

## U R B A N T R A N S F O R M A T I O N

If big metropolises are to provide everything residents want, then it will require the resources of individuals, not politicians – that was the message from a forum on urban development

■ *Pana Janwiroj*  
*The Nation*  
SHANGHAI

**T**HE FIRST-TIME visitor's aerial view of the world's fastest-growing city could be described as "awesome", with one high-rise topping another. It is a view that might remind some of the popular "Flash Gordon" science fiction TV series of the 1950s, except that Shanghai is in full colour, and many architects have described it as "surreal".

But are cities like Shanghai liveable for the residents and friendly to visitors? How will this and other growing Asian cities balance the economic, environmental and social needs of its people?

More than 250 experts, including many new-generation architects, structural engineers and scholars from more than 40 countries gathered at Tongji University in Shanghai last month to debate these and other aspects of future urban development at the second Holcim Forum for Sustainable Construction, organised by the Holcim Foundation.

First held in 2004, the theme of the Holcim Forum this year was "Urban Trans-Formation".

One clear message that emerged from the forum was that city development is moving from the "industrialisation age" to the "ecological age".

The forum's experts and a host of speakers expounded on this from architectural, city planning and development and engineering standpoints.

"The paradigm has shifted," summed up Rolf Soiron, chairman of Swiss-based Holcim Ltd.

But the growing pains of the world's cities prevail – environmen-

tal, financial and even political. The debate on solutions to these problems saw a light at the end of the tunnel – in vision if not yet in practice – especially of those participants from less developed countries.

the level of emissions. "This need should become part of your profession."

If the paradigm has shifted, what does one practitioner think? Peter Head, director of Planning and Sustainability from urban consultant UK-based Arup, outlined a set of foundations critical to achieving sustainability.

No 1: The future matters  
No 2: The future is formed by current decisions and should be inter-generational equity

No 3: There are limited resources  
No 4: Willingness to act on scientific certainty and not absolute certainty

No 5: Systems are linked even if we don't see the linkages (harder always to convince politicians)  
No 6: Success for a city is a collective idea

No 7: Some humbleness in the face of nature is appropriate  
Saskia Sassen, professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, said from the view of history of the man-made world, architects, engineers and planners all know so much more today about environmental technologies.

"But resolution depends on a collection of things to come together."

She described city citizens' demands for hospitals, green space and environmentally sustainable construction as a political process providing room for the bigger world challenge on climate change – but how to get from A to B?

But playing down the reality of politics and its ability to transform, Sassen said that historically in the material world, some of the most transformational efforts did not come from the majority but from a particular situation, incident or event.

For instance, in the past, a war often led to changes. In today's cities

# 'ECO AGE' BECKONS CITIES

A MODERN skyscraper stands tall in Shanghai, just as old low-rise structures are being removed to give way to high-rise buildings that come with a blossoming economy.

**From the big picture comes the individuals who live, study, and work in cities. An 'Eco-city' might be a far-fetched dream, especially for new mega cities like Shanghai, Jakarta, New Delhi or Bangkok.**

From the big picture comes the individuals who live, study, and work in cities. An "Eco-city" might be a far-fetched dream, especially for new mega cities like Shanghai, Jakarta, New Delhi or Bangkok.

Elmar Ledergerber, mayor of Zurich, provided an anchor answer to the very notion that all city residents aspire to – "quality of life".

So, what drives the quality of life in a city? Ledergerber said there was no single answer, but as far as Zurich was concerned the three biggest contributors to its development have been competition between European cities, support from local residents and cheap money for infrastructure projects.

Zurich can claim a big success as it has consistently been ranked as one of the global cities with the best quality of life, alongside Vancouver and Melbourne. Few Asian cities have ever made the top 20!

Ledergerber also highlighted the importance of politics in successfully building a good city. Stability is needed, and for decades. Constant dialogue must take place with all stakeholders. A highly motivated population who are aware of today's challenges is also a factor, he added.

Where has politics failed? Molly O'Meara Sheehan, senior researcher at US-based World Watch Institute, has a ready answer: "Trees don't talk, children don't vote!"

Klaus Topfer, former executive director of the UN Environment Programme and a member of the Holcim Foundation advisory board, warned against seeing politics as a quick way to solutions. "Don't expect politics to be what they should be, people have no patience."

He called on each individual to do what they can to preserve the environment and not to wait for a precise scientific answer or unanimous conclusion – since that would be too late.

Topfer underlined the growing global cost of this era of unprecedented rapid economic development. He urged architects to design buildings that play a role in reducing

– which bring together the most advanced knowledge – how can they activate changes as "we know that 60 per cent of buildings in cities have to be rebuilt if sustainability to the environment and climate change are to be achieved?"

Sassen also said there is an increasing demand everywhere for accountability on the geographies of destruction. "Now we know we are in a sinking boat together."

"Cities energise such political space [dominated by big corporations], which social scientists have not yet learned how to use," she hinted as a possible solution.

Jean-Philippe Vassal, an architect from France, gave fresh impetus to the new paradigm. "Don't demolish," he argued, because it could only exasperate social and even environment conflicts.

Rather, the odd and tamed apartment buildings, which were built largely by the state, can be renovated to give greater space to residents. He showed several examples of how that could be done – as the idea helps to maintain the social fabric of the community whose members would be alienated if they are moved elsewhere.

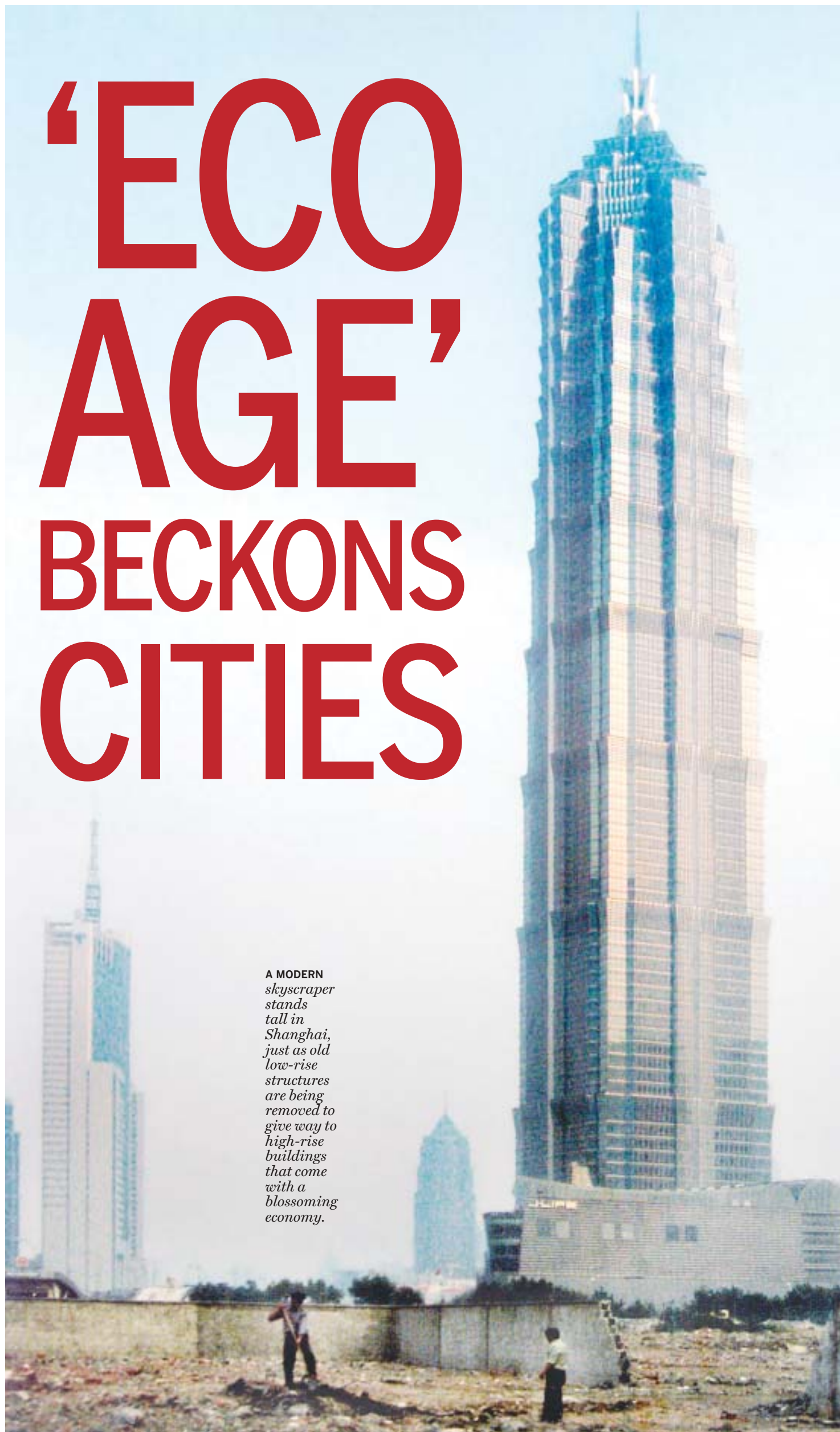
Enrique Penalosa, former mayor of Bogota, is arguably the most idealistic and innovative among his peers. He said the 20th century will be remembered as a disastrous one in urban history with more deaths from cars. "Will we do the same in the next 50 years. Can we do something different?," he asked.

For the flamboyant former mayor, sustainability begins with "pleasure and services in quality of life". The city is a means to a way of life. Shopping malls put up to replace walking is a symptom of a city's illness. Lack of access to green space is the main factor of exclusion, especially for the poor.

The irony is evident in the conflicting transport policies:

"Developed countries now work to reduce car use, while less developed countries want to develop their cities to facilitate car use!"

Sassen described the rapid development of Shanghai as a huge, missed opportunity since the city has the scale to take the lead in setting emission levels and to sustain it with bike pathways.



COURTESY OF TONGJI UNIVERSITY, CHINA

## A good city is ...

- Where residents should not feel inferior
- It facilitates and accommodates walking/pedestrians
- It compliments people-to-people contact
- It needs to be good to children, the elderly and the handicapped
- It should facilitate plenty of communication

## What is a sustainable city?

- It is a pleasure to live in
- It is people-friendly

Note: Defined by Enrique Penalosa, former mayor of Bogota, Columbia

## Five themes on urban transformation at the Holcim Forum for sustainable construction were discussed. They included:

### NORMATIVE URBANISM:

Architects should maintain their romanticism in order to go beyond the norm. They should accept inequality as a drive of urban development and a way to make the norm productive. Go out, change things, test and accept failures.

### INFORMAL URBANISM:

Currently very much in "fashion". Architects and planners are now in pursuit of urban pleasure that thrives on innovation, interaction, information and sustainability.

### GREEN URBANISM:

Cities have come a long way in terms of promoting green spaces. The next phase will be sustainable urbanism intertwined with social and economic priorities. Sustainable urbanism will open up opportunities for effective planning and implementation. It will not be just green – but all colours of the rainbow.

### TOURISTIC URBANISM:

The degree of activism should not be underestimated. Before, tourism was about exploring but has now shifted to include "packaged experiences". Excessive dependence on tourists has deprived cities of paying importance to communities as an asset of their own identity.

The success of Barcelona is one example of a grassroots effort and not just "top down". Tourism development should be regarded as an opportunity for regenerating communities and empowering the locals.

### TEMPORARY URBANISM:

Don't forget that in many instances temporary has become permanent as in the case of many refugee camps or the Gaza strip.

The United Nations today has become the biggest supplier of housing worldwide. Some places, such as Kabul, have seen over-investment, which means they are costly to run. A "one week camp" can easily become an urbanised area.

## CITY talk

### Over half the world lives in cities

More than half the world's people now live in cities.

In Shanghai, demand for space has seen as many as 5,000 high-rise buildings spring up in the past seven years. The adage 'Rome was not built in a day' may now be redundant.

"The paradigm has shifted," said Rolf Soiron, chairman of cement supplier Holcim of Switzerland.

### Sustainably sick, architects say

Here in Bangkok, architects have coined the phrase "sustainably sick". Paris-based R&S Architects has incorporated the city's ubiquitous pollution into its design of the contemporary art museum B-mu.

The geometric structure is covered with an electrostatic metal mesh, which, over time, will collect dust from the air and "build up a furry cover" that will protect exhibitions from the sun.

### Climate change doomsday clock?

New York, contrary to belief, uses a third less energy than other major American cities.

Michael Sorkin, director of the Graduate Urban Design Programme at New York's City College of New York, said this was because most residents used public transport.

Seventy-nine per cent of the Big Apple's emissions come from buildings, not cars.

New York is gearing up for several environmental projects as it prepares for a projected population increase of one million in the coming years.

Sorkin suggests creating a climate-change global catastrophe clock with time ticking down to doomsday as a wake-up call about global warming.

### Thai participants at Holcim Forum

The Holcim Forum for Sustainable Construction 2007 in Shanghai in mid-April attracted several participants from Thailand. These included Engineering Institute president Dr Karoon Chandrangsou, Town and Country Planning Department senior architect Thongchai Roachanakanan, Asian Institute of Technology Assoc Professor Dr Pichai Nimitiyongskul and Chiang Mai University Faculty of Architecture lecturer Dr Apichoke Lekagul.

Apichoke presented findings on enhancing the authenticity of art-and-craft production for tourism development.

### Apirak to attend top cities summit

Later this month Bangkok Governor Apirak Kosayodhin will attend the Large Cities Climate Leadership Summit in New York hosted by the Clinton Foundation.

Other Asian cities invited include Addis Ababa, Beijing, Cairo, Delhi, Dhaka, Hanoi, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Karachi, Manila, Mumbai, Seoul, Shanghai and Tokyo.

Cities from Berlin to Bogota, Lima to London and Cairo to Chicago will attend, too.

### \$2 million for big awards contest

Meanwhile the second Holcim Awards for sustainable construction open for entries on June 1. Prizes in five regional competitions and the global awards total US\$2 million (Bt69.5 million). The event is open to planners, architects, builders and building owners.

Buildings started before June 1 of this year are eligible. The first phase will select regional winners in 2008 that automatically qualify for the global competition in 2009. Further details will be announced in June.