Editorial

Kjell Skyllstad+

Editor in Chief

We live in a world of rapid urbanization. In 1950 the world had only one megacity – New York. Today Asia has more than half of the world's largest cities, including 10 megacities: Bangkok, Beijing, Jakarta, Karachi, Kolkhata, Mumbai, Osaka, Seoul, Shanghai, and Tokyo. According to UN estimates, the proportion of the world's population living in cities will rise from today's 50 percent to 70 percent by 2050. Every week sees more than a million people moving to the cities. Ninety percent of expected population growth is projected to be concentrated in the cities. Southeast Asia is steadily urbanizing. In 1950 only 15 percent lived in cities, while today more than 40 percent of the population lives in urban areas, with the numbers rapidly rising, mainly due to influx from rural areas.

This rapid process of urbanization is accompanied by equally rapid social and cultural changes affecting all aspects of life. As pointed out by the Centre for Livable Cities and ASEAN Studies Centre at the Singapore World City Summit (June 2010) there is a marked shift from living in an extended family to nuclear family accommodations in the growing Asian cities. One could add that the close intergenerational contact, which constituted the very foundation for the transfer of cultural values and knowledge as well as artistic skills from one generation to the next, is often lost through the isolation caused by split living arrangements even within one household. A life style built on a sufficiency economy, which supported local craftsmanship and transfer of knowledge is replaced by an urban consumerist ideology.

City authorities throughout the region feel the pressure to modernize, which results in a steady decline and loss of heritage sites and cultural traditions through the demolishing of old buildings in the city centers and rapid replacement by high rise complexes.

So acknowledging these negative consequences of rapid urban growth, why do city planners not come up with programs for sustainable development that would also promote cultural continuity? The answer is that cities and towns in the region are largely self-organizing instead of planned. Where plans exist they are often disregarded by private entrepreneurs within a system of a profit-driven market economy that also disregards public interest. This privatization of urban planning has also resulted in a division between a growing middle-class of well-to-do citizens and those living at the geographical, social and economic margins.

+ Dr. Kjell Skyllstad, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway

The Asian development bank points to the sad fact that between 240 and 260 million people in Asia's urban areas live on less than 1 USD a day. This is one-third of the total number of absolute poor in Asia, which in turn accounts for about 70 percent of those living in dire poverty throughout the world. Most of them eek out a living in degraded squatter settlements on the edges of large cities. It is estimated that the population of these slums will grow by an average of 110 million people every year, reaching about 700 million by 2015.

It seems that in this self-destructive process we are nearing a critical point of no return. However, just at this moment, there is another worldwide concern that has necessitated a profound soul searching among city administrators – the issue of grave environmental degradation. Again the Asian Development Bank discloses that cities occupy 2 percent of the world's land but consume 75 percent of its resources and produce a similar percentage of its waste in addition to 80 percent of carbon dioxide emissions. This year Asian cities have experienced unprecedented effects of global warming, including devastating landslides, floods, heat waves, and shortages of potable water. No doubt these problems have motivated and propelled a movement to implement intra- and interdepartmental city planning initiatives, and to enact necessary legislation with a vision of one day making their cities livable for all citizens.

Moreover, in this vision, cultural workers and institutions, artists and art educators have a definite role to play. A study of the cultural preferences of Nobel Prize awardees from all scientific disciplines discloses a level of personal artistic proficiency and activity far exceeding that of the population at large. Throughout the centuries, artists have been at the forefront of initiating cultural, social, and economic development on the local and global arenas. Furthermore, where city planners have chosen to cooperate with art institutions in implementing daring proposals for urban rehabilitation, results have been achieved that exceed all expectations.

An experience that prompted a report in this journal was the awarding of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize or what is also called, "The Nobel Prize for Cities" to Bilbao, Spain at the Singapore World City Summit in June 2010. The city's Mayor told a stunned audience the success story of a city reborn, the story of a reinvented and regenerated city. This is a model for inclusive city development.

The disastrous decline of the formerly thriving industrial town had led to an equally serious social crisis. The outlook for the future could not have been more bleak and hopeless. Then by a stroke of luck, the Guggenheim museum was looking for a European venue to build a museum. Here is where we saw our chance, the Mayor explained. "We built an art museum in the middle of a crisis and a ruined city. In times of crises it is time to invest and this investment paid off. The most audacious art project conceivable was paid for within three years and the city was reborn."

In university cities the art faculties have been seen to take the lead in devising projects for city development. There is a great and immediate demand for research in all areas connected to the place of arts and culture in urban and regional planning, which in most countries has suffered from ineffective leadership and a lack of clear and measurable goals.

Just let me mentioned a few of these open fields:

- What is the role of the arts in urban planning and community development?
- How can the arts contribute to the creative re-imagining and revitalization of a city?
- What are good practices of sustainable city renewal?
- How can the arts contribute to building social cohesion and bridging cultural divides?
- How can the art communities contribute to cultural continuity?
- How can the arts stimulate participatory citizenship and social interaction?
- What role can culture and the arts play in stimulating economic development?

The Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok has now for more than a decade, actively pursued an agenda of community outreach initiatives like the Art for All project described in this issue. We are likewise proud to report on the groundbreaking Declaration of the Cooperation by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and Alliances in the Fields of Art and Culture. The declaration was put to a decisive test when the Ministry of Culture immediately after the recent upheavals in the city, called on the artist communities for assistance in implementing a project for reconciliation. A hundred artists spontaneously responded and came up with the Imagine Peace project and shortly thereafter its exposition opened in the Bangkok Culture Center.

With the establishment of a cooperative link with the Urban Research Plaza and the Urban Culture Research center of Osaka City University a new page was turned in the history of this prestigious institution. This year, the eighth in a series of annual international academic conferences exploring the whole open field of urban culture research was held at the Maha Chulalongkorn Building at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok resulting in the publication of accepted papers in its book of proceedings.

Furthermore, the University and Faculty administration building on their experiences gained from the eight yearly forums, and in consultation with our international partners, has decided to go a step further to meet the demand for directions in urban planning in a critical new phase of rapid urban growth. Therefore on behalf of all parties involved and not least the editorial board and international reviewers who have dedicated themselves fully to the task, I hereby

have the honor of introducing the first volume of our interdisciplinary and international peer-reviewed Journal of Urban Culture Research and its supporting online edition.

As you will observe, the thematic focus for this volume was chosen in commemoration of the work of the great city planner and pioneer in urban development HM King Chulalongkorn. We hope through this issue to give the concept of the "creative city" which is almost a household expression, a new and more concrete substance that will lead to increased research activities across the region and the world in a field where guidance is in eager demand.