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Can architects meet the challenges thrown up by our growing urban populations?



BY HENRIETTA THOMPSON

It may be the case that you're happily on your way to a fabulous penthouse right now, with a stunning panoramic cityscape stretching for miles. A lot of people – mostly those who get to live at the top of them, build them or sell them – don't have any beef with skyscrapers at all. But tower blocks have been on the receiving end of some bad press for decades. Since they were invented around a century ago, they've come to define city skylines, while simultaneously being synonymous with greedy developers, ego-driven corporations and Bond-villain architects. And yet... the rise of megacities (those with populations above ten million) and the subsequent need for sustainable solutions present one of the most important challenges of the 21st century. Everyone – from the UN to the WHO – says so. Today, 54 per cent of the world's population live in urban areas, a proportion that's expected to increase to 66 per cent by 2050. This could add another 2.5 billion people to urban populations in the next 20 years or so. The pressure this will put on housing, infrastructure, transportation, energy and employment, as well as basic services such as education and healthcare, has been well documented. We need to rethink the way we live and work in cities. Thankfully, skyscrapers in the 21st century are beginning to look very



TELL THE TRUTH

It's time to burst the filter bubble, says **David Mattin**

different from their ancestors. Recently I met Ole Scheeren, a German architect with offices in Beijing, Hong Kong and London. Famously responsible for Beijing's CCTV HQ, which he designed with Rem Koolhaas while at OMA, Scheeren is currently working on a series of projects across the world. Refreshingly, he strongly believes the people who live and work inside a building are as much a part of it as concrete, steel and glass. Can architecture be about collaboration and storytelling instead of the isolation and hierarchy of a typical skyscraper, he asks?

Another way municipalities and their resident entrepreneurs and innovators are improving urban life is by investing in the waterways of cities. See Berlin's Flussbad, for example, an ambitious project hoping to transform 1.8km of the Spree River into a new public space. As well as cleaning the Spree's currently undrinkable water, Flussbad Berlin is also planning a new boardwalk and a wealth of new greenery. Cofounders Tim and Jan Edler of art and architecture studio Realities:united already host annual swimming competitions along 1,000m of the Spree to give the public a taste of the future, and hope to open a river pool in 2025, 100 years since the closure of the city's last one.

All-female creative consultancy Pocket Projects in Singapore is a living antithesis of the city's obsessive tall building culture. With a mission to preserve and breathe new life into Singapore's historic and culturally important buildings, it hopes to challenge the region's commercial preference to demolish and start anew, while also changing the public mindset on what a place can be.

London has made incredible strides in the last 15 years, with Stratford, Canary Wharf and King's Cross, in particular, seeing vast transformations. Greenwich Peninsula, a huge 190-acre stretch of land being masterplanned by developer Knight Dragon, is another new London district currently employing several of the world's most well-known architects and designers. In an area looped in by 1.6 miles of river, the city is being promised 48 acres of open green space, 10,000 new homes and a commercial district encompassing shops, hotels, restaurants and schools.

Cities that will be deemed the most 'liveable' in the future will be those that succeed in reconnecting communities, bridging neighbourhoods, social sectors and generations. Whether they do this by building tall, wide, underground or over water, they have a chance of rejuvenating the whole, panoramic urban view. ■

Henrietta Thompson is an editorial consultant and curator, and editor-at-large at *Wallpaper magazine**

This is the age of anger. And in 2017 our anger is a Great Wall that divides us in half. One half of you is angry because of Brexit. Or Trump. Or some other recent event that is, as far as you're concerned, the Worst Thing Ever. The other half of you is not angry about those things. You were angry before, when those things had not happened. When they did happen – Brexit, Trump, whatever it was – you enjoyed a brief and wonderful abatement of your anger. Only to find yourself becoming absolutely bleeping furious with all those people who keep saying that Brexit or Trump or whatever are Unutterably Terrible.

So we are two big and angry camps. We can all sense it – just scroll down your Facebook feed. The idea that our societies are becoming more polarised is borne out by data, too. The two most polarising US presidents in post-war history were the previous two: George W Bush and Barack Obama. But that was before Trump, of course. At time of writing his approval ratings are a stellar 84 per cent among Republicans and a woeful eight per cent among Democrats – a larger gap than even Bush or Obama ever faced.

There are many reasons for the great polarisation. One is the online filter bubble. Pre-internet, mainstream TV and print news ensured a shared narrative of current events, and constant exposure to opposing points of view. Today, millions exist instead inside an online bubble of boutique news platforms, self-selected Twitter feeds and YouTube recommendations, serving them an algorithmically curated media diet that simply confirms what they already think, plus interest. Many think the filter bubble helped get Trump elected in 2016. Unscrupulous players even used it to help them deliver fake news, targeting their stories about Hillary selling arms to ISIS at people most likely to believe them.

In 2017, then, rising numbers are acutely aware that they're trapped inside the bubble. And they want out. A clear opportunity for any brand in this environment? Arm consumers with a filter buster. Hi From the Other Side is a just-launched platform built entirely on the idea of bursting the filter bubble. It allows users to find others with opposing views on a range of issues, and then go head-to-head with them in a livestreamed debate that others can watch. The founder, Harvard Business School student Henry Tsai, was inspired by the devastatingly polarising US presidential election. And filter busters don't have to be online. In April 2016, with Brazil deep in crisis around the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, ice-cream brand Ben & Jerry's invited people to debate politics in a São Paulo store.

Really, the rising trend for filter busters is just one fragment of a much larger picture. While everyone is talking about post-truth right now, businesses should remember that a few key truths about the world around us – and human nature – aren't going anywhere. In uncertain times, brands would do well to cleave to those truths. And one among them? People will always want accurate and constructive information. With millions increasingly aware that they only ever see

half the story, anyone helping us to burst our filter bubbles will win respect. I look forward to hearing your (angry) comments. ■

David Mattin is head of trends and insights at trendwatching.com

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