



Asia's most important and biggest meeting point for the emerging discipline of Smart Electricity

Sustainable living: Preserve of the rich?

- **Many model eco projects are exclusive, premium developments**
- **If the green lifestyle is not equitable, how far is it truly sustainable?**

By Siaw Mei Li

As **protestors rallied** against socio-economic inequality halfway across the globe on Wall Street, participants at the recent Sustainable Cities Asia 2011 conference in Singapore were pondering the issues of access and equitability in developing sustainable cities.

Amidst presentations on dazzling upcoming projects such as **Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's** masterplan for Green Tech City in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the BSD City Green Office Park designed by **Aedas** for BSD City in West Jakarta, there was a marked consciousness of socio-economic disparities and uneven levels of development across many parts of the Asia Pacific.

A delegate remarked that many high-rise green spaces still seem exclusive – created not so much for nature's sake as for the financially-privileged. Another wondered how the region's rising middle classes could be persuaded to choose fuel-efficient mass transit over a private car.



Saaed Zaki: Will we be able to build green cities for the lower-income? (photo credit: GPA photo)

Dr Saaed Zaki, managing director of **dwp** Thailand, who raised the debate bar with his provocative questions, says: "Most of the growth in urban populations will be in developing countries – countries where a significant portion of the population will not be in a position to afford fancy dwellings to live in. There will be an impact on the environment. Will we be able to build green cities for the portion of the population that is middle-income, lower-income?"

Citing high-profile showcase eco-cities being developed in the region at a slow pace and at huge investments, he questioned whether such projects can ever provide genuine solutions for a

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"We need to hold together and hang in there to get through this difficult time."

*Shi Zhengrong,
APVIA chief
chairman*

[Keeper of Malaysia's FiT](#)



"If you don't comply at the point of submission, you don't qualify."

*Badriyah Abdul
Malek, SEDA
Malaysia CEO*

[Singapore creates solar hub](#)

burgeoning global population that has just crossed the seven billion mark, most of whom cannot afford “the Masdars of this world”.

Number of eco-cities around the world today



Source: Simon Joss, International Eco-Cities Initiative. Background photo is an artist impression of part of the Knowledge Centre, Masdar City (photo credit: Masdar City)

Democracy and sustainability

Paul James, director of the Global Cities Institute in Melbourne, Australia and director of the **United Nations Global Compact Cities Programme** shares that at most similar conferences he attends, there is a sense of urgency that somehow never gets translated enough into action. He asserts: “The evidence suggests that awareness is not connected to practice.”

To this, Robbert Van Nouhuys, director of **ACLA** in Hong Kong, says: “Hope is the only thing we have. I think we are a species that can only correct ourselves out of serious disasters and we’re a bit close to the edge and a lot of people are going to fall off. But we have to give hope to the next generation because they have to live in the situation that we created. If we are to help future generations, it’s at least by putting the right framework in place, by developing them the way they should be developed.”

Van Nouhuys underlines the need for solutions that are “loud, legal and long”, referring to policy frameworks that are clear and unambiguous, legally enforceable and long-term in scope and objective. He cites Chongqing in China as one place where visionary leadership has wrought change at a quick pace, adding: “This would have sounded really strange if we said this 30 years ago, but China is actually one of the catalysts for change for the rest of the world. I can see that very clearly being so close to the source.”



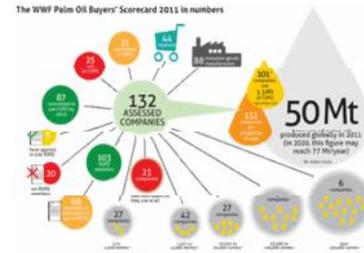
Djoko Prihanto: Chenjia Town Eco-Community gets 12% of its energy from renewables (photo credit: GPA photo)



“Local banks are being educated to familiarise them in solar project financing.”

Goh Chee Kiong,
EDB Singapore

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Intelligent eco-township on Nanjing island



An example of the change Van Nouhuys spoke of was seen when Djoko Prihanto, senior vice president of **Surbana International's** urban planning group in Singapore presented on the firm's work in Chenjia Town Eco-Community near Shanghai. He shares that 12% of the energy used by the township is produced on-site via renewable energy infrastructure such as rooftop solar panels.

However, when Djoko commented that sustainable initiatives often move faster along under the strong, top-down governance of former communist states or authoritarian regimes compared to places like Indonesia or India where democratic civil participation is high, Saeed Zaki was quick to interject that sustainability should never take precedence over people's rights to democracy. Peter Stueck, who has spent much time supervising Aedas' work in Jakarta, then pipes in with a reminder that "democracy is a very powerful driver [for change], but bureaucracy is not."

Sustainable mobility vs social mobility

The dilemma facing many rising Asian cities was expressed from the floor by conference delegate Abigail Evans when she recalled a quotation, frequently attributed to Margaret Thatcher: "A man who, beyond the age of 30, finds himself on a bus, can count himself as a failure."



Peter Stueck: Democracy is a very powerful driver [for change], but bureaucracy is not (photo credit: GPA photo)

How, indeed, could city planners change still-prevalent public perception of private transport as a necessary mark of prestige and progress? At least two speakers – Peter Stueck of Aedas and Dan Ringelstein of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill – admit there's very little to be done for public transport in their firms' respective eco-township projects in Indonesia and Vietnam.

Elad Eisenstein of **Arup** remarks, however, that in London at least, class distinctions are being blurred in public transit where a CEO and a low-income person could well share the same Tube carriage. Director of environment for **Greater London Authority** Emma Strain observed that cycling for commute has gone up hugely in London too, by about 500% over the last ten years, even though cycling rates there are still very low compared to European cities like Copenhagen or Amsterdam.

The impact of transport planning in influencing equitable access for all was also illustrated by Dr George Sun, deputy director of Singapore's **Land Transport Authority**. In Singapore, tactile guidance makes navigating key public spaces and transport hubs safer and more comfortable for the sight-disabled, while special transit cards for the less physically agile, such as the elderly, can be used to keep pedestrian lights on green for a longer duration.

The tension between achieving sustainable geographical mobility and expressing one's social mobility also arises in planning an eco-city's security and landscape features. Djoko explains that in the Chenjia township, incorporating security features within a borderless development required creative solutions through the

The Sino-Singapore Nanjing Eco Hi-tech Island (SNEI) is one of Nanjing's largest foreign collaborations, and will be developed over more than ten years, with a total investment estimated at 100 billion yuan (US\$15.7 billion)

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Mumtaz Khan, CEO Maybank MEACP

use of boundaries such as waterways and strategically placed greenery.

Stueck, too, acknowledges the challenges of developing a commercial space that enjoys free flow of human traffic while maintaining inconspicuous but sufficient levels of security to keep residents of an exclusive eco-township happy.

Paul James, in summing up, notes that ultimately, sustainable cities must be sensitive not only to issues of culture and nature, but also “to the way communities face each other and walk along the streets... it’s built into the whole notion of liveability.”



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“The appraisal of projects will be more stringent than cases involving straight bank loans.”

*Tengku Datuk
Zafrul Tengku
Aziz, CEO
Maybank
Investment*

[Green rating cannot be a tick-the-box exercise](#)

Green buildings labels that are effective must consider the people that lie at the heart of sustainable communities