

Vertical Cities Asia Symposium – Abstracts of Faculty Members

Title: Muddy Skies in Construction

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Abstract:

There are three primary ingredients essential to working up recipes for rich and healthy vertical cities. Contrary to many assumptions—“ideas are cheap”—the most important requirement is for some messy design imagination to emerge beyond the foundational research that we develop through critical inquiry into life’s boundless urban complexities. Cities are infinitely important to research and ponder, but without some slicing, dicing and cooking up into proposals for architecture, research and planning alone will always end at reading and writing the menu, and never move some more fully satisfying meal toward the table. Proposals for urban architecture inevitably risk professional embarrassment and simplistic armchair ridicule, since the issues addressed are incomparably complex, the obstacles to comprehensive solutions endless, and seductive oversimplification beckons from every theoretical and sub-disciplinary quadrant. Nevertheless, the naïvely optimistic architect’s essential step out from the precipice of foundational research into this dangerous void of articulated form and spatial potential is essential to meaningful progress toward radically improved urban construction.

Beyond spirited imagination, the second ingredient for rich and healthy vertical cities is for the application of practical construction ingenuity, wrestling these recognizably messy ideas into some form of affordable and beneficial implementation. The third ingredient—as vexing for creative architects as it is for any talented chef interested foremost in cooking as a joy in its self, and woefully burdened by the accompanying nuisance of managing the restaurant—is the application of economic imagination. If someone can invent a strategically-focused profit strategy enabling cities of substantial creative architecture—or better yet, an alternative economic model systematically assigning greater value to health and happy living—then fantastic vertical cities will soon be built with as much dynamic cultural energy as the world has recently witnessed in the creative renaissance of traditional and creative cuisine. Imagine the new vertical possibilities for our urban lives if developing human culture will soon again care so much for its cities and urban architecture as it has so beneficially begun to remember as expectation and aspiration for the quality of food (and of course, these issues are actually quite fully intertwined).

This paper presents design work focused primarily in the first two categories—a little bit of messy imagination struggling equally with practical construction ingenuity. The more imaginative economic strategy cannot be far behind, but in these projects, the underlying economic imperative lies primarily in the logic of construction systemization and the intrinsic value of more sustainable environmental infrastructure. As a practical matter, the authors of these projects, Mark Anderson and Peter Anderson, have taken a single building block—the ISO standard shipping module—and developed from this surprisingly flexible building block a series of practical urban construction proposals for high-density, low-, medium- and high-rise sustainable construction. Mud of the earth (water and soil), drawn up into more contemporary yet necessarily still muddy human life in the sky, is a central and continuous thread animating this series of building block projects, and energizing their sometimes unexpectedly blossoming vertical skins.