

THE CITY AT EYE LEVEL IN ASIAN CONTEXT

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Not all concepts that are successful in 'the West' may work in 'the East'. Asia's cities are booming, and rightly in their own unprecedented ways. There are no cookie-cutter solutions as each city is unique in its strengths and challenges. Hence solutions need to be tailored and contextual. And in order to arrive at that, city managers, activists and planners need to look for creative and innovative ways to involve, engage and entice multiple stakeholders, in particular those that dominate urban development, to understand that developing human-centric places that build communities can be profitable. In fact, it is precisely what savvy urban consumers are now demanding.

Below are some interconnected forces at play in Asia's cities:

- 1. High growth and high density** — The pace of development in Asia is unprecedented, the urbanisation rate is higher than in any other continent and 15 out of the top 20 fastest-growing cities are located in Asia. The urban reality of dense cities is what shapes the definition and importance of public place. In cities where living spaces are small and living environments are crowded, all basic necessities are amplified and the significance of public space is more profound; no longer is the street an

ordinary common good, it becomes an essential part of urban life, perhaps even a physical and emotional refuge, especially in cities with a high concentration of informal settlements. Many places are overcrowded, yet at the same time, the city often has an abundance of under-utilised and inaccessible spaces — think disused laneways, closed waterfronts, dark overpasses, abandoned buildings. So how does one create valuable public space in overcrowded places and open up underused spaces?

2. **Loss of place identity: The disappearing spirit of place** — In Asia's building frenzy, some of the original qualities of human scale tend to get lost. In many of the skyscraper cities, it is increasingly difficult to find the character and vibrancy that is so typical for traditional neighbourhoods. How does one embrace the qualities of old city centres (human scale, open squares, walkable streets) and translate them successfully for high rise development and environments? How do we create a level of permeability in high rises that keep activity at street level — crucial for place identity, street vibrancy and vital for the success of small retail businesses.

3. **Personal identity and nation building: Young creatives and home** — An emerging group of millennials and Gen Z's are looking for their own definition of urban identity. Unlike post-independence generations that focus primarily on economic growth, they are increasingly looking beyond financial prosperity, eschewing materiality and seeking for a better quality of life through intangible experiences. In this post-capitalistic urban realm, this demographic is dynamic and eager to contribute to the place they call 'home'. They are shaping cities and boosting the soft economy. How can we leverage their creativity and energy to create people-centric places that better serve the needs of their communities?

4. **Climate and comfort of place** — Many countries in Asia are prone to natural disasters like typhoons, earthquakes, monsoons, tsunamis and more. Cities are currently facing multiple climate challenges and there is an urgent need to create comfortable spaces in increasingly hostile urban environments such as rising temperatures, high humidity, torrential rain as well as flooding. Climate has shaped the design of public places for centuries as is visible in the hybrid indoor and outdoor spaces and ingenious solutions like shaded streets, sponge surfaces, deep wells, bioswale systems, ponds and lakes, and open spaces to optimise air circulation. As cities become denser and climate change and air pollution bring them to a boiling point, we need to define the modern-day equivalent towards creating comfortable places.

The notion of 'Public Space' is fundamentally different from the West due to how Asian cities are planned and built. The dense urban environments and fast-growing cities call for multi-layered and multifunctional uses of spaces.





Public spaces in Asian cities are often multi-layered and multi-functional depending on the time of the day.



5. Fluidity between public and private space

— The line between what is public and private space in a dense urban environment is often blurred. Privately owned and managed public spaces (or third spaces) like shopping malls, rooftops, arcades, footbridges that dot the urban landscape respond to citizens' needs. On the other hand, there are many instances where public space becomes a tenable good; used by street vendors, food hawkers, fruit sellers that together constitute a separate street-side economy and often contribute towards the vibrancy of the city. The informal sector is prevalent in Asia, taking a large share of the economy. Cities need to relook at revenue and management models to cater for this fluidity and look at how this model can be reviewed to allow for the replication of successful bottom-up endeavours, such as citizens' contributions either via design or placemaking to public spaces. There is also a need for city managers to ascertain ways in which they can learn and benefit from the attributes of private spaces and connect the public and private domain.

traffic lane during the day and a football pitch by night, or busy thoroughfare during the week and pedestrian zone in the weekend. How can cities be flexible and creative in the design and management of very expensive prime areas that are also very dense, ensuring its optimum use?

7. Multi-cultural and multi-religious spaces

— The population in Asian city centres is rarely homogeneous, almost by default it is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious, all living side-by-side, often in close proximity. Depending on the population mix, they may or may not have the same preference, perception and use of public space. They may have specific gatherings, festivals and celebrations that claim the public space. Also, religious sites are interesting examples of shared space. Temple complexes, church yards, mosque compounds and school grounds are not just places of worship, they also function as important public, community and recreational spaces, not just to pray but also to play. Yet, these are not always inclusive spaces, each comes with their own rules and regulations. How can cities and communities work together to allow for greater inclusivity and understanding to strengthen neighbourhood identities?

6. Multifunctional use of public spaces

— Public spaces in Asian cities are often multi-layered and multi-functional depending on the time of the day: a street food market in the morning,

The previously named forces are unique in Asia, often creating a melange of experiences that make Asian cities very exciting and vibrant but on the other hand, not necessarily supportive of an inclusive and comfortable environment for low-income, informal and aged communities. This is often exacerbated by the following:

1. **Urban development is typically real estate-driven** — Compared to well-resourced municipal governments in the West, local or district governments in Asian cities often have limited room to manoeuvre to make large-scale investments in buildings, infrastructure or public space. With some notable exceptions, the local tax base is limited, political leverage constrained and therefore it is typically property owners and developers that dictate development in these places. In Southeast Asia’s competitive land and real estate markets, many governments have adopted a *laissez-faire* approach and an economy-driven mindset to urban development. As such, there is an urgent need to engage property owners and developers to adopt a place-led approach which focuses on human scale design that embraces social interaction and community building.



The unique Asian urban context calls for innovative solutions, site-specific methodologies and unconventional approaches.



2. **Shifting political climate** — Some Asian nations are characterised by volatile political regimes. A swinging power pendulum — at different administrative levels — impacts the longevity and continuity of urban plans. Re-election seems to be always just around the corner and senior decision-making positions in government can change based on political affiliation, which can impact plan making, operations or implementation or even abruptly cancel or catapult new ones. Political change can also influence leadership at powerful state-owned enterprises, and when it comes to placemaking and city-building this means that a ‘client’ relationship built over the course of many years can change overnight, particularly if they happen to own or operate real estate. Political urgency can also act as a catalyst; in many Asian nations, decision-making typically involves less layers and when the green light is given project implementation can move swiftly.

3. Planning profession is traditionally affiliated with architecture –

This explains an often top-down, technocratic attitude that designs to the needs of the client, often with very high plot ratios and GDVs (Gross Development Value). There is a lack of social and cultural thinkers that understand the interconnectedness between place-led design and economically vibrant places. Concepts like placemaking, public engagement, participatory designs and planning are novel to many and are finding their way into the Asian contexts via numerous trials and errors by professional and civic organisations. There is a need for city managers and local governments to recognise their efforts and make sure they are an integral part of urban planning and policymaking.

This unique Asian urban context calls for innovative solutions, site-specific methodologies and unconventional approaches. There are many successful examples and case studies across the continent, but often language prevents this knowledge to travel across borders. The City At Eye Level celebrates the practitioners who have brought change in their cities and provides a podium to share their stories among colleagues and urban professionals in other countries.