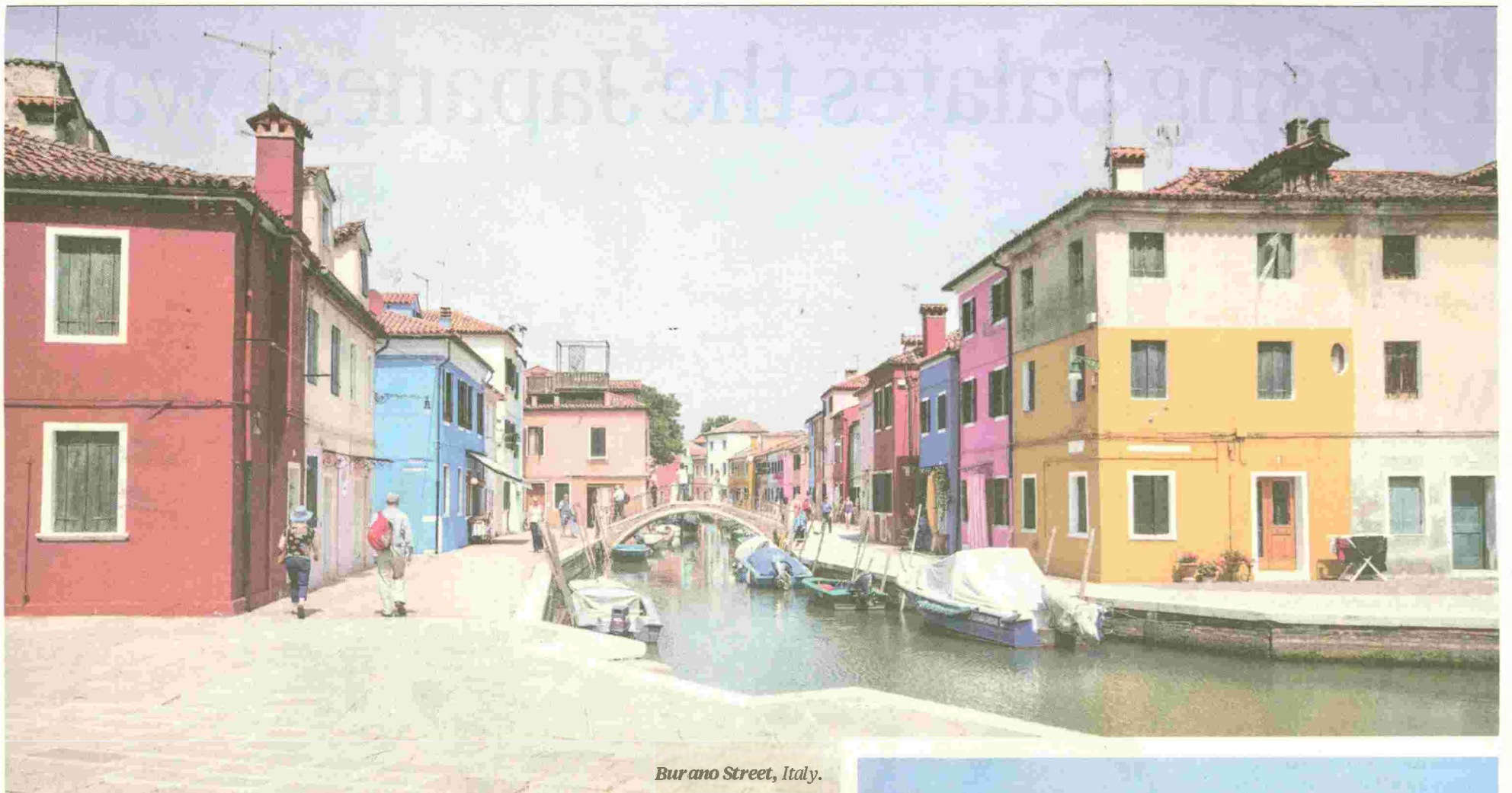


LIFE&TIMES **LIVING**

Burano Street, Italy.

Colour my city

Colours help to give soul and imagination to the cities that we live in, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

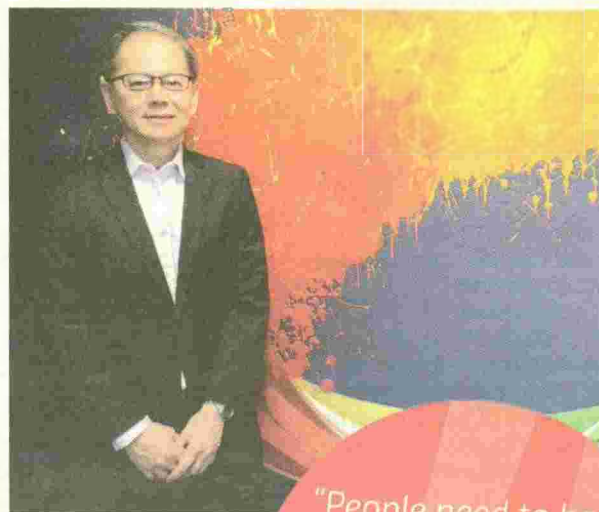
SOME time ago, when a friend and I drove into Kuala Lumpur, we went past one dull, nondescript building after another. Suddenly, something changed and we had to stop the car by the side of the road. It took us a while to understand why we were perplexed.

You see, there was a barren piece of land smack in the heart of the city. Furthermore, for a good half kilometre or so, there wasn't a building in sight. We could actually see the clear blue sky unhindered by a high-rise building. For so long, such sights were something we'd only seen in our hometown of Alor Setar, Kedah, where wide open spaces were the norm.

"If you look at what's happening to our cities, you'll notice streets full of grey homes, plain glass offices and beige shopping malls," says Goh Cheok Weng, managing director of AkzoNobel Paints (Malaysia).

"This has to change. Nobody wants to live in a dull, lifeless world, but many modern developments lack soul and imagination. Cities have to show their true colours. People need to have better connect with their surroundings to make city life more inspiring."

According to forecasts forwarded by Goh, by the 2050s, more than 75 per cent of the world's population will live in cities. To cope with this mass migration, cities tend to choose standardised solutions. These urban spaces



"People need to have better connect with their surroundings to make city life more inspiring."

Goh Cheok Weng,
AkzoNobel Paints

are grey, lifeless and anonymous — to which we do not connect; they don't inspire us to achieve our full potential.

To counter this, AkzoNobel has announced plans to fund a global research project to investigate the link between colour and economic development.

The project is part of AkzoNobel's wider Human Cities initiative, which Goh says is "... meant to highlight the company's commitment to improving, energising and regenerating urban communities across the world."

One of the programmes in the initiative was the recently concluded competition where people around the world took selfies to show what they found special about their own cities.

The hope is that people would be inspired to connect with their cities on an emotional level and, thereby, make city life more energetic and vibrant.

To participate, entrants had to share a selfie via Twitter or Instagram using #myurbanstory and @AkzoNobel. The winner gets to travel to Venice in September and help transform a



Gondolas in Venice.

Venetian Piazza.

When I asked Goh, 50, how one transforms a Venetian Piazza, he replies: "This is actually meant to be a surprise to the contestants."

To emphasise the importance of this project, Goh asserts: "Various factors help a city develop a collective identity, but citizens must be given an opportunity to express that identity. The Human Cities manifesto focuses on a few areas, one of them being colour. Colour is a powerful medium capable of affecting our perceptions and it has a distinct impact on all the factors that determine the vitality of the city such as, the social, cultural and economic."

A COLOURFUL LINK

The research into the link between colour and its effect on the economics of a nation has been carried out before. Citing a project in Rio de Janeiro called Favela Painting, Goh says Dutch architects Haas and Hahn gained fame in 2005 for painting a few houses in a favela (slum) using bright colours.

He echoes the comments made by Ton Buchner, AkzoNobel's CEO, during the recent

14th International Architecture Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia, namely, colours were absent in these slums because of poverty. Once there were colours, the people understood that they now had the right to what they previously thought was only available in a formal city.

Goh is certain that initiatives like the #myurbanstory project will go a long way towards fulfilling the terms of Human Cities initiative. Having grown up in Seremban, where "there were no gates in my neighbourhood and everything, be it the school, market, cinemas, sports courts, and banks were all within walking distance," Goh now lives in Petaling Jaya. He loves Petaling Jaya for its "diversity and blend of old and new, concrete and green."

Although he mentions green, this is not his favourite colour. In fact, it's blue with a tinge of marmalade. He explains: "I relate this to memories of my days in school when the national anthem was played. I noticed that on our national flag, the yellow crescent and star stood out from the strong blue background. Much like the sun rises against a blue sky, these two contrasting colours complement each other so well. Similarly, in life, we can be a pillar of strength and take charge, but we should also allow others to shine and stand out."