

Ranita Ma Tsz Yu (Hong Kong SAR)

Chinese University of Hong Kong

From a City-scale Beauty Pageant to a Continent-wide Diversified Gallery

Cities and Urban Development



Foreword and Acknowledgements

2020 was a year like no other as the pandemic changed many aspects of our lives. In a sense, that made early 2021 an ideal time to ask the question: how would you address some of the biggest challenges in Asia in the coming decade? In January 2021, the Asia Business Council joined hands with Nikkei Asia and the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford to launch the Asia's Challenge 2030 Global Essay Competition, open to students aged 18–22 anywhere in the world.

Given the many obstacles facing young people pursuing their studies during a global pandemic, we did not know how many essays we would receive. Yet we were impressed by thoughtful submissions from universities across Asia and as far afield as California and London. We pored over essays on topics ranging from artificial intelligence and aquaculture to smart cities and virus sequencing and learned a lot in the process.

The essays reflect a generation that is asking hard questions about the challenges facing Asian societies and optimistic about the prospects for creating a better world through new modes of doing business and innovative approaches to policymaking.

Young people from Asia are increasingly globally aware. They want policymakers to adopt international best practices in public health and environmental protection, especially in areas like sustainable finance and mental health awareness. But they reject the uncritical adoption of Western models, from urban design to economic development. Many call for a celebration of their unique national and regional identities, whether through locally inspired architectural designs or the increased representation of indigenous perspectives.

Participants in the Economy, Trade, and Finance category want to improve existing economic models so that a balance is struck between economic growth and a fairer, more sustainable, and more stable world.

In the Public Health and the Natural Environment category, respondents called for holistic approaches to health. Concerns about mental wellness reflect the pressures brought about by increasingly competitive academic and professional environments, while essays about communications and interpersonal relationships demonstrate the desire for a more intentional focus on modeling healthy relationships. Still other submissions addressed the existential crisis posed by climate change and the complicated web of interrelated challenges, from plastic waste to fossil fuel use. Proposed solutions range from changes in consumer behavior to an entirely new model of development.

In the Cities and Urban Development category, the essays we received reflected a desire for smarter, more walkable, climate resilient cities, and urban environments that reflect their unique local character. Whether as consumers, as employees, or as entrepreneurs themselves, this younger generation will demand that businesses and governments adopt sustainable practices and modes of operation that benefit their communities.

This global essay competition would not have been possible without the support of the former and current Chairmen of the Asia Business Council, Lim Boon Heng of Temasek and Daniel Tsai of Fubon Group. We are also indebted to Vice-chairman Tak Niinami of Suntory Group and Council Trustee Nazir Razak of Ikhlas Capital, who made key introductions to Nikkei Asia and the Blavatnik School.

Special thanks must also go to Shigasaburo Okumura and Daisuke Akazawa, Editor-in-chief and Chief Producer of Nikkei Asia, and Ngaire Woods and Luna Sidhu, Founding Dean and Director of Development of the Blavatnik School, for making this competition possible.

We would also like to thank our judges who generously volunteered their time and energy.

Economy, Trade, and Finance category:

- Nobuyoshi John Ehara, Co-founder, Unison Capital
- Emily Jones, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Katsuhiko Hara, Chief Desk Editor, Nikkei Asia

Public Health and the Natural Environment category:

- George Tahija, Principal, PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya Tbk
- Maya Tudor, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Futoshi Kuwamoto, Business & Market News Editor, Nikkei Asia

Cities and Urban Development category:

- Zhang Xin, Founder and CEO, SOHO China
- Sir Paul Collier, Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Shin Nakayama, News Editor, Nikkei Asia

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ashleigh Au of SOHO China Scholarships and Ruth Collier of Oxford University in publicizing the contest.

There is no doubt that this generation will be profoundly shaped by the experience of living through the world-altering events of 2020 during their formative years. But most essays took the longer view instead of focusing solely on the pandemic, looking ahead to the challenges of the next decade and beyond. Policymakers and business leaders around the world should take note of their ideas as this young generation comes of age and begins to lead local and international development in multiple fields.



Pauline Yeung
Program Director
Asia Business Council



Colleen Howe
Program Associate
Asia Business Council

Award-winning Essays

Economy, Trade, and Finance

Krati Gupta (India)

Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law

The Three Pillar Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Responsible Financing:
Addressing Asia's Challenges in the "Decade of Action"

Chloris Jiaqi Kang (Singapore)

National University of Singapore

Private Money for the Public Good –
Unlocking Private Equity for Asia's Sustainable Finance

Henry Michael Mayhew (United Kingdom)

University College London

Asian Central Bank Mandates: What about Equality?

Public Health and the Natural Environment

Hanun Thalia (Indonesia)

Universitas Indonesia

KomU as a Strategy to Improve Family Communications

Yao Yuanchen (China)

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Meeting the Challenge of Plastic Waste Recycling in Japan and China

Suzu Yokoyama (Japan)

Tsuda University

Tackling Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Japan and South Korea

Cities and Urban Development

Matthew Flores (Philippines)

Ateneo de Manila University

Indigenous Cities: Reframing Modernity and Our Cities

Rya Jetha (United States)

Pomona College

Reinventing the Asian Megacity: Absorbing Climate Change with Sponge Design

Ranita Ma Tsz Yu (Hong Kong SAR)

Chinese University of Hong Kong

From a City-scale Beauty Pageant to a Continent-wide Diversified Gallery

Ashley Faith Santoso (Indonesia)

Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia

The Neglected Effects of Gender-based Violence towards Jakarta's Urban Walkability

Ranita Ma Tsz Yu (Hong Kong SAR)
Chinese University of Hong Kong

From a City-scale Beauty Pageant to a Continent-wide Diversified Gallery

Never can we underestimate how Asians love shopping! We are home to 14 out of the 20 largest shopping malls in the world. Let me introduce you to some of the winners:

In the top seven we have 1 Uthm from Malaysia, with over 5 million square feet of leasable area and the largest rooftop garden in Southeast Asia.



Fig. 1 & 2 – Interior and rooftop garden of the 1 Uthm

Our third runner-up goes to SM City North EDSA from Philippines, with close to 5.4 million square feet of leasable area and again featuring a Sky Garden.



Fig. 3 & 4 – Interior and Sky Garden of the SM City North EDSA

And now finally, please applaud our champion, the South China Mall from China with 6.6 million square feet of leasable area, and once again, an outdoor garden.



Fig. 5 & 6 – Interior and outdoor area of the South China Mall

The winning recipe is clear. First, we need to be big—in fact, enormous—to earn the titles. To drive traffic and sales, we incorporate intricate escalator networks, bright lighting, and international household brands. Without the trouble of going to the directory, it is safe to assume that there is a green open area.

It begs the question—unless you live next to one of them, you probably cannot tell the difference between our top 20. Are these the malls you wish to visit in any part of Asia in the next 10 years and beyond?

Now let's walk to the next block, the city-pride skyscraper. We love skyscrapers, generally defined as buildings over 100-metres tall, as they are masterpieces and symbolize our prosperity. We hear phrases like, "There are no more than 6000 buildings this tall on earth, and there's one in my city!"

But we might as well think again. There are over 300 skyscrapers completed around the world every year. Ten years later, the phrase "my city is one out of 10,000!" might be getting less impressive than before.

To house 70% of the largest malls and 63% of the tallest buildings is not a coincidence. The underlying issue lies in every city competing in the dimensions of size and height, as if they are the key performance indicators of a "successful" city. In that sense, there can only be one winner. Worse still, the champion will be quickly replaced by the thousands of younger, taller, and more advanced buildings waiting in line.

How did we get here? Asian cities have performed miracles in catching up with the West through industrialization and exports. We had an unfettered urge to join the class of developed cities through modernization. Being enormous and tall are our entry tickets.

By no means can we disregard the progress made so far, from poverty alleviation to infrastructure networks and technological advances. But the upcoming decade is a different story as we move beyond basic necessities. The majority of cities will lose the cost advantage in labour and resources. In fact, it is already happening as China exports 60 million manufacturing jobs to Africa. As we reduce our reliance on low-cost manufacturing, our cities are in dire need of developing a distinctiveness that better serves the people and sustains global competitiveness.

The danger of sameness goes far beyond whether cities look aesthetically similar. If we have a singular mindset on buildings, we could fail outright. Take the South China Mall. It was more famously known as the "Ghost Mall," the largest mall with a tenant occupancy rate below 10%. City leaders and developers were hastily looking to replicate the success of world-class mega-malls without thorough customer understanding. It was not until recent renovations focused on residents, such as including family-friendly facilities, that the occupancy rate recovered.

If we have a singular mindset on priority sectors, we could forever trail behind our role models. Suppose an Asian city wished to become a financial city with a lucrative stock market. This city would see that there are already well-established trading

hubs in the region such as Hong Kong and Tokyo. Their institutional frameworks and talent development are meticulously planned to sustain their competitiveness. The city starting afresh lacks a strategic advantage, such that the match is like David facing Goliath, only this time the Goliath is also cautious about the other Goliaths (and Davids) around.

If we have a singular mindset on development, we may lose our identity. What are we most proud of about our cities? That they are food paradises? Or home to skyscraper landmarks? The alarming truth is that people from different cities like Shanghai and Singapore might have shared the same answers and are unable to articulate how their cities are distinctive. We are not much different if we started modernizing at the same time, at the same pace, and using the same pathway. If we the citizens feel this way, our tourists are only more confused. There might not be a sound reason to visit identical cities and there is absolutely no need to visit either of them again. Our tourism and workforce will therefore suffer.

Most importantly, if we have a singular mindset on problem solving, we will be impotent in actually solving any problems. Whether it is climate change, rapid urbanisation, or food shortages, the list of universal challenges goes on. Something as simple as plastic is manufactured using different raw materials and technology in the East and West, meaning that copying others' solutions in waste reduction would not yield the desired results. Thus, our mindset is of the most fundamental importance, rather than the problems we are trying to solve. We cannot apply the same methods as others without taking into account the uniqueness of Asia, our individual cities, and our cultures.

It becomes clear that planners can no longer peek at and paste our neighbours' blueprints. We have to match the market with our unique strengths and contexts and draw our own master plans. The simple answer is utilizing our respective strengths. The tricky question is – how?

Answer 1 – Know ourselves, and know our frenemies better

Back to our financial hub case. What can David do? With Hong Kong and Shanghai standing firm in the leading positions, multiple Chinese cities have found the answer by specializing in niche segments within the financial industry. Beijing takes advantage of its close ties with the central government and becomes the headquarters of financial institutions; Shenzhen, having positioned itself as a financial innovator, continues to attract global STEM talents; and Qingdao is working toward being an international wealth management centre. Through conscientious division of labour, the Davids find ways to complement and seize the spill-over benefit from the Goliaths.

Answer 2 – Learn from others smartly

Learning from others' experiences could save us from many troubles. But such learning is not blindly taking others' answers as our own, but rather understanding the factors in their success and carefully evaluating whether those factors apply in our own unique contexts.

The means of learning has grown exponentially with technology advances. In particular, collaborative data analytics projects among cities, such as Bloomberg's "What Works Cities" program, have unlocked huge potential for evidence-based decision-making. Sharing data with fellow cities can reduce the biases inherent in zooming into a handful of successful examples and promote healthy competition to create more livable cities. Bloomberg's pilot in the United States has already shown promising results such as increased workforce diversity. Can we build a database in our country and take it further to integrate with those in Asia, and the world?

Answer 3 – The people know best

Cities are built for and run by the people, who should have a say in where the cities are progressing toward. Through civic participation, we can get people excited about collectively envisioning a city's future. The Nagara Rimba Nusa Design Contest is a fine example in Indonesia on crowdsourcing ideas for the new capital city. The point may not be to identify the best amateur architect, but to launch a data-collection project to uncover what the people have in mind. Patterns then emerge on what are the people's greatest concerns and desires for the cities we share.

What I like most about the winning design for Nagara Rimba Nusa is its leverage on the natural environment. The name "Forest Archipelago City" suggests that the city is in harmony with the surrounding forest. The natural green infrastructure provides cooling, flooding protection and retreat for the residents. One cannot find the most expensive mall or the tallest tower as all buildings are cohesive to the environment and with each other.



Fig. 7 - Design for the Forest Archipelago City, Indonesia

In Phuket, Thailand, people and hotels had united in protests against over-tourism, believing the "paradise island" was broken by the craving for profits. Indeed, modernization and tourism have made much of the city irrelevant to the humble working class. The luxurious shopping malls that serve the tourists rather than the locals are also systemically vulnerable and they have paid the price as tourism halted under the Coronavirus pandemic.

But there is a silver lining. Without tourists, city planners and developers can now shift their focus back to the locals, and they could rediscover the unique elements that have defined Thailand. Maybe it is the immersion of Buddhism in everyday life, or maybe it is the ripe tropical fruits and delicious recipes. To find out, we need to cast away our assumptions on "modernization" and open our eyes.

Cities that tie development to their cultural and environmental uniqueness are those that would be remembered and loved by locals and visitors alike. They are the cities that can sustain their competitiveness because no one else can imitate them. And I trust that I will find many of them flourishing in Asia in the near future.

References

- ArquitectonicaGEO. (2015, February 16). SM city north EDSA Sky garden by arquitectonicageo , from : <https://architizer.com/projects/sm-city-north-edsa-sky-garden/>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Carruthers, M. (2018, October 09). Phuket hotels' last ditch effort to Save 'PARADISE island' from plastic, from : <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/travel-leisure/article/2167462/phuket-hotels-unite-save-paradise-island-plastic-and>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Eguizzardi. (2020, July 06). An in-depth look at Chinese investment in African Manufacturing, from : <https://pedl.cepr.org/content/vii-depth-look-chinese-investment-african-manufacturing>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Kato, Y. (2019, December 03). A visualization of the world's countries by number of skyscrapers, from : <https://www.fixr.com/blog/2018/04/16/a-visualization-of-the-worlds-countries-by-number-of-skyscrapers/>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Keegan, M. (2018, January 31). World's biggest shopping mall in China is no longer a 'GHOST MALL', from : <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/worlds-biggest-shopping-mall-china-no-longer-ghost-mall/>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Maulia, E. (2019, December 23). 'Forest ARCHIPELAGO' wins design contest for new INDONESIA CAPITAL, from : <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Forest-Archipelago-wins-design-contest-for-new-Indonesia-capital>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Paynter, B. (2018, January 18). What 100 cities are learning from each other by sharing their data, from : <https://www.fastcompany.com/40518004/what-100-cities-are-learning-from-each-other-by-sharing-their-data>
Retrieved April 30, 2021.
- Siebrits, J. (2020). Skyscrapers: Global LIVING Report 2019: CBRE, from <https://www.cbrecommercial.com/uk/en-GB/news/skyscrapers>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Shrestha. (2018, July 27). Largest shopping malls, from : <https://yourjournnee.com/largest-shopping-malls-in-the-world/>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.
- Slk. (2016, August 02). The secret Garden really is a hidden gem on the rooftop of 1 Utama shopping centre, from : <https://kualalumpurkids.wordpress.com/2016/06/25/the-secret-garden-really-is-a-hidden-gem-on-the-rooftop-of-1-utama-shopping-centre/>
Retrieved April 29, 2021.