SHARIL AMIN ABDUL RAHIM/FocusM

Vehicles at a virtual standstill on the Damansara-Puchong Highway at Bandar Sunway, Petaling Jaya. Many revitalisation programmes are regulated by obsolete planning controls and most proposals measure the value of people content quantitatively rather than qualitatively

Pedestrian architecture in urban design

The pedestrian is in danger of becoming the lost soul of the city environment

by Mustapha Kamal Zulkarnain

THOUGH the problems of many of our cities are serious and complex, they are neither altogether new nor are they insurmountable. Throughout history, cities have been threatened by environmental and political catastrophe, and some have met cataclysmic endings.

Urban decay has always been a concern. Cities that have survived have done so because they responded effectively to crises not dissimilar to those we are experiencing.

The differences today are in scale, consequence and speed of change. Cities - as the word implies - are centres of world civilisation; they cannot be allowed to die.

Once our most urgent urban problems have been identified, it is up to us to find inventive solutions and guide our cities where we want them to go. Basically, we share the urban dream.

We yearn for cities that are healthy, safe and economically sound; cities that provide essential public and social services, sufficient open space, recreational and cultural facilities, natural, historical and scenic resources as well as appropriate and pleasing architecture; cities that not only reflect the vitality but also meet

the diverse needs of inhabitants regardless of age, background and lifestyle.

In spite of immense social and technological progress, the quality of urban life is far from as it should be and could be. While some cities flourish, others are undergoing serious economic and social decline.

Almost all cities in the world have been flooded with shrines to property investment. This has arisen from the lack of a clear understanding and interpretation of the complexities of popular behaviour and preferences. Instead, there has been a preoccupation with distracting, short-term goals.

We, as city-dwellers, have failed to preserve an awareness of what makes a pleasant, friendly city. Much of a city, unfortunately, has given way to images of foreign origin. Some see this as incompatible with local ways. With this spreading, the needs of the man-in-the-street are neglected.

In urban-design terms, cities are made of blocks, squares and streets. Those are the invented materials in the structure of any city. But what makes a city is its vitality and vibrancy as a result of its people. The people content of a city is an important element in stimulating the reform of its harsh or dilapidated parts.

This is part of the idea of pedestrian architecture, a process which looks at the interface between buildings and adjacent

streets, streets as a more or less design entity, activities generated and which would be generated from it, myths and realities about pedestrian architecture as well as the general concept of it.

City decay

Great concern has been expressed at the decline of the core of many major cities and towns around the world. The core - the city - throughout urban history, has been a symbol of the urbane.

It has been closely associated with geographical place and conveys an urbanity which, during the Middle Ages, signified a governed human settlement exhibiting an urban character as distinct from one characterised by a rural lifestyle.

With the fast-moving tide of technology, this notion is elaborated on by overlaying a glitter, a clangour and a clatter of business.

In our modern era, the term has taken on various meanings synonymous with chic, trendiness, cosmopolitanism, sophistication, civility (implying the respect both of self and of others and thus, offering a recognition of the importance of the public realm or collective wellbeing) and *savoir-vivre*.

This new urbaneness, which evolved with the rise of modernity, has totally changed the concept of urbanity.

Disrespectful of history and human scale, modern buildings are frequently an intrusion - unsympathetic to their purpose. Stripped to their barest essentials, they offer little delight or surprise.

Through insensitive urban-renewal policies of the past, the fabric of many neighbourhoods has been destroyed and large numbers of people have been needlessly displaced. It was mistakenly thought the most efficient and economic way of renewing blighted areas was to raze and then rebuild them.

Are the ills of our cities incurable or will there be a renaissance? Our decimated central business districts are being revitalised, though with mixed results. While many remain deserted after dark, others are being rezoned for multiple uses and are again becoming 24-hour neighbourhoods.

The most successful downtowns have integrated residential and commercial buildings, and offer a range of activities and entertainment.

The dispersion of people to the outskirts of cities and city centres while maintaining a temporary population density in cities and city centres has left most parts underused, economically and socially.

According to French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his memoir *Tristes Tropiques*, "Cities have often been likened to symphonies and poems, and the comparison seems perfectly natural; they are in fact objects of the same kind.

"By its form as by the manner of its birth, the city has elements of biological procreation, organic evolution and aesthetic creation. It is both a natural object and a thing to be cultivated; individual and group; something lived and something dreamed; it is the human invention par excellence."

Priorities and loyalties

Priorities seem to be for the comfort of private automobiles and vehicular traffic in general as opposed to the much-needed requirements of the man-in-the-street, which I propose be named "pedestrian".

We could design fabulous architecture, whether buildings, squares, malls, streets or even parks in terms of its physical being and measured appropriateness to its location. It would be such a shame if they were not to be filled with the very essence of place and placemaking: People.

And not just any people but people who feel a sense of belonging and identity in that place of architecture, as reflected in Wolf von Eckardt's essay *Our Design Behaviour*, which states: "The design of the city is obviously supposed ... to give all its citizens a sense of belonging, an identity and be the instrument for *civitas*, the dynamic, creative order that makes for civilisation.

"I have considerable doubt that it is very useful to try to measure this influence of design on behaviour."

Tempting as this may be, he adds, "it won't solve any of our emotional problems, which are, in part at least, caused by acute aesthetic deprivation and which are, I believe, the guts of the present urban crisis."

Not a programme or proposal has been left unimplemented to overcome this problem but why have they not achieved the anticipated results?

Have we done something wrong? Have we left anything out along the way? Have we just repeated past mistakes in another way?

Our challenge

Cities are not static; they are continuously being transformed by each new generation. It is imperative we add our own contribution to ensure our cities not only survive but also thrive.

In doing so, it will be reassuring to reflect on past achievements. Our challenge is to reshape what has become an immensely complex, man-made environment.

Let us try with equal determination, imagination, intelligence and necessary sacrifice to fulfil the aspirations of all inhabitants of all cities, and prove that urban life can be both humane and beautiful.

Case studies

Meeting the environmental needs of man is the purpose of urban design – equipping the city in the way people want in a

Seeking greatest good

democratic society. This should mean seeking the greatest good for the greatest number rather than conferring a private vision on a select few.

However, as soon as we try to create an environment of universal appeal, we realise little is known about the most basic questions, like "What do people want from their surroundings? How are they affected by their environment?"

The following are some conclusions drawn from various case studies:

▶ A majority of city authorities have adopted the clear segregation of pedestrians from vehicles, in terms of space and time.

▶ Most if not all utilise piecemeal development. As a result, a feeling of totality is lacking.

▶ Business entrepreneurs have the projected opinion that segregation causes a loss in business profit.

▶ The provision of malls, atriums, squares as well connectors like aerobridges and underground metro systems. Zebra crossings have problems of security.

▶ In most cities, squares, malls, atriums or simply streets inhibit physical freedom and sensory awareness rather than increase the facets of pedestrian activity.

▶ Many revitalisation programmes are regulated by obsolete planning controls.

▶ Most proposals measure the value of people content quantitatively as opposed to qualitatively.

▶ There seems to be a worrying failure to acknowledge the role of façade as a means of continuity in promoting celebrations and festivities, from the streets to the inner realms of buildings.

▶ Most cities use the idea of pedestrian zones such as pedestrian districts, pedestrian streets, transit ways and semi- or wholly-enclosed malls.

▶ Aerobridges or undergrounds used as a means to promote vitality, liveability and accessibility clearly create a new orientation within a city. Climate plays an important role in determining this necessity.

▶ Social amenities like crèches are neglected as a back-up for other, designed facilities like the atrium shopping centre.

▶ In instances that depict a success in revitalising city places, there hardly exists a barrier (time) for the pedestrian to use facilities.

▶ It seems the pedestrian is in danger of becoming the lost soul of the city environment.

▶ The market has a place in determining the level and quality of revitalisation programmes.

In conclusion, there exists some common ground – liveability, accessibility, imageability and vitality – that defines pedestrian architecture.

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