorities played an important role in the future of Planet Earth and must therefore place sustainability at the heart of

urban planning policies.

Global City is organised by Reed Exhibitions Middle East as a knowledge gathering, networking and business platform. The organisers decided to have Global City in Abu Dhabi in recognition of the capital's inspiring record in the event's key themes of sustainability, progress and strategy.

He sheds light on one of the most important issues of the day - energy consumption worldwide.

"Two-thirds of the energy is consumed in cities, two-thirds of CO2 emissions are from cities and 50 per cent of the world's population lives in cities," he said. "It is vital that young cities like Abu Dhabi do not make the same mistakes that European or American cities have made.

"There are several cities in the world that aspire to be carbon neutral. Copenhagen, Denmark, dubbed the world's most livable city, has managed to reduce emissions below the set standards. They do this by switching behaviour. More than 60 per cent of the people there use bikes now, even though the weather is rainy.

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"Such changes begin with individuals. If the public is provided with attractive transport systems, why would one family have two cars? Usage of local building materials that have lower emissions would suit that particular region. It only takes the courage to start making changes, have a good vision, engage your citizens, and be a good example as a city," he remarked.

Getting from point A to B
With the UAE fast forwarding into travel time with its state-of-the-art metro rail systems that come at



ISSUES

absolutely the right time, the aspect of urban transport, which is one of the most important facets of a city's sustainability ratio, comes under the spotlight.

At Global City, city planners looked into the best ways for cities to fully integrate their transport systems to build a reliable and usable system for the future. The five key elements in adding life to downtown areas and sustainable regeneration were promotion, communication, leadership, hospitality and climate.

"City centres should be planned in such a way that people live close by and commuting distances are reduced. Public means of transport should be integrated into mainstream travel immediately. Pedestrian-friendly road structures and bike paths should be planned at early stages.

"If you give a high-quality service and create living spaces rather than just bus or tram stations, the system quickly becomes integrated into the city," said Upendra Tripathy, IAS, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Minority Affairs and former Principal Secretary for Transport and Home in the Government of Karnataka, India.

Tripathy reminded attendees about an unassailable fact: today urban transport developments are so highly advanced, they are a shoe-in for sustainability.

The idea of broadcasting public transport schedules to people in their homes thereby informing them about the choices and timings of different

WHAT CAN WE DO?

What we can do to build a sustainable future for ourselves and the world:

- **Raise awareness: Build a healthy relationship with nature and environment.**
- **Live simply: Differentiate between needs and wants. Consumerism is not based on**

real needs, but pushed by an inflated standard of living influenced by clever marketing.

- **Reduce energy consumption: Use energy saving electronic devices. Save water.**
- **Avoid wasting food. Eat locally produced food.**
- **Drive less, switch to fuel-efficient cars.**
- **Paint your home a light**

colour if you live in a warm climate, or a dark colour in a cold climate.

- **Reuse and recycle.**
- **Teach your children sustainable values.**
- **Avoid using household cleaners, air fresheners, interior paints, carpets and even furniture items that contain toxic materials.**

modes of transport is not far off in terms of possibility and implementation.

Mona Serageldin, vice-president, Institute for International Urban Development, is an academic who thinks Abu Dhabi has done a good job by balancing the older and newer generations' lifestyle requirements in both social as well as cultural contexts. "Thinking about how such massive developments are going to affect the country in general, in itself, is a positive step towards attaining sustainability in the long run."

A migrant is an entrepreneur

While the relationship between peoples and infrastructure is fairly straightforward to draw out, what introduces an interesting and challenging complexity to this relationship is the migration of peoples in and out of a city. Today, the world over, every city is seeing an ebb and flow of people as they move in, settle for varying periods of time and move on (or stay on as the case maybe).

This decision is dictated by a host of considerations including personal, professional, social, even environmental, to name a few. While the movement offers food for thought for city planners on an almost yearly basis, this mass of people also is a reservoir of human wealth for a city's developmental aspirations.

"How beneficial immigrants are to a city is related to the response of that particular city to them," said Kyle Rae, councillor, Economic and Culture Development in Toronto. As a member of the City Council, Rae has spent

almost 20 years trying to improve co-ordination between cultural and economic projects in Toronto.

"Only when migrants feel the cities they work in are their own, will they contribute earnestly to its growth," he said. The best way to integrate local citizens with immigrants is through sharing of local culture and heritage.

"Cultural projects can express universal values through literature, cinema or art, well rooted in specific cultures. The approach is not turned towards the past; in fact, it's an open-door policy which shows respect to history and local identity while contributing to the creation of future cities through inclusion."

Offering a platform for peoples to showcase their cultural offerings can often channel it all into the melting pot of a city's overall holding. "The communities built their community theatres and community cultural centres, which become incubators for the large non-profit institutions. This trend has received support from the city, federal and provincial governments [the world over]," he said.

No one today can possibly predict the predicament in which a town or city will find itself in 20 or 30 years from now. We as humans must face the implications of the growing pressures on our natural resource base as well as the human capacity to bear and re-grow.

While it's perhaps too soon to tell the results of initiatives in the UAE, on the other hand, the country has already taken a huge step on its way to being a Global City. That in itself is sustainable progress. ■

- Feby Imthias is a writer based in Abu Dhabi

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