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BY LIFE & TIMES**PULSE** people**SUSTAINABLE PURSUIT**

Do today's buildings and architecture practices create sustainable buildings? **Aneeta Sundararaj** poses the question to three award-winning architects



Jariyawadee Lekawatana



Datuk Dr Ar Ken Yeang



Dr Milinda Pathiraja

PICTURES BY AMIRUDIN SAHIB

In the last few months, there have been reports of Donald Trump saying that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese. He vowed to cancel the international Paris climate accord that US President Barack Obama championed. It was reported that he also wanted to rearrange the United States' energy and environmental priorities by opening government land to oil and gas drilling, coal mining and pull back plans to push utilities toward lower carbon emissions.

Crystallising all these into a single sentence, Datuk Dr Ar Ken Yeang says: "Trump is an anti-environmentalist."

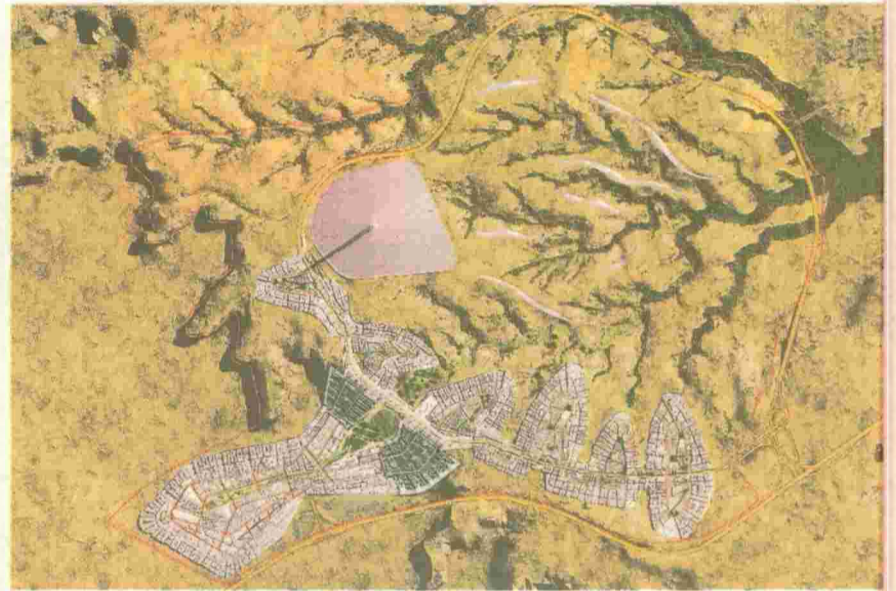
Together with Dr Milinda Pathiraja (from Sri Lanka) and Jariyawadee Lekawatana (from Thailand), Ken was speaking at the recent launch of the fifth International LafargeHolcim Awards.

The award offers US\$2 million in total (RM8.9 million) cash prizes and the closing date for this competition is in March next year.

SUSTAINABILITY

Since the theme of the event is Sustainability By Design, it's only proper that the main topic of discussion is the word sustainability. All the questions centre on one issue: Is there an abuse of the word? In other words, how sustainable is sustainability?

The answer that Pathiraja gives is simple: "Sustainability is not a choice, it's an obligation." Indeed, as the 4th cycle (2014-2015) Global Silver winner of this award, it is reflected in his design of a community library in the village Ambepussa, outside Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. In the aftermath of the civil war in Sri Lanka,



Master plan for KA-CARE.

he wanted to address the reintegration into society of young soldiers. As such, Pathiraja undertook the task of training former soldiers with a different set of skills to build this library.

The 40-year-old architect believes that the word sustainability is widely used for different reasons. It can be confusing because sometimes, it's a "sentimental call" and people are encouraged not to build at all. Sometimes, it's used in scientific research and sometimes, as a rating system.

These sentiments are echoed by Jariyawadee when she says: "I've heard this word since university." The 51-year-old Bangkok native feels that we should go beyond a checklist provided by rating systems. As the 4th cycle (2014-2015) Asia Pacific Gold winner, she designed a new sanctuary for endangered birds, which included a bird clinic, a library and an auditorium.

GENERATION THING

Sustainability doesn't sound so passe, though, when Yeang talks about it. For him, it's a generations thing. He says: "I've been in this field for 40 years now. Sustainability is still in its infancy. It's more than just buildings."

As the Asia-Pacific Bronze winner for the 3rd cycle (2011-2012), Yeang's design was to create a 14-storey ecologically-designed retail and commercial building in Putrajaya. It is "based on a sophisticated,

well-elaborated and integrative merger of eco-friendly state-of-the-art technologies appropriate for high quality use".

Close to age 70, Yeang says that today's architects need to be authentic when creating their designs. Keeping in mind the big picture, the man described as a *sifu* in the architecture world asserts that if the source of energy is not green, how can a building be considered green? If steel is used, the question must be asked: How do you get the steel? If it isn't produced in a green manner, then the building shouldn't be called green. For emphasis, he adds: "Start with the infrastructure being green."

This leads to a study of preferred methodology in architecture. An example is the six-year project that Yeang was part of. It was to create a master plan for a city called KA CARE (King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy). The overriding question from the beginning is something that Malaysia, too, needs to think about: What happens when oil runs out? In other words, what alternative sources of energy do we have?

The extensive study Yeang and his team undertook resulted in a detailed understanding that the final design must respond to the climate, harsh terrain and unforgiving landscape of the desert. When it was unveiled, the final master plan had gone some way towards fulfilling the "fundamental aim of building a sustainable future for Saudi Arabia".



Community library in Ambepussa Sri Lanka.



Chiang Mai Bird Sanctuary.

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MORE THAN JUST STATEMENTS

Sadly, the project never took off because of the political upheaval in the Middle East since 2011. This also underlies what Yeang says: "Unless there is political will, be it to create more sustainable buildings or protect the environment, nothing will work. Putting it bluntly, he says: "Governments should do more than just offer statements about sustainability."

The only remaining question then, is this: Can we ever achieve sustainability? It is possible, believes Pathiraja, only if we promote social equality. "If we take

care of people, people will take care of the environment," he adds. He also suggests that we use the principles of yesterday but update the style of buildings such as enhancing cross-ventilation and increasing the use of natural light in our buildings.

Meanwhile, for Jariyawadee, the solution is stark. "There should be fewer humans on earth," she says. Explaining that the human population is estimated to grow to 10 billion, she asks a pertinent question: How will we cope with such an enormous population?

For Yeang meanwhile, one way to achieve sustainability is for people to become less materialistic. Quite simply, we should stop collecting stuff. Also, governments can help promote sustainability in three ways.

The first is through education about what it means to have sustainable buildings. This includes persuading people to be good to the environment. People should get incentives for practising sustainability. In Singapore, building plans aren't approved if they don't comply with set rating systems.

Lastly, there should be penalty imposed on buildings that are not sustainable. This means that if you pollute the environment, the government will fine you. Ken's parting words have undertones of a warning to many anti-environmentalists the world over: "My generation didn't bother (about sustainability). Even if we stop doing everything now, the consequences of what we did (to the environment) will continue well into the next 50 years. Now, it's too late for preventative measures. We're in a race to rescue the environment."

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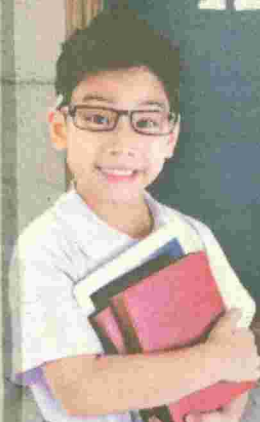
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