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Acting The Part

Clive Owen

Is Ready To Take On The Extreme

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JASON POMEROY

BUILDING BLOCKS

BY EXAMINING THE ARCHITECTURE OF CITIES ACROSS ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, ECO-ARCHITECT PROFESSOR JASON POMEROY, TELLS OF THE CIVILISATIONS' PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IN CHANNEL NEWSASIA'S *CITY TIME TRAVELLER*

WORDS BY KC YAP PICTURES BY POMEROY STUDIO

Serving first as shelters and places of worship, architecture has over the millenniums evolved into works of art, with structures of all sizes, shapes and features delineating not just our skylines but also our cultures, progress and the myriad life of every metropolis since the beginning of human civilisation. Often, historians and archaeologists rely on them, or what remains of them, to be solid evidence of bygone societies that would otherwise exist only in fables and fragments of ancient manuscripts, or perish with time. Yet, despite living in an age of instant information, many know little more than the structures' names and heights.

Today, having gone from vernacular designs that are much more reflective of local needs, expertise, the surrounding environment and materials available, to ornate Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance styles, to towering steel and glass skyscrapers, architecture is faced with critical environmental issues brought on by over-development. The industry has, however, taken a major shift towards sustainable construction principles, adopting greener roof designs, solar technology, biodegradable materials, energy-efficient structures.

Amongst those who are championing the cause is Professor Jason Pomeroy, founding principal of Singapore-based urbanism, architecture, design and research firm Pomeroy Studio. In addition to pushing the green limits, Professor Pomeroy, by way of his show *City Time Travellers*, now in its second season on Channel NewsAsia, has taken it upon himself to study buildings and their places, and offer us valuable insights into their cultural origins through the bricks, mortar, or steel and glass, of their cities. From the Spanish influenced walled city of Intramuros in Manila, to the gleaming towers of power and prestige in Shanghai, the built environment is able to link history, culture and modern life few other physical structures can.

Please tell us about some of the highlights of your travels.

The places I visited have spanned the breadths of time, ranging from the 7th century ancient city of Varanasi, through to the 21st century city of Tokyo that is a hotbed of technological ingenuity laid upon age old socio-cultural practices. I've also seen the majestic Palaces of Hue, the magical ruins of Ayutthaya and the Spanish-colonial citadel of Intramuros in Manila. What transcends culture though is an indigenous civilisation's understanding of basic environmental and social needs, embodied in many of these historical buildings. Shelter from the elements, natural light and ventilation, locally sourced materials and a spatial 'encoding' as to who can, or can't, occupy a particular space, can be found in all.

One city that did stand out was Kolkata, India. This was the centre of British power during the colonial era. The British created a centralised administration system, very effective transport infrastructure and a world-class education system. Kolkata embodies this, in its grand structures, from the Howrah station which remains India's largest railway complex, to The Victoria Memorial whose architect drew on British, Mughal, Deccani, Egyptian, Venetian and Islamic influences. Kolkata's influence can even be seen in contemporary Britain, through the popularity of Indian cuisine.

Why do you think it's important to revisit our cities and structures, and how do you think architecture and landscapes can help build better living and work environments?

A city's buildings can tell you so much about the culture and traditions of the people who lived and continue to live there, as well as the period in which they were built. This effectively tells the story of a country's evolution. In Kuala Lumpur, for example, you can see buildings that date back to the British colonial period, which sit cheek by jowl next to

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Eco-architect and host of Channel NewsAsia's *City Time Traveller*, Professor Jason Pomeroy

Professor Pomeroy designed the contemporary Idea House (located in Shah Alam) based on the traditional Malay kampong house. (Below) A stroll down memory lane in Manila, Philippines



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modern Islamic structures that reference Malaysia’s post-independence quest for a new identity. Growing environmental consciousness has left its indelible mark in many buildings, such as the Menara Mesiniaga, as well as symbols of economic progress with Islamic undertones—a perfect example being the Petronas Twin Towers.

Sustainable architecture pays respect to the natural environment, harnessing the wind, sun and rain to reduce energy and water consumption—and therefore costs. However, Pomeroy Studio’s interpretation goes beyond this, and draws on a nation’s culture and tradition to create built environments that positively impact people’s lives. One of our projects in Penang, Jahabah, for example, is a mixed-use development that includes low and medium cost housing, hotel, religious school, community centre and retail bazaar. The development reinterpreted the traditional Malay *serambi* (terraces) to create outdoor social spaces, and incorporated passive design techniques that maximised natural light and ventilation. We also drew on Islamic references in the form of the four-fold garden (*Chahar Bagh*) to create vertical Islamic gardens that promoted its use for outdoor activities as well as absorbing noxious pollutants in the atmosphere and reducing ambient temperatures.

It’s said that you are able to understand a culture and its origins by reading its buildings and places. What are the signs that you look for?

I like to read buildings like I read books—from cover to cover and several times to appreciate the full story and its sub-plot subtleties. In that sense, there are similarities to archaeology, in that you can ‘read’ the object or structure, and let it tell you a particular socio-cultural, economic or technological sub-story. That’s what is so great about *City Time Traveller*. I get to visit these amazing urban habitats that have evolved over time, and the various layers of history tell a very distinct story. Like a bit of detective work, one can then delve deeper into origins: Who built it? For what purpose? What was the economy like back then? What about the climate? How did the building change people’s lives?

This is not the reserve of just old buildings. Take Jin Mao tower in Shanghai for example. The growth of an economy requires heroes, and Deng Xiaoping was heralded as the leader behind the opening of China to the world. What I could ‘read’ from the architecture was that such a prospect needed a physical manifestation. Jin Mao tower became a landmark that spoke of China’s cultural and economic transformation. The ability for the American architects Skidmore Owings and Merrill to look from the outside was perhaps the secret to the projects success. Seizing on the Chinese cultural significance of the number 8 (the leader declaring the project on July 8th, 1988, on his 88th birthday as well as for prosperity and good luck), the tower stands at 88 storeys, and comprises of office, hotel, and observation deck. Rather than create a pastiche version of a pagoda, I could see the architects sought to reinterpret its essence metaphorically and physically. The Pagoda’s unique tiered roof structure is reinterpreted as a series of cantilevered elements that dissect the building. As a landmark within an uninterrupted skyline, it similarly acts as a beacon for people’s congregation—just like its ancient predecessor.



Professor Pomeroy visits the iconic Petronas Twin Towers and sheds light on the significance of superstructures

Over time, modern architecture has become pretty much the same everywhere (concrete, glass, steel), with few to no cultural references. Would you say that societies are beginning to lose their identities?

Yes—in the wake of globalisation and technological advancement it’s easy to lose sight of who we are and where we come from, and to what point should we allow technology to affect our lives. It is also easy to see how the power of brands can change the cultural landscape. We no longer say “let’s grab a coffee” but may be inclined to say “I’m grabbing a Starbucks”. This is true for the built environment too. Architects with popular appeal are able to traverse the globe and lay their imprint on the built environment. Spaces, which were once reflected the cultural practices, beliefs and the traditions of a local people, are being replaced by familiar global brands.

This is why I believe that talking about social, economic and environmental principles of sustainability doesn’t go far enough. We should also consider a cultural sustainability that seeks to preserve traditional social practices and potentially safeguards against modern environments that lack cultural relevance.

Have extensive real estate activities led the Middle East to the destruction of many of its historical sites and natural landscapes?

I don’t believe this is true, and is a perception perhaps resulted from the dominance of the glinting skyscrapers of Dubai that have become a symbol of the Middle East as a whole. In fact, the Middle East has probably done just as much if not more to preserve its cultural heritage than parts of Asia. The great city of Isfahan in Iran would attest to this. Even newer examples, such as Qatar, is fiercely protective of its tradition, and I. M. Pei executed the Museum of Islamic Art it demonstrates a respect for the heritage of the place without resorting to a particularly Western aesthetic.

So let’s turn our attention to Abu Dhabi, or even Dubai for that matter. This was an area vastly populated by not historic sites—rather, an abundance of sand dunes. They have been able to capitalise on their geographic position as a tourism, leisure and financial destination and turn nothing into something in the space of approximately 35 years. This actually is a remarkable story of perseverance and can be argued that had such an approach not been adopted, older historic centres may have been demolished to pursue modern urbanisation.

Many western countries have adopted environmentally-friendly technologies and promote recycling and the use of green materials. Are Asian governments as committed?

The rates and standards of recycling in Asia vary considerably. China, for instance, leads the world in the amount of waste it recycles, albeit a significant amount is imported from Europe where landfill costs are prohibitively expensive. Taiwan is also a world leader in recycling. After experiencing an economic boon in the 1980’s and 1990’s, rubbish was quite literally piling up in the streets, which forced the government to act, and attracted entrepreneurs who saw an opportunity to generate revenue from someone else’s trash.

While recycling is very important in reducing our impact on the environment, there are also other “low hanging fruit” that individuals

“I think the Asian city will be a hybrid city—a marriage of old, contemporary and what we can call futuristic”

can pick, such as the preservation of water and energy. Fixing aeration devices to taps in order to put pressure through water can reduce average consumption from 133 litres of water a day to 64. We can switch light fittings to LED. Opting for ceiling fans, and incorporating household plants for shading as well as absorbing noxious pollutants and dust in the atmosphere also go some way to ensuring a greener urban habitat. **What are the things the government can do/provide to facilitate/enforce green developments? And how can developers and consumers contribute to this?** The stigma of green design costing 30% more than normal buildings will continue to be challenged and de-mystified as more and more green buildings are assessed in terms of their capital and operational costs in comparison to non-green buildings. Governmental legislation will increasingly be enforcing this position. Common perceptions that sustainable design is costly will continue to change, with an increased awareness that the costs initially associated with green design are marginal (1-5% over non-green buildings) and yet the upsides considerably outweigh the former. Improved habitable conditions, reduced energy and water consumption and therefore utility bills and greater social mobility all contribute to an increase in savvy property purchasers basing their decisions on such tangible savings and lifestyle improvements.

People want to know in layman's terms what sustainable design can do for them. This requires the tangible benefits being clearly spelled out. Improved air quality, reduced water consumption, reduced energy consumption, reduced ambient temperatures can all be calculated and provide an indication as to how much household money can be saved. **Many old, colonial buildings are being torn down to make way for modern development, or restored only to be commercialised. In your opinion, what is the right way to go about this?**

I think you have to look no further than Singapore to get an idea on how to build for the future, while preserving the past. It is important for a city to understand the role that heritage plays in shaping a nation's culture. Singapore's shop-houses were the first 'mixed-use' developments, featuring shops on ground floors and living quarters on the first and second. These districts were punctuated by mosques and temples where traders and families could pray and give thanks.

Today, these places have been completely transformed, and arguably for the better whilst retaining the spirit of trade and commerce. Wander through the streets of Telok Ayer, or Amoy Street and see the modern businesses in the upper storeys of traditional shop houses—from tech firms, to hedge funds to creative agencies. At street level, the transformation is made complete by a variety of boutiques, cafes, bars and restaurants. It's a prime example of how heritage buildings can be preserved and given a new lease of life (pun intended!).

Japan employs construction practices evolved from traditional techniques that have stood the test of time, such as the complicated bracket systems. Give us more examples of traditional methods that are both eco-friendly and adaptable for modern construction.

The best example I can give is the Malay *kampung* house. In 2010, I built Asia's first carbon-zero prototype home, called the Idea House (located in Shah Alam). I drew inspiration from the passive design techniques of the *kampung* house—commonly used prior to the advent of air conditioning and artificial light, and designed not by architects, but by its very inhabitants. It's this sense of local, community driven building that requires an element of simplicity, and we wanted to capture such modular vernacular techniques and couple it with the latest technological advances.

The *kampung* house has deep overhanging roofs that provide shade from the sun and rain, it has a larger roof volume that allows for greater air

circulation, and is raised on stilts to mitigate flood risk and accommodate uneven surfaces. The outside of the house is richly planted with tropical vegetation to cool down the air coming in. There are cultural nuances too, including an open verandah where the family would gather, and the building could expand and contract according to the size of the family.

These techniques were adapted for the Idea House, the result of which, with the incorporation of modern technology (solar cells, water harvesting features, etc), was a house that not only produced its own carbon-free electricity but actually produced excess electricity, providing revenue generation opportunities.

Looking at iconic structures such as the Burj and our Twin Towers, one can't help but wonder if taller and bigger means better?

These iconic tall buildings are not necessarily a response to inner city densification and the need to 'go tall' as a means of economic return on a 'postage stamp' sized site. Rather, they are symbols of power of a corporation, prestige, and sometimes opulence—for instance Trump Tower Manila which we have designed, will be the tallest residential tower in the Philippines when completed in 2016. They also demonstrate a city's 'arrival' on the global stage, and arguably characterise that particular city—for instance Shanghai Tower or Taipei 101. From the Empire State Building to Marina Bay Sands, these structures dominate skylines and serve as a physical reminder of a memorable place. Turning towards the office, retail and residential buildings that the local population inhabit on a daily basis, one needs to take a more critical look. The reality is that land is becoming scarcer and so we need to start looking up, rather than out. The parks, squares and other communal spaces that are being destroyed at ground level to make way for development, need to be replicated in the sky. So we are seeing an increasing use of skycourts and skygardens. This was the subject of my book published last year (*The Skycourt and Skygarden: Greening the Urban Habitat*, Routledge 2013).

Going forward, what do you think developing cities will look like?

Developing cities have the potential to go two ways: they can become heated, congested, polluted, crime-infested metropolises, where the rich live in lush, gated communities while the rest are forced to commute to work from afar. Or, they can become centres of wealth. This really depends on whether governments, urban planners and citizens embrace the concept of sustainably built environments that 1) draws on the essence of culture and tradition to positively impact peoples' lives, and 2) pays respect to the natural environment, harnessing the sun, wind and rain to reduce energy consumption 3) embraces technologies sparingly to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels 4) ensures open landscaped spaces and their buildings retain their asset value through sound commercial design 5) acknowledges space as commodity worth preserving in the wake of urbanisation.

I think the Asian city will be a hybrid city—a marriage of old, contemporary and what we can call futuristic. The vestiges of a 19th century colonial or indigenous past (e.g. the Hutongs in Beijing) will be retained as urban artefacts of nostalgia to remind us of yesteryear. The layering of the contemporary will act as a reminder of economic progress and technological advancement in the 20th century. But the 21st century layering will come as a result of climate change, inner city migration, population increase and further technological advancement. Buildings might simply extend vertically, and will be interlinked via skybridges. Skygardens will be in abundance given the need for alternative social spaces in such increasing inner city densities. These vertical gardens could also provide an opportunity for urban farming to cater for increasing food needs, as well as help reduce pollutants in the atmosphere and the searing heat of the city. ☺



The National Mosque of Malaysia is amongst Pomeroy's destinations in *City Time Traveller*.



The Howrah Junction railway station in Kolkata remains India's largest railway complex and a heritage site that stood out the most to Pomeroy.



The majestic Spanish colonial citadel of Intramuros, also known as the Walled City, the oldest district and historic crux of Manila.