Design Future

Saeed Zaki, Ph.D., MD of architecture and interior design firm dwp (design worldwide partnership) talks about the development of future cities.

The future remains a mystery, but that does not stop speculation about what ours will look like. We are continually planning for tomorrow and in doing so we can attempt to predict the form of our future is likely to take. Looking at current trends in society, urban planning and its influences may be one of the key sources of the shape of things to come, in our cities of the future.

Urban creativity

By the year 2040, with an expected urban population of the world in excess of 6.5 billion people, approximately 2 out of 3 people globally will be living in cities. For this to happen in an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable way, urban planners and designers will have to conceive and plan our cities of future based on two key elements, namely, transportation and communication.

The past concept of sprawling cities is soon to diminish, as land becomes scarcer and demand for resources increases. The cities of the future will be based on the concept of a 'planned-opolis' – a term conceived to reflect urban development, based on a hyper-efficient use of resources. It is also projected that Asia will be home to the largest number of mega-cities, where the population exceeds 10 million, with China and India leading the way. Bangkok will be one of the mega-cities of the future and will see mass-transit systems continuing to replace the use of private vehicles more and more avidly. This, in the face of rising fuel costs, will see a greater push and increasing need for clean energy – a necessity rather than a mere wish.

The future cities will also, out of necessity, be more energy-efficient, green and eco-friendly. One possible scenario is that self-sustaining neighbourhoods replace large city centres, thereby reducing the need for commuting. The cities of the future will also be highly networked, as communication systems become ever more instrumental to the functioning of cities and their economies. With travel restricted, there will be an evolution of systems, allowing one to transport virtually to any part of the world via technology, such as holographically, conducting meetings and leading businesses, without moving beyond one's house or neighbourhood.

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The increased risks, as seen by the recent nuclear disaster in Japan, demonstrate a clear need for not just clean but safe energy sources, becoming more important. Cities and even neighbourhoods may brew their own bio-fuels, as more traditional energy sources diminish and energy costs sky rocket. Cities and buildings will be designed to allow not only for function, but also to maximise solar and wind energy, certain to be some of the key sources of power for the future.

Heading skyward

Cities of the future will be dense and vertical, made possible as result of advancements in materials, construction, transportation and communication technologies. Such an idea was first conceived in the 1950s by the well-known Italian architect Paolo Soleri, in his utopian 'Mesa City' concept, housing 2 million inhabitants in a high-technology vertically-dense urban environment . More recently Eugene Tsui expanded on this idea in his proposal, the 'Ultima Tower', a two-mile high green tower, consisting of a multi-dimensional eco-system, combined with a mixed-use development, created as a vertical neighborhood. This may not happen in our life-time but the idea is not unattainable with technological advancements, allowing us to plan and build more complex and previously unthinkable structures and vertical cities.

Mass transit systems, accordingly, will not just be horizontal, but we will see vertical or multi-layered mass transit system made possible, allowing the movement of people and goods in every which direction - think Roald Dahl's 'Charlie & the Great Glass Elevator' and beyond. China is already experimenting with the development of a multi-level transit corridor, where a giant bus will straddle two lanes of the road running on rails, underneath which private vehicles can still drive. Alleviating traffic congestion, allowing the carriage of more passengers within one 'vehicle' and helping the environment are just some of the benefits that will follow from such a plan.

Future cities will also see an increased use of more energy-conscious, environmentally friendly vehicular solutions. Queue 'Back to the future Part 5' and we may even see, in the next 3-4 decades, private jet cars with the ability to fly short distances, thus by-passing road congestion. What we have seen in the movies and read about in sci-fi books is not far from becoming the reality of the layout and pulse of our future cities. However, we do need to be mindful, taking the right precautions to ensure the development of a cleaner and greener world, and not just a series of colossal carbon traps.

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