


# **AN ALTERNATIVE URBAN STRATEGY**

 **WILLIAM S W LIM**

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**WILLIAM S.W. LIM**

FOREWORD BY

**PHILIP MOTH**

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The book is a collection of the author's articles written between 1975–1980 in which he examines a wide range of urban problems. He draws heavily upon his own experience as a practising architect, urban planner and development consultant, whose daily work brings him into first hand contact with career minded government bureaucrats, profit motivated developers and displaced householders and slum dwellers. As a concerned scholar he has studied the urban problems from the point of view of one who is deeply conscious of his Asian roots.

The author is of the opinion that the urban problems in the Third World, or for that matter in the developed world, cannot be solved in a piecemeal fashion. Massive low-cost housing programmes, heavily subsidised transport systems, foreign technical and financial aid – can but tinker with the surface of the problem. He advocates an overall alternative urban development strategy in which we need to abandon our present consumer-oriented lifestyle and a blind acceptance of the symbols of Western development.

The Articles are organised under five sections, namely: Planning and Environment, Transport, Housing, Values and Creativity and General issues. In many ways, this book is the continuation to and development of the ideas expressed in the author's earlier book on Equity and urban environment in the Third World: with special reference to Asean countries and Singapore, published in 1975.

# **AN ALTERNATIVE URBAN STRATEGY**

The human settlements crisis cannot be tackled without raising the question of the transformation of society itself. This transformation constitutes a challenge to man's capacity for creation and renewal and is inseparable from the overall problem of development. It calls for increased citizen awareness, the destruction of forms of domination, and the substantial reduction of disparities within the framework of new institutions, new instruments, new technologies, new models and new concepts, and of a new role for the individual both within each country and in the international context.

*Report of the meeting of experts held at Dubrovnik from 20–23 May 1975. Organised by the secretariat of Habitat: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, 1975. (A/CONF. 70/WG/14. Limited distribution).*

# FOREWORD

*This volume comprises a collection of papers and articles presented or written by the author over the quinquennium 1975–1980. All sixteen of them unfold the author's own original thoughts, ideas and proposals except for the one-but-penultimate item (the first item in Section V) which I had the privilege of writing jointly with him. I feel all the more honoured, therefore, to have been approached to write this "Foreword".*

*Some readers will immediately recognise this collection as a logical sequel to Mr. William Lim's previous anthology of his constructive suggestions in 1975, which was entitled "Equity and Urban Environment in the Third World". In a review of that work, I had the occasion to remark :—*

*"The greatest merit in his papers and articles consist in his ability not merely to forecast future developments and policies but in fact to influence their course. The book is replete with instances of legislative measures and official acts which were originally proposed by Mr. Lim. . . . . Of the other prognostications, the order in which they will come into fruition could well become a parlour guessing game".*

*The present volume goes further in making concrete recommendations for an alternative development strategy for urban centres in the Third World: with special reference to Asean countries. Granted Mr. Lim's prophetic vision for matters pertaining to the built environment and granted also the tremendous growth potential of the Asean region — putting these two together the reader will find, as he proceeds from Section to Section, from Chapter to Chapter, that he is presented with a recipe for a successful solution of the problems of urban development in Asean.*

*As I see it, the main emphasis placed by the author relate to the following areas: in other words, these are his principal concerns:— Firstly, our beloved cities (as he calls them) are now being represented by banks and commercial buildings and by thus imitating the West we have lost our sense of cultural values in the worship of our new god, money. Enlightened Third World leaders have now questioned the necessity to repeat the horrific experiences and human sufferings of the industrial revolution in Europe. He therefore challenges the basis and abolishes the arguments of outdated planning theories from the developed world. Their adoption and implementation are dangerous and could severely damage, nay destroy, the urban fabric and historical heritage of our cities. He suggests alternative urban planning models for Third World cities which can provide a better physical framework and achieve more equitable income distribution and community participation. One of these is the strategy of low resource urban centres, using only a fraction of the technical, financial and human resources that are presently utilised.*

*This would also ensure that sufficient resources are retained in the rural sector and slacken rural migration to urban centres. Secondly, Mr. Lim is concerned deeply with political and social justice; the elimination of corruption and inefficiency; and with the plight of the urban poor. For example, he points out that high priority given to road construction can only benefit the car-owning minority at the expense of the environmental quality of the city and the urban poor. Thirdly, he argues that lack of political will and commitment is often the root cause of urban problems. His next three worries are the preservation of local culture, of the environment and the absence of public participation in urban development.*

*To summarise briefly the main thrust of the author's papers and articles would, in fact, result in doing violence to his style and his capacity for persuasive writing. All those interested in the built environment, in our cities, in our peoples and in the welfare of the peoples of our respective countries in Asean should read and ponder this book. Before concluding, I cannot resist reproducing a few sentences from the collection:*

1. *"Even in land-short Singapore, there is sufficient residential land to accommodate 4 to 6 million people at a moderate density".*
2. *"Land must first and foremost be treated as a commodity belonging to the whole community and to be utilised in the interest of all especially the underprivileged".*
3. *"It is unrealistic for Third World countries to rely on massive foreign assistance to resolve their problems".*
4. *"We must discard our pre-conceived middle-class images and pseudo-Western housing and environmental standards".*
5. *"We must find appropriate solutions from first principles appropriate to each country".*
6. *"Low resource urban centres should be developed urgently to prevent the fast approaching urban crisis".*
7. *"If we want to save our cities, the time for action is NOW".*

**PHILIP MOTH**

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# PREFACE

*This book is a collection of articles written between 1975–1980 on various aspects of urban problems. Most of them are directly relating to issues in the Asean countries with special attention given to Singapore. However, it is conceivable that this collection may have general relevance to other Third World countries. The author has accepted that Singapore is a special case. It is a city-state of 616 sq. k.m., with a population of 2.36 million (1979) and a high per capita income of US\$3,794 (S\$8,232) (1979). Comments regarding Singapore need to be closely examined, if they are to be adopted for Asean and other Third World countries.*

*The content is divided into five sections:— namely Planning and Environment, Transport, Housing, Values and Creativity and General issues. In many ways, this book is the continuation to and development of the ideas expressed in my earlier book on Equity and urban environment in the Third World: with special reference to Asean countries and Singapore, published in 1975.*

*In the last few years, there is an increasing awareness of the special problems facing urban centres in Third World countries. Much progress towards a more realistic approach in providing low-income housing has been achieved in some Third World countries. However, the living conditions of the majority, particularly the urban poor, have not substantially improved, and in many instances have even deteriorated. The basic issues of rural-urban dichotomy, large disparity of income distribution, rapid urbanisation without corresponding job opportunities, steep increase in urban land prices and the general deterioration of the urban environment etc. continue to exist. None of the urban centres in Third World countries, nor for that matter in the developed countries, have as yet adopted an overall alternative urban development strategy.*

*It is in this context that the author has attempted to find alternative solutions, as indicated in several of the articles:— “Low Resource Urban Centres”, “Alternative Development Strategy in the Third World”, Urban Transport and Mobility of People”, and “Some Policy Guidelines to Low-Income Urban Housing in Third World Countries”. The article on Images of the West” is to analyse the attempt to restructure Western societies and its effect on the development in Third World countries. The importance of a well-defined land policy to the larger issues of urban problems is recognised. The article on “Land Policy in Singapore” is a case study of how the effective use of land policy instruments can influence the broader planning, economic and social objectives of Singapore.*

*Traditional societies, now on the threshold of modernisation, are confronted with the dilemma of what direction its development should take. Before we leap from the frying pan into the fire, we need to take a deep careful look at the relationship between cultural values and development. A preliminary attempt is made by the author to analyse the related issues of cultural values, creativity and development in Singapore.*

*My effort to achieve a better understanding of the living conditions of the urban poor within the different Asean countries will not be possible without the mental stimulation from the members of the Southeast Asia Study Group. The Group consists of concerned intellectuals, professionals and academics of various disciplines in the Asean countries. In particular, I would like to mention Sulak Sivaraksa and Paul Chamniern of Thailand, Lim Teck Ghee of Malaysia, Soedjatmoko and Adnan Buyung Nasution of Indonesia and Karina and Randolph David as well as Ponciano Bengagen and Mary Hollnsteiner of Philippines.*

*My genuine thanks must be given to my wife Lena who discussed and commented on the substance and corrected my English in all the articles. I wish to acknowledge the understanding of my partners in DP Architects in allowing me to take time off to write these articles and to be involved in numerous conferences. However, it would not be possible for me to put this book together without Nancy Chng, who has once again so painstakingly edited the articles with understanding and enthusiasm, as she had done for my previous book. I wish also to offer my sincere thanks to Professor Philip Motha who has kindly agreed to write the Foreword, and to Toy for designing the cover and layout as well as to my personal secretary Jessie Tan and the firm's librarian Judy Seah who have all so willingly taken on the extra workload.*

William S. W. Lim

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**PART I**

# **PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT**



**An Alternative Development Strategy for Urban Centres in Asean Countries** : keynote paper presented at the seminar on "Planning for Large Southeast Asian Cities – The Gap Between Planning And Implementation : Problems And Prospects", organised by the German Foundation for International Development (DSC) and the Human Settlements Division of Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand. Aug 25 to Sept 23, 1979.

**Cry Our Beloved Cities** : paper delivered at the symposium on "The Environment in Malaysia" jointly organised by the Consumers' Association of Penang and School of Biological Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang from Sept 16–20, 1978. Published with title : "When a City is Not Home" in **Business Times** (Singapore), Sept 25, 1978. p.2.

**If Concrete Can Speak** : paper presented at the conference on "Our World in Concrete and Structures" sponsored by Ready-Mixed Concrete Association of Singapore on Aug 24–25, 1978. Also published in : **On Site** (Singapore), Nov 1978, 2(1):4–6; **Business Times** (Singapore), Aug 25, 1978. p. 6.

**Low Resource Urban Centres : With Special Reference to Asean Countries** : article published in **City Planning Review** (Japan), Aug 1976, 9:8–14. Also published in Nancy Chng (*ed.*) **Questioning Development in Southeast Asia**, Singapore, published by Select Books on behalf of Southeast Asia Study Group, Singapore, 1977. p.51–62; **Solidarity** (Philippines), Jan/Feb 1977. p. 12–18.

# An Alternative Development Strategy For Urban Centres In Asean Countries

1979

The problems facing many major urban centres in Third World countries are approaching crisis dimensions. Urban population is rapidly increasing. Despite efforts to create more jobs opportunities, there is more unemployment and underemployment. Road networks have been improved, but traffic conditions are becoming increasingly chaotic. More public housing is being built, but the squatter population continues to increase. Major infrastructure and services are being provided and many projects are initiated to improve the urban environment. A disproportionate percentage of financial, technical and administrative resources have been spent to develop these urban centres, compared to that spent on rural areas. Yet, these efforts have failed to benefit the majority of the urban population, in particular the urban poor.

Why is this so; what has gone wrong? Over the last two decades numerous research studies have been carried out by academic institutions as well as local and foreign consultants. However, no viable urban development strategy suited for Third World countries has been established, accepted and adopted for implementation. Is this because the political machinery is inadequate to meet the complex problems of urban growth and development, or is it because of the shortage of administrative and professional manpower? The services of foreign consultants have been extensively used. Why are they equally ineffective? Is it fair just to put the blame on the inability of governments to carry out their recommendations or on the limited budget available? Are these constraints so severe and serious that no viable solution is possible? These and many other related questions must have caused great concern to many policy-makers in Third World countries.

While this analysis will address itself to the five Asean countries, some points raised may be relevant to most Third World urban centres.

## **PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS**

In discussing and analysing a possible alternative urban development strategy for the Third World, it is necessary to identify some specially relevant problems and constraints. They are:—

1. Decision process in planning,
2. Current urban planning theories,
3. Urban land policy,
4. Urban and rural dichotomy,
- and 5. Conflicts of cultural values.

### **1. Decision Process in Planning**

At the risk of over-simplification, the decision process in planning goes something like this:— Politicians identify the broad planning objectives. These objectives are then translated by the administrative and professional staff in the public sector for implementation. In identifying the broad



policy objectives, politicians make many promises in public. Some are made with serious intention, others are not.

Irrespective of the political system, politicians must in their stated policies attempt to respond to the need of the majority. However, in the absence of a viable and effective opposition and a free and critical press, the normal check-and-balance process is not present. In this region, politicians often make incredible promises regarding the provision of public housing, the improvement of infrastructure facilities for the poor while championing the cause of people's participation. In actual fact, the dwellings of the squatters are often ruthlessly demolished; the new infrastructure is constructed mainly in the business districts and in the higher income residential areas; and planning projects are implemented with no consultation with or even consideration for the urban poor. These are examples of politicians who are sadly lacking in the will or ability to carry out well considered planning policies.

The administrative and professional staff in public sector belong to the privileged members of the community — in other words, the elite. They usually fail to appreciate, least of all identify with or are sympathetic to, the problems of the urban poor.

The need to seek a better understanding of the complex urban development process is neglected. The political will and ability to carry out well-meaning broad policy objectives are sadly lacking. When these conditions are generally prevalent in the public sector, there is little wonder that the implementation of planning policies has not been effective.

## **2. Current Urban Planning Theories**

Western planning theories were developed in response to the industrial revolution and technological innovation. These theories have subsequently evolved to accommodate private vehicles, multi-storey buildings and the consumer-oriented way of life. With better awareness of the limitation of global