



Asia Real Estate Summit

Shaping the Aspirations of Future Cities

Issues moving and shaking
the real estate industry

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Asia Real Estate Summit



For more ARES,
SCAN this

Shaping the aspirations of future cities: Global perspectives for a holistic approach to sustainable development in the Asia Pacific region

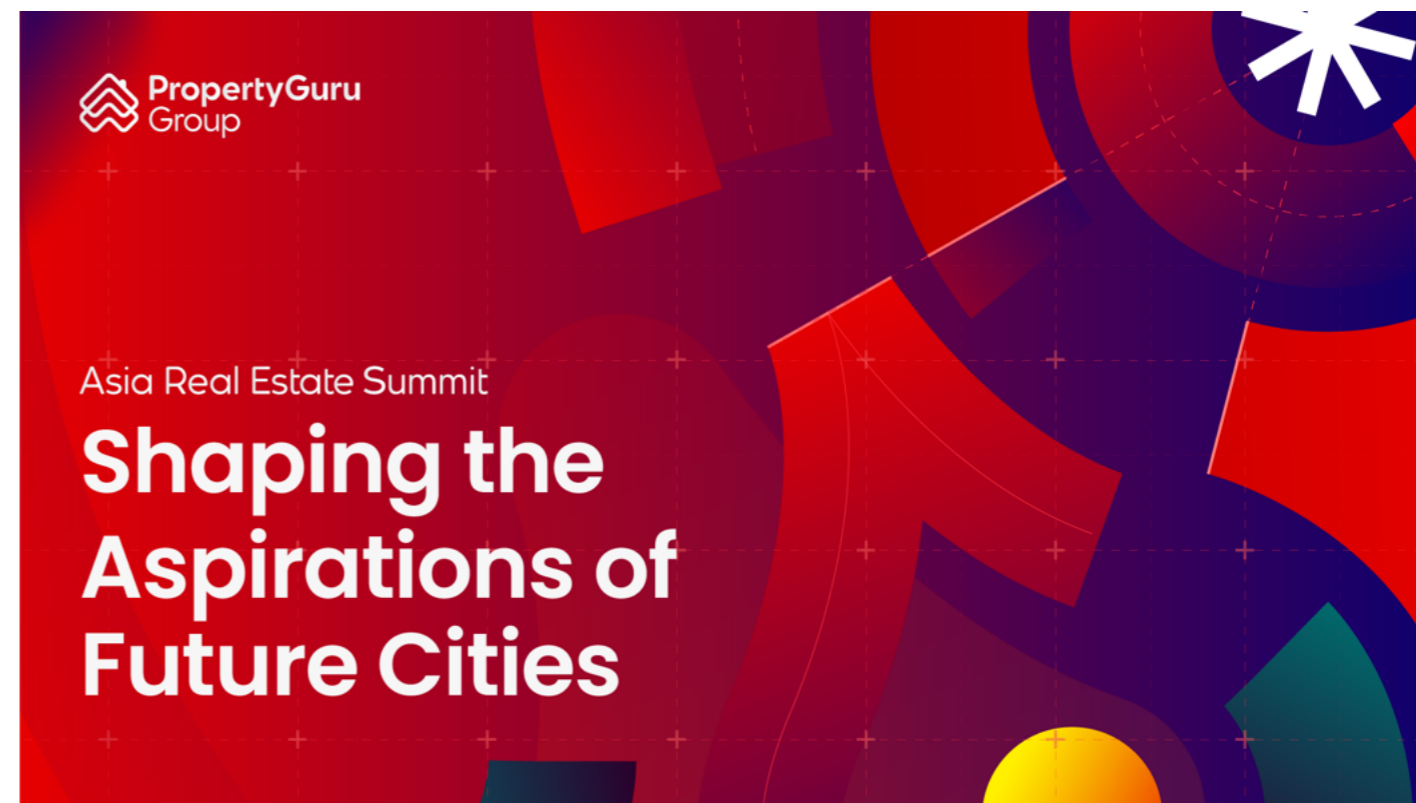
By Stephen Oehme

Every year, the world adds new buildings equivalent to 10 to 20 times the total building area of Singapore; nearly 70 percent of this growth occurs in Asia

Having served as the Chairperson of the Asia Real Estate Summit (ARES) for the past five years, I am thrilled to present this white paper, based on our landmark 10th Summit. We welcomed hundreds of delegates, including industry leaders, innovators, visionaries, and investors from across the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

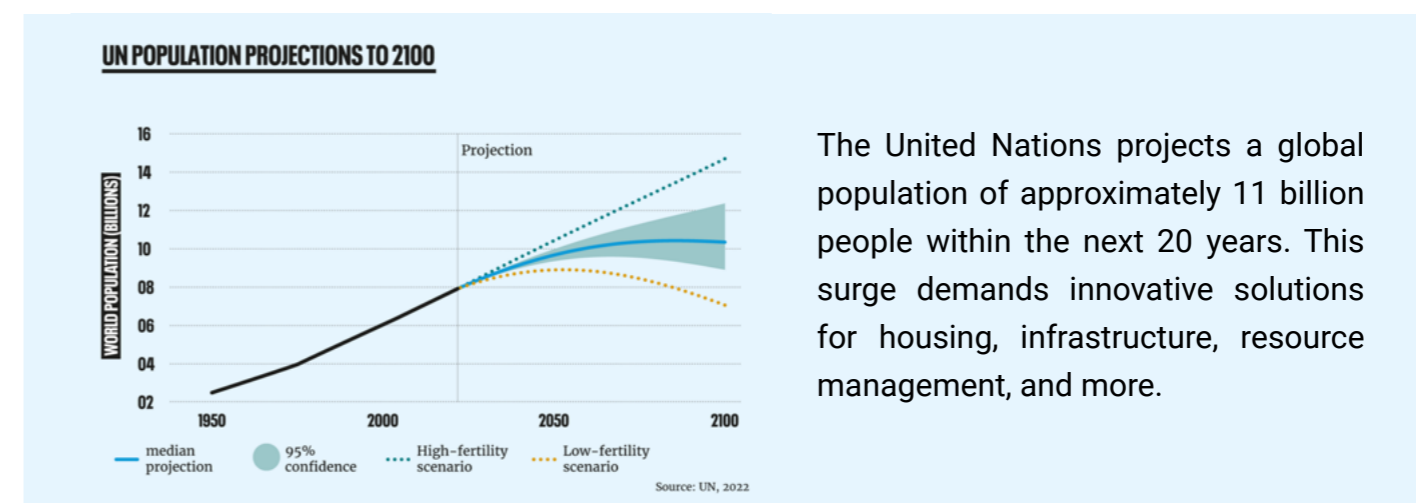


Through ARES, we have spent the past five years driving innovation, data revolution, adaptive reinvention, and community empowerment, bringing us to this crucial juncture. The decisions we make today shape the future of our cities in the coming decades.

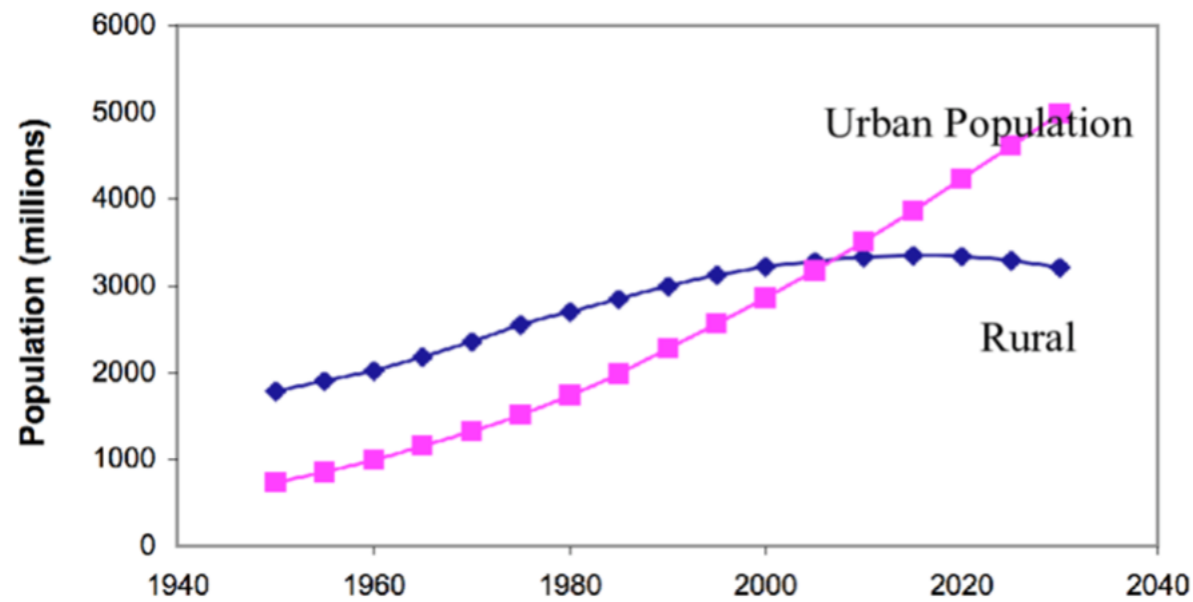


Global dynamics shaping our future

Several key dynamics are influencing our industry and the development of communities and cities worldwide.



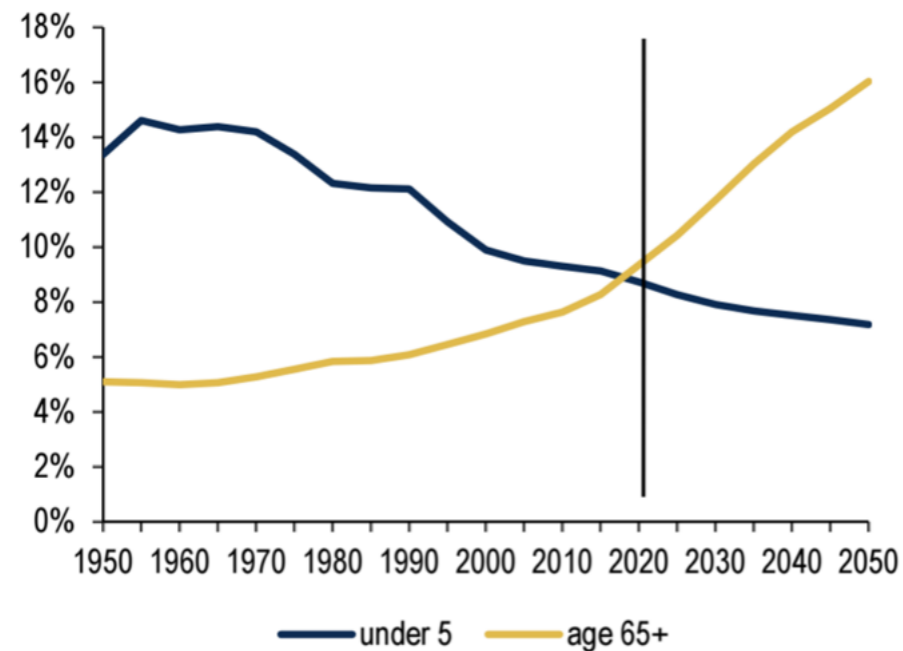
The United Nations projects a global population of approximately 11 billion people within the next 20 years. This surge demands innovative solutions for housing, infrastructure, resource management, and more.



In 2005, a pivotal moment occurred: More people began living in urban environments than in rural areas. This shift has only accelerated, leading to even greater movement between cities, regions, and nations.

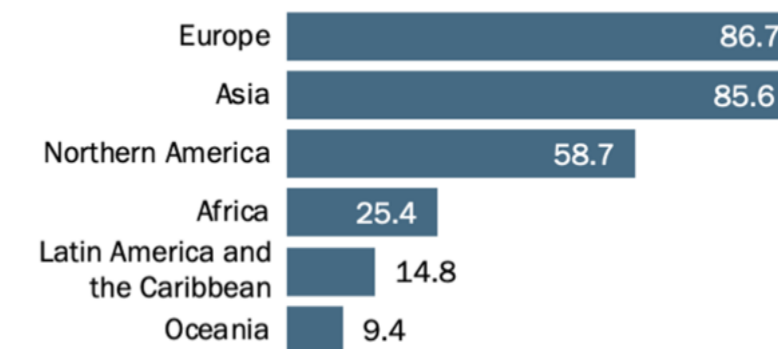
Chart 10: Young children and older people as a % of global population: 1950-2050

Number of 65+ will overtake those aged <5 by the end of this decade



Europe and Asia were home to the most international migrants in 2020

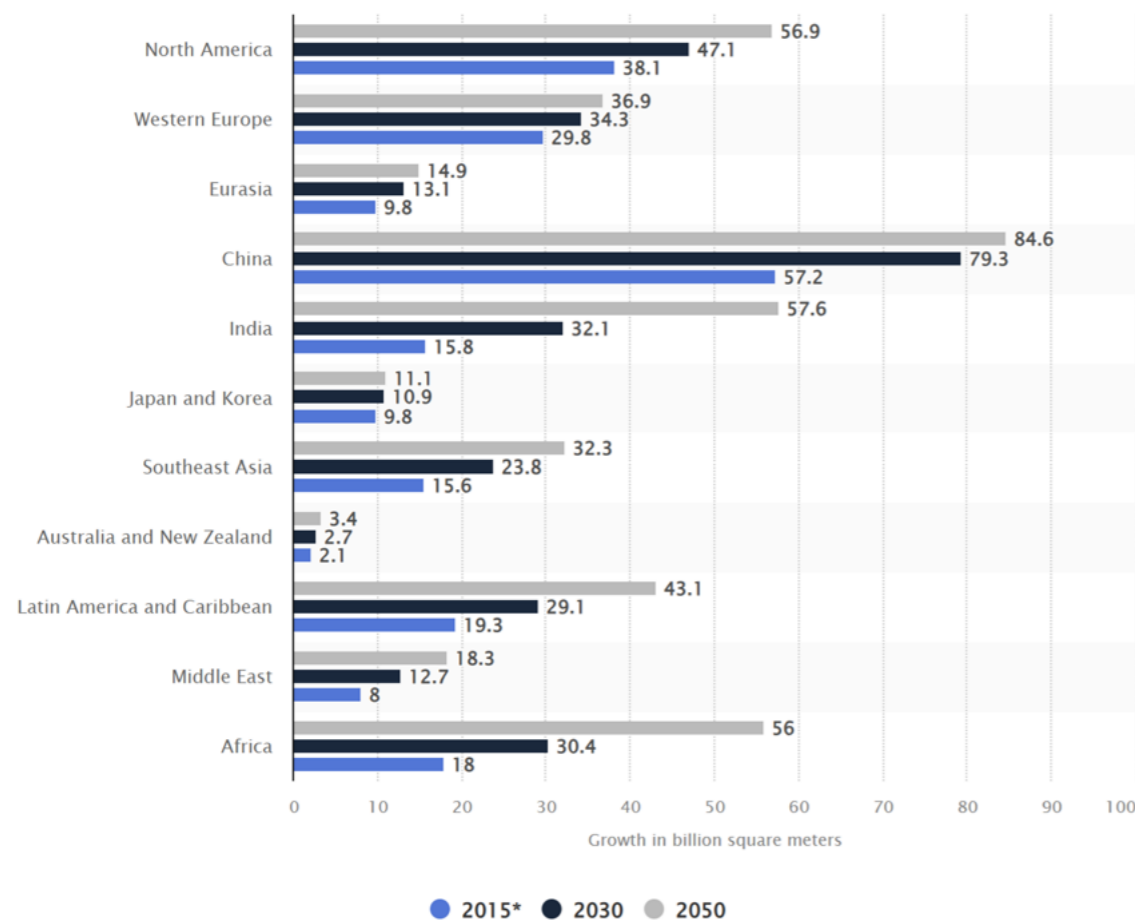
International migrant population in ___, in millions



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020 International Migrant Stock data.

However, with ageing populations and declining birth rates, we must reshape our cities to make sure they remain liveable, affordable, and full of opportunities.

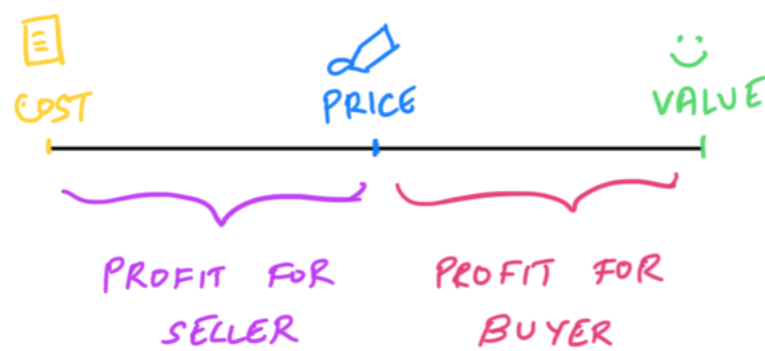
Migration patterns are evolving, with Asia attracting more migrants than ever before. This is why we must create inclusive communities that embrace diversity, maximise equality, fairness, and liveability for all.



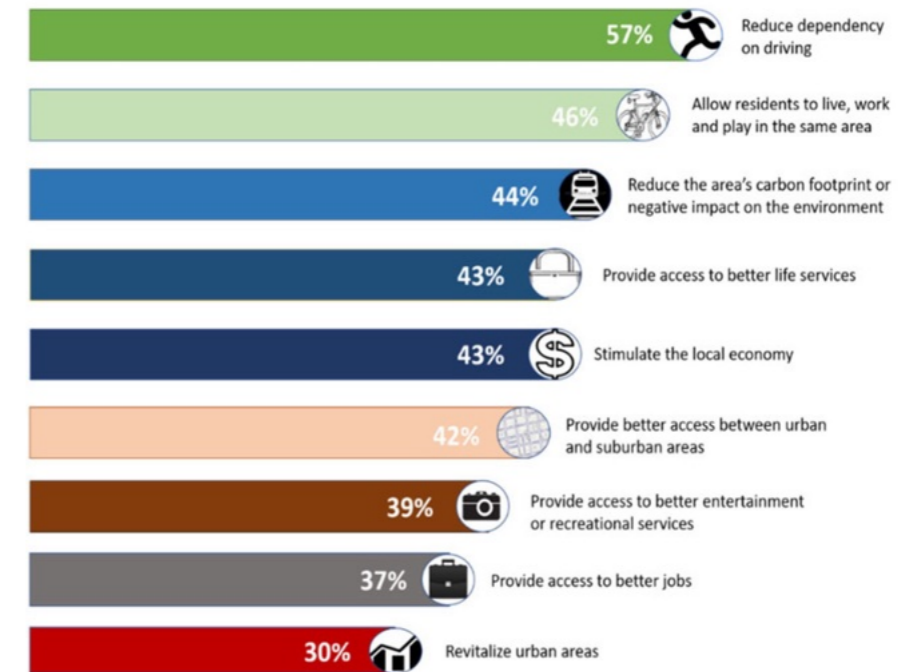
At the same time, the demand for real estate is surging. Global building square footage is expected to double by 2050, primarily in Asia.

Embracing value-driven development

While learning from the past is important, we need to let go of antiquated processes and mindsets.



A critical shift is moving from cost-based thinking to a value-driven one. By considering the broader impact of our decisions, we can create developments that generate immediate and lasting value.



A holistic approach involves thinking more broadly. For example, transit-oriented development (TOD) has long been recognised as a key value driver in real estate. However, TOD is just one relatively small element of a larger strategy for adding long-term value – we need to think in broader terms. Furthermore, when viewed holistically, TOD encompasses more factors and benefits than just the six or nine ways often cited. This emphasises the need for deeper thinking.

Aligning with global goals



The guidance we need for our collective future is already around us; all we need to do is channel these goals into every project with focus and efficiency.

The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a roadmap for creating a more sustainable and equitable world.



Our efforts contribute to this global movement towards sustainability. By working together and learning from initiatives, such as COP28 and COP29, and by aligning our projects with these SDGs and other existing frameworks, we can unlock new opportunities for achieving immediate value.

In doing so, we can make a lasting impact on the lives of millions. The existing processes, reporting, and benchmarking must be used as a guide for every decision on every project.

Illustrating success: Case studies in holistic urban development

I have been personally involved with the following projects that incorporated value management (VM) processes and achieved outstanding, balanced, and sustainable outcomes. The processes involved in these projects did not require additional time or costs when applying a holistic VM approach.



Burj Khalifa, Dubai



Downtown Dubai



Cricket Ground (MCG), Melbourne



Katara Twin Towers Hotel, Doha



Raffles Hotel, Singapore



ISF Complex Doha

1. Burj Khalifa and Downtown Dubai

The VM approach maintained capital cost neutrality, while reducing ongoing operational costs and delivering the following benefits:

- The project broke new ground, changed mindsets, supported elevated benchmarks in the region (energy, water, materials, etc.), and attained LEED Gold certification.
- It changed the lives of the approximately 100,000 people who live and work within the development by enhancing walkability, cultural attractions, and public transportation. Additionally, it contributes USD1.5 billion annually to Dubai's GDP and has raised the bar for liveability and urban expectations in the region.
- The project remains a symbol of modern Dubai, fostering community pride and reinforcing the city's status as a premier destination to visit and live.
- From day one, the Burj Khalifa and Downtown Dubai developments have delivered positive impacts across all four sustainability pillars – environment, human, social, and economic – and continue to do so.
- The project met cost and timeline expectations – an exceptional achievement for what was, and still is, the tallest building in the world.

2. Internal Security Force (ISF) Camp, Doha

Even though the project was already fully planned – with most of the 385 buildings designed and construction of some infrastructure and buildings underway – we still achieved significant improvements. These included a USD1 billion savings (approximately 20 percent), reduced operational costs, and the following enhancements:

- Extensive environmental benefits, including optimised materials use, energy efficiency, water management, and biodiversity conservation; achieving a GSAS 4-Star rating (the local green building certification); and pioneering district-level sustainability in the country.
- Expanded the project beyond its planned military functions to include additional spaces for education, art, music, recreation, social activities, and community engagement, all while achieving the cost savings outlined above.

3. Katara Twin Towers

The project achieved significant milestones including:

- Strong capital cost and operational cost control.
- Timely delivery for the FIFA World Cup 2022, while ensuring the project remains an iconic landmark in Qatar for decades to come.
- Becoming Qatar's first hospitality project to receive a GSAS 5-Star rating for excellence in energy efficiency, water conservation, materials use, and waste management.

4. AAMI Park, Melbourne

The project delivered these enhancements

- Expanded seating capacity by 20 percent with less than a two percent cost increase, while incorporating enhanced outcomes, including:
 - A strong focus on energy efficiency, contributing to a 47 percent reduction in overall energy consumption and the removal of 815 tonnes of CO2 annually.
 - Enhanced materials use, water conservation, and waste management.
 - Greatly improved amenities, sightlines, and profitability.

5. Raffles Hotel Singapore

The project achieved capital cost savings while maintaining the hotel's iconic and luxury status and profitability. Moreover, it integrated modern sustainability practices into a heritage building, including energy efficiency, water efficiency, enhanced biodiversity, and excellent waste management practices, covering materials, food sourcing, and packaging

These examples show that with holistic and VM processes, we can simultaneously address environmental, social, economic, and cultural sustainability while achieving significant economic benefits.

Evolving values and challenges

"Price is what you pay; value is what you get." Yet, too often, processes, priorities, and actions do not reflect this principle. We simply must adapt.

EXPERIENCES VS THINGS

To wait (for an experience) is great

- Even a bad experience becomes a good story
- They're different every time
- We can share them
- Experiences are harder to compare
- Experiences introduce you to different worldly perspectives
- Experiences help you express gratitude
- Experiences are inherently more social
- Experiences become an ingrained part of our identity
- Experiences help define your purpose and passions
- Experiences make the man (and the woman)

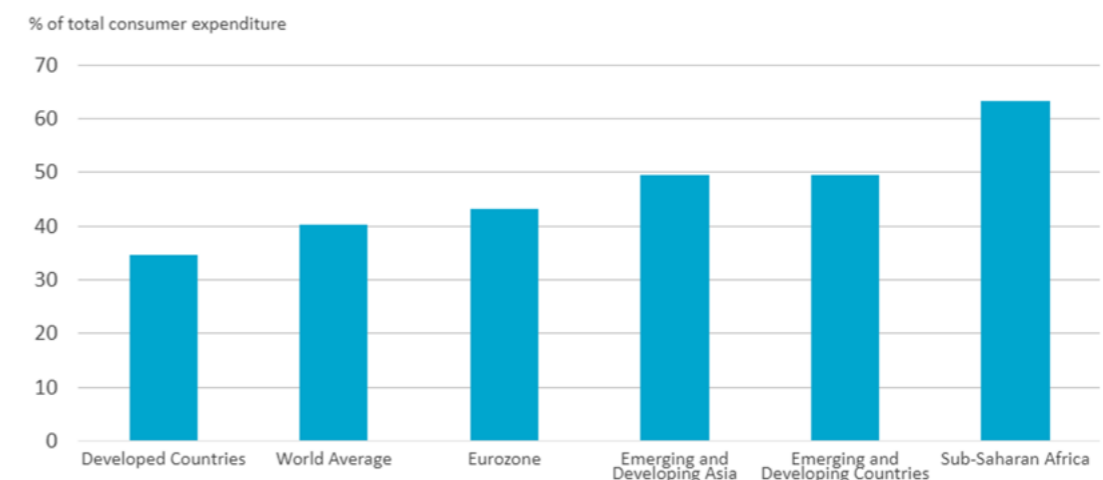
Waiting is annoying

- Your stuff will never become a part of you
- Buying things can isolate you
- Things do not change us
- Shopping do not teach you anything
- Items change value
- Things are not forever
- Even an expensive item will soon be forgotten
- We get bored of stuff easily
- Things do not help us to define who we are
- Money and things makes us happy — but only to a certain extent

Tourist Maker

One of the most pressing challenges today is housing affordability. As the largest expense for individuals and families, housing plays a crucial role in creating inclusive cities.

Share of Food, Housing, and Clothing in Total Consumer Spending 2023



Source: Euromonitor International from national statistics/Eurostat/UN/OECD



Leveraging technology for sustainable development

Technology is advancing even faster than predicted. AI and other emerging technologies highlight the importance of holistic outcomes, and they provide a pathway to achieve them.

AI pros and cons

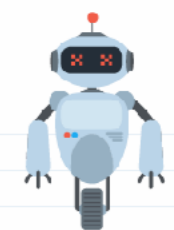
AI ADVANTAGES

- 24/7 availability
- Scalability
- Improved accuracy and reduced rate of error
- Enhanced safety
- Less mundane and repetitive tasks
- Improved human experiences
- Unbiased decision-making
- Lack of emotion and judgment
- Innovation
- Improved efficiency and productivity
- Democratization of knowledge
- Expanded access to expertise



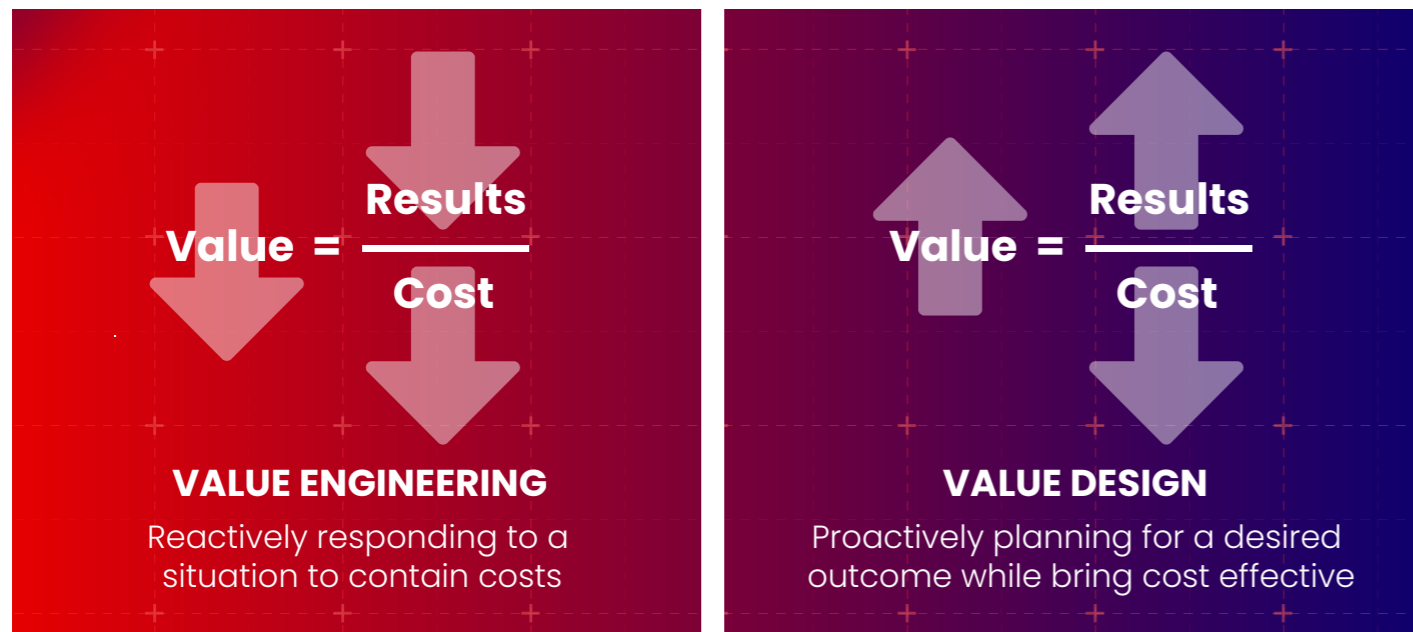
AI DISADVANTAGES

- Lack of creativity
- Absence of empathy
- Skill loss in humans
- Increased laziness in humans, lower productivity
- Job loss and displacement
- Ethical and privacy violations
- High energy requirements, questions of sustainability
- Inaccuracies
- Unforeseen risks stemming from AI flaws
- Risks on a larger scale
- Deepfakes and other fraudulent activities
- Uneven distribution of benefits to society



Creating holistic value

As the saying goes, "We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." Holistic value is not something we create; it already exists. Our role is to recognise, capture, and maximise it through thoughtful processes and strategies.



Achieving lower costs now and building lasting value

A core message of this white paper is that financial profitability can align seamlessly with sustainability objectives. To borrow from a familiar adage, "Profit is like oxygen – necessary for survival, but not the ultimate purpose of life." Profitability and cash flow are the lifeblood of every organisation; without them, delivering the lasting positive changes required for true sustainability would be impossible.

By adopting comprehensive and strategic approaches, we can cultivate genuinely sustainable cities that benefit all communities. The notion that sustainable practices are too costly is incorrect. This white paper shows how a value-first mindset can save time, reduce costs, and drive immediate profitability.

Together, we can build cities that not only navigate the challenges of tomorrow but also exceed the aspirations of today. We look forward to exploring outcomes and supporting further progress at ARES 2025.



Building spaces with residents' needs in mind

How SMDC paves the way for a smarter, greener, and more connected future

By Jessica Bianca Sy

Success in today's real estate market largely depends on how well developers adapt to the evolving needs of residents. For SM Development Corporation (SMDC), that entails prioritising design, innovation, and sustainability. We apply this approach not just in our developments but also through our SMDC Good Guys Impact initiative, which helps align our spaces with residents' aspirations and well-being.

Understanding consumer behaviour in real estate

Homebuyers nowadays are more discerning than ever. While location and affordability remain key considerations in most purchase decisions, more and more buyers are seeking environments that offer holistic benefits encompassing convenience, security, and a sense of community. This is supported by recent findings that point to four key priorities influencing real estate purchasing decisions:

- **Accessibility** – This refers to proximity to transport hubs, commercial centres, and essential services, such as healthcare, education, and daily necessities.
- **Wellness-oriented spaces** – These are areas with thoughtfully designed greenery, are well-ventilated, and have eco-friendly features.
- **Smart living** – This involves the integration of technology into everyday living for security, efficiency, and convenience.
- **Community engagement** – This means an environment where friendly connections come naturally.

Consumer preferences serve as guiding principles in every SMDC project, and we incorporate them into our efforts through the SMDC Good Guys Impact programme. Our primary aim with this initiative is to create a deep sense of belonging and shared purpose within our developments.

Designing with residents in mind

A home is a place where both our physical and emotional well-being are nurtured. SMDC follows this principle when designing projects by:

- Creating multi-functional spaces with flexible layouts
- Building in lifestyle and retail hubs that make neighbourhoods more walkable and day-to-day errands easier
- Using green features that maximise natural ventilation, utilise eco-friendly materials, and promote energy efficiency

These design choices are evident in our developments, particularly those that incorporate biophilic design elements, which seamlessly integrate natural light and greenery into living areas. These features not only improve the look and feel of a space, but they also create a more calming, productive, and liveable environment.

Additionally, SMDC's core sustainability and social responsibility programme, the Good Guys Impact, strengthens connections among residents by implementing wellness initiatives, livelihood opportunities, and social engagement activities.

Innovation as a key driver

Innovation is at the heart of SMDC's strategy. It's what enables us to stay ahead of future trends and elevate the living experience in our residences. This commitment is built around three key pillars:

- **Smart home integration**, primarily security features, energy-saving automation, and app-based community management functionality
- **Sustainable construction**, or the use of environmentally friendly materials and renewable energy sources
- **Disaster-resilient design**, with a focus on structural integrity and climate-adaptive solutions to maintain long-term safety.

Our innovative approach also manifests in the way SMDC Good Guys Impact engages with the people who live in our developments. These initiatives include tech-enabled services, financial literacy programmes, and inclusive neighbourhood projects that enrich residents' lives.

Sustainability in real estate

As an advocate for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), SMDC recognises its role in building residential environments that can withstand climate-related challenges. This is why we designed our developments to include sustainable solutions, such as:

- **Waste management systems** with recycling programmes and responsible waste disposal initiatives
- **Energy-efficient features** that use smart planning to reduce carbon footprints and improve resource efficiency
- **Water conservation initiatives** that encourage responsible consumption through rainwater harvesting and deploying water-efficient fixtures

Integrating sustainability into every project is how we create long-term value for both residents and help preserve natural resources. Moreover, SMDC Good Guys Impact encourages residents to participate in various eco-friendly activities, such as nurturing neighbourhood gardens and contributing to responsible waste management programmes. This way, sustainable living becomes a shared commitment across all SMDC projects.



When you think of Japanese craftsmanship, one of the first things that often comes to mind is *kintsugi* or the art of repairing broken pottery with gold. Ironically, while Japan celebrates this philosophy in art, the mindset is completely different when it comes to houses.

The average lifespan of a house in Japan is about 30 years before it is replaced. Perfectly good homes, rich in history and character, and built with quality materials are treated as disposable. The concept of renovating rather than rebuilding remains a foreign idea.

The first time I stepped into an abandoned house in Tokyo, I was in disbelief. I thought, "Why isn't this a sought-after property?" It had a fantastic location, plenty of sunlight, and was ridiculously cheap. It was, however, quite run-down. But that was the best part – I could fix it up exactly how I wanted.

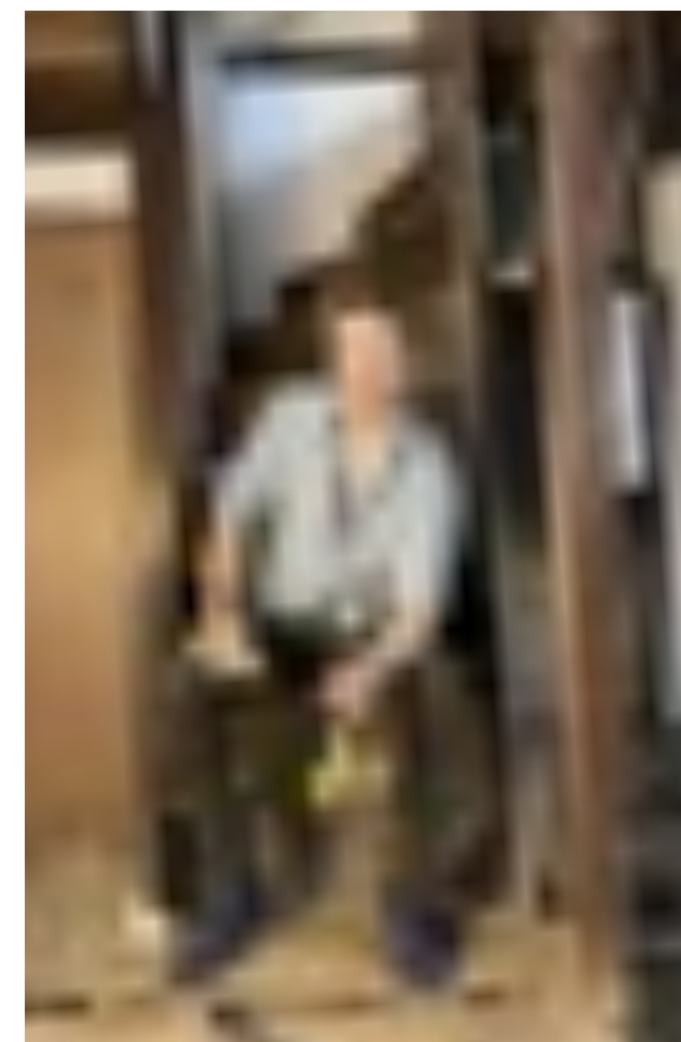
The broker who accompanied me thought I was insane for wanting to buy an old house. That moment made me realise just how deeply ingrained the "new is always better" mentality is in Japan.



Finding beauty in the abandoned: Why renovations are crucial and why old is not bad

With the right vision, renovation can lead to growth, creativity,
and sustainability

By Anton Wormann (Anton in Japan)



The hidden value in abandoned spaces

Japanese homes are often treated like disposable objects. The second they are lived in, they lose value. In many Western countries, an old house, with its original features, is a selling point; in Japan, it is a liability. While land prices in popular areas are rising, home values drop to nearly zero after just a few decades.

As a result, there are currently 10 million abandoned homes (*akiya*) in Japan. By 2033, that number is projected to skyrocket to 22 million, or a third of all homes in the country.

But if you look beyond the surface, you will see that many of these houses have incredible craftsmanship – thick wooden beams, intricate joinery, high-quality materials like hinoki (Japanese cypress), and layouts designed with natural light and airflow in mind. These are things you cannot easily replicate in a new build without spending a fortune.

In Sweden, we use the term ‘renoveringsbehov’ (‘renovation needed’) to refer to properties in need of renovation. Interestingly, these types of properties are often more expensive than ready-to-move-in apartments because buyers want the freedom to renovate the space exactly how they like. By contrast, in Japan, anything that is not brand new is seen as undesirable. Japan could benefit from shifting its perspective towards seeing the potential in a home beyond its age.

Renovation is more sustainable than demolition

If you have ever seen a house being demolished in Japan, you know it is not a gentle process. It is a total teardown, and the amount of waste produced is staggering. Perfectly good materials, including wood, tiles, and fixtures, are smashed and discarded simply because the system favours building from scratch over repurposing.

Incidentally, the construction industry is one of the biggest contributors to waste and carbon emissions worldwide. Renovating instead of rebuilding means less waste going to landfills, less energy used to produce new materials, and ultimately, more sustainable housing solutions.

Renovating also lets you personalise your home. Instead of settling for a cookie-cutter apartment, you can create a space that is unique, customised, and eco-friendly.



Considering natural disasters in renovation

One thing that must be considered when renovating in Japan is earthquake and natural disaster preparedness. Japan sits on the Pacific Ring of Fire, making it one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world. Older houses often lack modern seismic reinforcements, so ensuring the home’s safety is a must.

This does not mean you need to demolish everything. Many old houses have strong, flexible wooden structures that can withstand earthquakes better than some modern buildings. However, renovating old houses will require reinforcing weak points, securing the foundation, and using traditional construction techniques alongside modern technology to make sure they are safe and sustainable.

Revitalising communities through renovation

Akiya are part of the fabric of a community, and when left abandoned, they can drag an entire neighbourhood down. Renovating a single house can encourage others to take action, attract new residents, and even boost the local economy.

I have turned abandoned homes into thriving Airbnbs, unique rental spaces, and community hubs, and these transformations have brought new energy, new people, and new possibilities.

Renovation is about mindset

It is easy to tear something down and replace it, but real value comes from seeing potential where others see problems. This perspective is particularly relevant in a world that constantly pushes us to consume, replace, and upgrade rather than repair, reuse, and reinvent. So, the next time you see a rundown house, do not view it as trash; see it as an opportunity to create something unique.



“Luxury is dead.”

These three words caused quite a stir at a recent trade event I attended. The statement was delivered with firm conviction by one of the most prominent luxury leisure experts I know. With decades of polished, urbane sophistication, the expert was clearly not interested in entertaining notions of “redefining,” “recreating,” or any future-focused buzzwords surrounding luxury.

I am supposed to write about “redefining luxury living” for this white paper, but it has been an arduous task. When I took a quick scroll through LinkedIn, I found yet another luxury pundit criticising the concept of “redefining luxury.” According to the expert, it seemed as absurd as a Rimowa suitcase stuffed with knockoff items. And no, this does not refer to the cheaper Rimowas, but the aluminium ones that dent if you throw them off the third floor of your condo.

Luxury defined and redefined

So, I have come to a conclusion: To redefine luxury, I must first understand its actual definition. According to a random Google search, luxury is defined as “the state of great comfort and extravagant living.” For me, great comfort is a black shirt and shorts, yet no one has ever accused me of being a luxury maven.

My quest for a deeper understanding of luxury remains unfulfilled, but here is my take on all the tirades against luxury living: We live in a world of customisation, and our value systems have evolved. The outdated idea of luxury living – characterised by white linen, unsmiling yet attentive servitude, and sprawling spaces designed for aimless wandering in search of the nearest exit – is a thing of the past. And thank God for that.

Today, luxury has transitioned from being exclusive to being inclusive. It is no longer about getting away from it all, but about engaging with the world and being social. Take travel, for instance. The Aman hotel chain, once frequented by the so-called Aman junkies, catered to those seeking solitary moments and disconnection from technology, offering mediocre food and a strict British India-inspired dress code. Today, however, the rich are embracing technology, fine cuisine, and immersive, exotic experiences.

Luxury is now split into two distinct paths: the aspirational, brand-conscious path, and the path of the truly rich who aspire to healthier lifestyles, different values, and more meaningful connections.

It is about quality, not square footage

In real estate, space still represents luxury, but its value today is more about where that space is located and how it is used. Subtle yet significant shifts towards sustainability, active living, and social spaces designed for sharing meals, conversations, and multi-generational living are making a comeback. Is this shift a result of the post-COVID-19 era, or is it simply the natural outcome of excess indulgence?

Take alcohol consumption, for example. The trend towards drinking less is real; luxury is no longer defined by endless bottles of champagne. A similar pattern can be observed in the world of automotive collecting, where vintage cars and electric vehicles have emerged as everyday, practical transport even for the truly wealthy. These illustrate that while the top end of the market has become more grounded, the yearning for the exotic still exists – although it is no longer flaunted in your face.

True luxury is global but quietly private

What does all of this mean for luxury real estate?

Property buyers today are now more likely to collect global real estate and less inclined to settle in one place for long periods. While they still value quality and brand prestige, they are increasingly drawn to limited editions, niche products, and a globalised lifestyle.

Conspicuous consumption, often associated with luxury lifestyles, has found a home in global playgrounds such as Dubai and Miami, where it thrives. But in a parallel universe, true luxury remains a one percent equation – smaller, more elite, and self-fulfilling than most people realise. Everything else is just surface-level gloss designed to gain likes on Instagram.

Ultimately, true luxury still comes with a price tag. If you want luxury, be prepared to pay for it. This age-old idiom is just as relevant today as it was a decade or a century ago: if you have to ask how much something costs, you are probably not part of the demographic that can afford it. Sorry, but luxury is not dead; it is simply hiding away somewhere very private.



Rethinking workplace designs by putting culture, connectivity, and employee well-being first

Real estate workplace design strategies — once focused on traditional, fixed office setups — are now shifting towards more flexible designs

By Gynen Kyra Toriano

There used to be a singular idea of what a workplace looked like: a single-location office where employees clocked in and out. But the pandemic ushered in a significant change. Many employees now prefer a work environment that offers greater flexibility, fosters collaboration, and helps them stay productive.

At the 2024 PropertyGuru Asia Real Estate Summit, the panel discussion “Culture, Communities, and Spaces That Shape Us,” moderated by Wendy McEwan, Vice President of Transformation at PropertyGuru Group, brought together wellness, real estate, and communications experts. The discussion focused on the evolving expectations around workspaces and how these are influencing the way people work.

Reevaluating the role of the traditional office

Chelsea Perino, Managing Director of Global Communications at The Executive Centre, noted that the pandemic caused a permanent shift in people’s perception of workspaces.

“The pre-pandemic workspace model was binary — employees had a desk and went to the office every day. Post-pandemic, people started to ask more probing questions about the ideal workplace: ‘Where do I work best? What do I need to do my best work?’”

This change in perception led companies to consider whether their current office setups are still effective as spaces for connection, collaboration, and creativity.

Designing workspaces to create a sense of community

The panel also talked about designing workspaces to create a sense of community. Some panelists said that while remote work allows considerable flexibility in workers’ schedules, it can also make them feel disconnected, particularly freelancers, digital nomads, and solo entrepreneurs.

Alex Bentley, a Bangkok-based content creator, stated that co-living and co-working environments are helping to bridge this gap. “Shared environments create opportunities for organic connections; they facilitate conversations that do not happen in scheduled Zoom calls.”

Well-being as a design imperative

Meanwhile, Michael Jones, certified ergonomist and founder of Pain-Free Me Studio (a posture and mobility wellness centre), stressed the importance of physical comfort and wellness in employees’ performance. According to him, ergonomically designed work equipment and health-focused spaces are key to achieving optimal productivity.

“When people are comfortable, they are more productive. Posture education, flexible furniture, and regular movement are now recognised as contributors to both performance and retention,” he explained.

Jones also advocated for spaces that support people’s different work styles, reduce physical strain, and promote alertness throughout the day.

Where work and home life seamlessly intersect

As the boundaries between the workplace and home continue to blur, the need for mixed-use developments becomes more apparent. Kristin Thorsteins, Head of Development France and Turkey at IHG, pointed out that regulatory requirements in Singapore are driving this trend. She said, that developments in the Central Business District (CBD) are now required to include residential and hospitality components.

“There is growing awareness about the idea that for workplaces to be truly flexible, they must also be accessible. Asking people to commute long distances just so they can use supposedly flexible offices defeats the purpose,” she said.

Thorsteins added that hotels have been adopting the concept of living and workspace integration by introducing functional workspaces that accommodate the needs of travelers who combine business and leisure.

Flexibility as strategy

The panelists also discussed how making workspaces flexible, which used to be optional, has become a crucial real estate design strategy.

Perino added that this shift has even led Grade A landlords to approach The Executive Centre, a workplace solutions provider, to incorporate flexible models into their portfolios.

Organisational culture's influence on workspaces

The panel strongly agreed that office design and corporate real estate decisions should be based on organisational culture.

"Some companies embraced flexibility during the pandemic but are now reversing that stance. Others, like Airbnb, have made remote work a core part of how they operate."

Perino added, "You can build a beautiful office, but unless you can explain why it exists and how it supports your people, it will not fulfill its purpose."

Designing spaces that reflect company values, support collaboration, and promote employee well-being is no longer optional but a business imperative.

The necessity of human-centred designs

The discussion closed on a clear note about the future: Workplaces must be designed to meet people's needs and not just around processes or productivity objectives. Developers must therefore consider comfort, culture, and connectivity as core pillars of real estate success.

The moderator concluded that the most successful developments are those that prioritise community-building and people's experience.

As the nature of work continues to evolve, those who are responsible for designing work environments must keep pace. That means turning offices into hubs for interaction and innovation. Developers and organisations that embrace this change will be in the best position to thrive in the years ahead.



Embracing human-centricity is a potential path for the future of work culture and design

When work culture and workplace design are in harmony, organisations can create an environment where people thrive and are the main driver of success

By Chelsea Perino

An increasing number of organisations are adopting the concept of human-centricity by creating environments that prioritise the well-being and empowerment of their employees. Interestingly, this has not always been the case.

Until recently, workplace cultures were defined by rigid hierarchies, strict schedules, and an emphasis on individual productivity. Employees were expected to work from a designated office, with limited flexibility in terms of remote work or flexible hours.

Unsurprisingly, the evolution of workplace design follows a similar pattern. Cubicles, closed offices, and formal meeting rooms were prevalent in office layouts until the early 2000s. Even then, only a few tech businesses were experimenting with their office layouts. However, as companies began to realise the impact of physical space on employee well-being and productivity, they started to shift towards more open, collaborative, and innovative designs.



This focus on people does not stop at culture; it must extend to the physical environment. A people-first work culture should align with human-centric workplace design. For instance, by incorporating elements such as greenery and natural light, workplaces can promote well-being and productivity. Additionally, adopting ergonomic furniture improves employees' comfort and supports their health. These seemingly small yet impactful details play a crucial role in creating a holistic and positive employee experience.

Unfortunately, many organisations are opting to revert to pre-COVID policies that remove much of that trust-based thinking. For instance, companies such as Google and Apple have implemented return-to-office work plans, citing the benefits of face-to-face collaboration. CEO Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase famously said in an internal memo, "We know that some of you prefer a hybrid schedule and respectfully understand that not everyone will agree with this decision. Being together greatly enhances mentoring, learning, brainstorming, and getting things done."

While the reasoning behind such decisions may seem logical, is a mandated return to the office really the best approach?

New era, new ways of working

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for change, prompting a widespread transition to remote work. Organisations had to quickly adapt to new ways of operating, with a focus on communication, flexibility, and empathy during this challenging period.

Companies that embraced remote work were able to successfully maintain a strong sense of community and support for their employees, even in virtual settings. This period also drove the adoption of hybrid work models, with spaces designed to accommodate both in-person and remote collaboration. The focus on creating flexible spaces that promote employee health and comfort became paramount.

A people-first work culture

Few would argue that a work culture with a strong emphasis on employee well-being, empowerment, and inclusivity is a bad thing. It is a culture that recognises employees as the heart of any organisation whose needs and experiences should be carefully considered. Recognising how, when, and where individuals work best creates a strong sense of belonging within the organisation, which, in turn, helps foster loyalty and commitment.



The intersection of work culture and workplace design

The true power of human-centricity comes from combining a culture of trust and empowerment with a workplace design that supports both productivity and individual needs. When these elements align, organisations create environments that reflect their values and enhance employee engagement and satisfaction.

A workplace that aims for greater transparency and collaboration can be reinforced by using an open office layout that encourages interaction and idea-sharing. Similarly, a focus on creativity and innovation can be supported by developing flexible workspaces that adapt to different tasks and employee preferences.

When employees feel valued, supported, and trusted, they are more likely to perform at their best and remain loyal to the organisation. Organisations that embrace the philosophy of human-centricity are well-positioned to attract top talent and nurture and retain their most valuable asset – their people. As we look towards the future of work, we must continue to care for the well-being of employees and consider whether the workplace design truly supports them. The goal is to shape a future where the office is not just a place, but a space where we feel connected and empowered to do our best work.



Architecture for the next generation: Why cities need purpose-driven spaces

To create meaningful impact, developers must put people, adaptive planning, and material innovation at the heart of the design process

By Gynen Kyra Toriano

The way we think about architectural design was once driven primarily by technical considerations that do not always directly impact people's lives. In recent years, the design focus has been leaning towards what spaces can and should do for the people who use them.

This was the subject of a fascinating discussion at the PropertyGuru Asia Real Estate Summit 2024. At the summit, a panel consisting of architects, designers, and developers discussed how spatial design can respond to some of today's most pressing urban challenges, while also addressing changing lifestyles and diverse cultural identities.

Placemaking as cultural expression

During the discussion, the role of placemaking – or an approach to urban design that prioritises people's need for community and well-being over structures – was a central focus. The panel talked about it as both a practical tool for urban planning and a means to reflect the character of a community.

Shao-wei Huang of Zaha Hadid Architects shared how their Henderson Tower project in Hong Kong was designed to preserve the city's identity by integrating its symbolic flower into the tower's form. Similarly, their Beijing Daxing Airport project uses mythological references to root the architecture in national identity.

Shao-wei argued that every structure should contribute to preserving its environment's cultural identity and serve the people who inhabit it.

Nature as a design foundation

For some architects, nature serves as both inspiration and a core design component.

Patrick Keane, Founder of Enter Projects Asia, described how his team brings nature into architecture using materials such as rattan and bamboo. For instance, their work on the Bangalore Airport project involved transforming high-traffic public spaces into calming, nature-inspired environments.

“We wanted people to feel they were in a garden, not an airport,” said Keane. It’s also worth noting that their Project Rattan initiative supports local craft industries.

Stephen Pimbley, Founder of SPARK Architects and panel moderator, echoed the idea of nature as a core design element. He added that architecture should go beyond visual appeal and that the way a space feels – both in the physical and emotional sense – is critical to creating a sense of connection.

Designing for generations rather than broad demographics

To build on the discussion, Jessica Bianca Sy, Vice President at SMDC, emphasised the importance of long-term thinking in real estate development.

“We are not just designing for the next decade – we are planning for the next 50 years,” she said. This planning entails gearing up for population growth, the impacts of climate change, and varying urban lifestyles.

Sy noted that SMDC incorporates adaptability into its developments, including provisions for vertical expansion and retrofitting. She also cautioned against mass-market design strategies that result in bland, impersonal environments.

“Catering to every single demographic often leads to bland designs. We need to design for how people actually live, not just for broad demographic categories,” she added.

Compact living, considerable potential

Another key theme in the discussion was the concept of compact living and how it can lead to more sustainable lifestyles.

Colin Chee, Founder of Never Too Small, championed the efficiency and sustainability of compact living. He argued that reducing physical space encourages more mindful consumption and better design.

“Living with a smaller footprint forces people to think carefully about what they need,” he said.

Chee advocated for more innovation in micro-apartments, especially those that are under 50 square metres. Flexible partitions, modular layouts, and culturally attuned design features, such as entryways that preserve privacy, are becoming increasingly important.

Pimbley added that compact living must also be supported by strong public infrastructure, where streets, parks, and communal areas create opportunities for interaction and connection.

Innovating with a human focus

The panel also discussed the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping urban development. While the speakers acknowledged that technology offers powerful new tools, they warned against allowing efficiency to replace empathy in design.

“AI can support data and modelling, but we must stay focused on the people we are designing for,” Sy noted.

Thien Duong of GSA Vietnam added that the most liveable cities are those that support natural human interaction. Sidewalks, plazas, and neighbourhood spaces should prioritise walkability, social contact, and accessibility.

Building on Duong’s point, Pimbley shared how older European cities, such as Barcelona or Paris, were designed with pedestrians in mind. He challenged developers to return to this scale and mind-set, including in fast-growing Asian cities.

Building with purpose

Designing for impact means creating spaces that are built to last, flexible in function, and meaningful to the people who use them.

Pimbley concluded that architecture should not only be functional and visually compelling; it should also inspire a sense of identity and encourage future innovation.

Asia's rapid urban growth presents a pivotal opportunity. The challenge is no longer how much we build, but how wisely and meaningfully we shape the places we call home.

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