

Death of cities

Urban resilience in cities depends on our ability to view buildings as malleable environments as opposed to static structures



The year is 2100. You're in Kuala Lumpur. You walk through the city, looking at the many skyscrapers which once made for a glittering skyline.

A shadow of its former glory, the crumbling city is filled with dilapidated skyscrapers, lending to the dense aura of deterioration. Concrete structures and glass facades crumble onto sidewalks without warning. Entire districts left abandoned as people move to the edge of the city, developing virgin lands.

The era of capitalism has left us with the "buy and throw away" mentality. Architecture is not exempted from this. Buildings become outdated due to changes in taste, function or expectation of building performance.

As with other products on the market, where purchasing a replacement has more advantages than the inconvenience of repairing the product, the erection of a new building is more advantageous than repurposing an outdated one.

This approach is especially dangerous in young, heavily populated Asian cities, as the construction rate in these parts of the world is extremely rapid.

For example, Kuala Lumpur has experienced a construction boom in the last 20 years. The once-flat skyline is now full of skyscrapers. According to the US Department of Energy, the average office building's lifespan in 2008 was 73 years; shorter than the average human lifespan.

Due to similar methods of construction, taste and the time at which it was built, it is safe to assume that these buildings will become obsolete at around the same time, resulting in the skyscraper graveyard phenomenon.

Dilapidated buildings are an immense liability to cities as the latter are often left to manage properties abandoned by property owners using scarce taxpayer money. Few options are left for cities to remove these buildings.

Typically, cities are unable to bear the cost of demolition, prolonging the suffering and decline of surrounding properties. The impact of this is devastating to the social fabric.

In our present-day, a single or



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by
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a block of derelict buildings create social problems in its immediate vicinity, cause a decline in surrounding property value and is an eyesore to the community.

Abandoned properties often lead to an increase in violent crimes as they provide the perfect setting for nefarious and illegal activities. One can only imagine the detrimental social and psychological impact of a city filled

with dilapidated skyscrapers.

It is extremely difficult to manage the undesirability of buildings on such a large scale. There are many ghost cities and towns around the world, sparsely populated or abandoned altogether, such as the ghost cities of China and the ghost town of Bukit Beruntung, Malaysia.

Efforts to revive, maintain and repopulate the thousands of abandoned buildings in these areas are futile. The scope of this issue spans multiple disciplines and requires a wholesome approach to the design and use of cities.

It also requires a change in mindset among stakeholders and decision makers when it comes to determining the value of good design, inclusive architecture and the impact of spaces on communities. Thus, it is imperative that we start having conversations on the inevitable death of buildings and its impact on cities.

Repurposing a sustainable solution

With regards to architecture, this problem can be addressed in two ways: demolition/disassembly or adaptive reuse. Demolition using current technology is expensive.

In most cases, repurposing a building is the sustainable solution.

An extrapolation of current trends sees many buildings adapted to meet the demands of the day. The generic building stock of the open plan office and retail outlets will be easily repurposed; morphing and evolving with the needs of the community.

A compelling case study for adaptability would be the meatpacking district in New York. Initially comprised of residential and industrial neighbourhoods, it evolved into neighbourhoods with marketplaces focused on the meat packing industry.

The area eventually gentrified to become New York's most fashionable neighbourhood and further flourished with the addition of the High Line linear park: an elevated freight rail line transformed into a public park.

Conversely, the biggest challenge for our cities will be the early obsolescence of apartments and condominiums. Due to the high population density in Asian cities like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Hong Kong, high-rise living is not an option, but a

necessity.

The design of present-day

high-rise living is static; built in unique grids with irregularly spaced columns, narrow but long load-bearing walls and other structural components which would be difficult to work around. These do not allow for changes in terms of layout, expansion or reduction in size of units.

Dealing with obsolescence

It is crucial that we look into alternative methods of designing mass housing to mitigate the monumental challenge of dealing with hundreds, if not thousands, of dilapidated building stock, which are difficult to repurpose, leading to a city with a graveyard of skyscrapers.

Although all buildings will become obsolete, it is time that we manage their obsolescence. Change is the only constant in our society. Great leaps in technology and evolutionary thinking lead to changing needs, expectations and lifestyles.

A healthy, resilient city is one which grows with its inhabitants. Much like the revitalisation of the meatpacking district in New York, a series of skyscrapers interconnected through constantly curated programming to meet the changing demands of the day may be the way forward.

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Alternative approaches from the Open Building movement show that the solutions have always been within our grasp.

Open Building embraces the idea that the built environment is in constant transformation and change must be recognised. The idea that the built environment is the product of an on-going, never-ending, design process in which the environment transforms part by part.

However, there needs to be awareness and the desire for alternative solutions from the public before developers are willing to invest in the research and development required for the next big step in architecture.

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