



A sustainable satellite development near Shanghai.

Q&A: Architect of a sustainable future

German architect **Albert Speer Jr** is a pioneer of sustainable building and city planning whose firm has designed ecological communities from Cologne in Germany to Shanghai in China. With the publication of a new book setting out his philosophy, he explains why we should take a more holistic approach to urban development.

What does sustainability mean to you?

That we don't use more resources today than we can rebuild for the next generation. We still, everywhere, need too much energy and too much of everything else — mobility, land use and so on. Western society thinks in sectors, and not enough in circles. We must be holistic and interdisciplinary.

Are you optimistic about the power of architects to shape sustainable cities?

Architects and planners control roughly 5% of all the decisions needed for governing a city; the rest are political or based on different economic interests. You need an interdisciplinary team, which is missing in many governmental bodies.

The world is taking too long to make decisions. It's taken nearly two decades since the conference in Rio de Janeiro to get sustainability into the minds of politicians and governments.

China is building lots of new cities — what is their approach?

From my experience, I feel that the Chinese culture is better organized to manage problems than others. We are designing new eco-cities in China, where we design the infrastructure and urban planning. The main aim is to protect the environment and reduce the amount of farmland converted into cities. Chinese thinking is direct and practical, and they make decisions fast. My impression is that not everything is going in the right direction, but they are learning rapidly and want to build things in another way than in the past.

Are there differences between working in developed and developing countries?

In general, the problems are the same, but the solutions are very different. In developing countries, there is a lot of urbanization because cities are growing. In Europe and

other countries, the population is declining, cities are not growing any more, so the goals have to be more concentrated on existing city parts, rather than on the development of cities and new cities.

Does every place need its own approach?

Concerns about the environment, climate, land consumption, transportation and civic participation are the same everywhere. Architecture will be similar around the world



Architect Albert Speer pioneered 'green' planning.

in the future because people need similar spaces. But every city needs to think more about its own character and opportunities, as well as its landscape, culture, history and future. Integrated urban development will become more important, because cities are all competing against each other.

Is this true of 'megacities' such as Tehran, Manila and Cairo?

If you look at these cities in more detail, they're not one place with 10 million or 50 million people, they're 15 or 20 cities with 800,000 to 2 million people each. It's unrealistic to stop their development: we have to see them as polycentric so that they can function better.

For example, I'm involved in a project that started 25 years ago to restructure a city

of 3 million people within Cairo. It's called the City of 6th October and it's just behind the pyramids. Many things have been built, but public transport is missing, there's no green belt, and urban planning has been very scattered. Our basic plan has been adopted this year, and we're now in the phase of coordinating the development.

Do cities require social engineering too?

Yes. Urban development and sustainable cities have a lot to do with the people living in them. In Cologne last year, we came up with a master plan for the inner city of 130,000 people, and civic participation was a large part of our work. At first the interest was minor, but after a year our sessions were always full. Participation can't be stimulated by one public appearance and a lecture, it has to continue over several years.

What have been the biggest changes during your career?

Holistic thinking is more accepted. When I began trying to plan ecological cities 30 years ago, the word 'ecological' hardly existed. Because of technology and globalization, it's now easier to compare your own situation with what is happening elsewhere.

What's your favourite city?

In Europe, it's Barcelona. All the things we are talking about — transport, green space and so on — are integrated into the urban tissue. In Asia it's Singapore, which is a very dense city, but also green and very liveable. ■ Interview by **John Whitfield**, a writer based in London.

Albert Speer & Partner: A Manifesto for Sustainable Cities

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