

## **ARCHITECTURE FOR A SUSTAINABLE AND HAPPY SOCIETY**

Keynote address by **Mr. Jigmi Y. Thinley**,

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At the Annual Congress of Danish Architects.

Theme: “The Architect As A Visionary Growth Driver”

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I am most honoured to be invited to participate in this very important event. It gives me much happiness to visit this country that stands tall for what it has achieved as a nation.

Worldwide happiness surveys regularly rank Denmark along with other Scandinavian countries as the happiest nation in the world. And this year, the 2<sup>nd</sup> UN sponsored World Happiness Report reaffirmed this remarkable and enviable status of Denmark on the basis of 6 key factors. You have a high GDP per capita, long life expectancy and suffer no corrupt leadership. Besides these, you enjoy a good sense of social support, full freedom to make life choices and a culture of generosity and voluntarism. Indeed, with your generous parental leave policies, free health care, and heavy income taxes, you have the least socio-economic inequality in the world. The 87.7% voter turnout in 2011 is a convincing indicator of the quality of your democratic governance system. Furthermore and most admirably, your altruistic commitment to promoting equality and cooperation across the world is evident in your ODA contribution of 0.84% of Gross National Income, which is well above the OECD target of 0.7%. Yours is a gentle, compassionate and prosperous society that I am convinced will continue to flourish.

I come from a country that believes in happiness as the purpose of development and pursues it as a national aspiration. Your achievement demonstrates that it is not only a worthy dream but that it can be realised.

Denmark inspires us and the world admires you.

I believe your own role as architects in making Denmark into the peaceful, prosperous and happy country that it is today has been and continues to be substantial. How the Danes live, eat, worship and sleep or learn, work and play are conditioned enormously by the design, materials and aesthetics of the homes, institutions, work places and recreational facilities you conceive. I have always believed that through your work, you play a decisive role in defining human life. Architecture is what makes and interprets human experience. In the form of the simplest of structures, the grandest of edifices, the cities that have risen or fallen, architecture is the silent but eloquent narrator of human saga.

Today, as each year, since 1879, you are gathered to deliberate on issues and challenges, the dreams you share and the concerns you have over the changing nature of your role and responsibility in a world that is transforming ever so quickly. You are here to define your vision for Denmark, fully mindful, that what you agree here could be the cause of policy and legislation here and in countries far beyond your own borders - that what happens in Denmark could very well become the yardstick elsewhere in the world. Ours is a globalized, interdependent world and, in it, no country or community truly acts alone or expects the consequences of its

actions to be wholly local. As you think and speak for Denmark, you do so for humanity. It is a great responsibility!

No nation can prosper or hold on to its wealth if its neighbours are steeped in poverty and desperation. And no nation can enjoy peace and security if, across its borders, there is strife, conflict and suffering. Architecture itself is not a narrow and isolated realm. It is cross sectorial, multi-dimensional and a powerful transformative force. It changes and is changed by those that it serves and the environment within which it functions. And we know that the conditions that influence Denmark are not only of its own making. Therein lies the wisdom of always being mindful of the larger world of which all our countries and our individual selves are an indivisible and interdependent part. This is, of course, what the Danes know best as a country that is, possibly, more aware, caring and conscious of the larger world than most others. You are appreciated for your conviction that as one single human society, we have no separate destiny.

What then is your vision for your homeland and for humanity? Where is it that you want to take this great nation from here as one that continues to lead by example? What are the challenges and pitfalls that you see and what are the solutions that you wish to innovate and apply? As “visionary growth drivers”, what will you sow, grow and harvest? What will your legacy be?

As a Bhutanese, I of course, believe your sacred role is to help ensure Denmark’s continued prevalence as the happiest country in the world. Just as your own happiness is ultimately dependent on many externalities, it is what the world needs to be inspired and

spurred on to enabling all human beings to pursue happiness. To this end, I believe it is your responsibility to commit what is possible, through your profession, to contribute to enhancing the resilience of your country's happiness enhancing conditions against the dangers and threats from within and without.

What are these threats and the challenges that could possibly reverse what you have accomplished and prevent others from following? What is threatening that must be prevented, foolish that must be reasoned and wrong that must be corrected? What are the negative forces that can be reversed and what are the inevitables that we must prepare for and, where possible, convert to opportunities? Looking at the brighter side, what are the good that have gone unacknowledged and need to be appreciated and promoted? How can you, as architects, act at the individual or collective levels to make a difference by influencing policy, law and attitudes? And within your own profession, what are the perceptions, ethics, standards and behaviours that need to change?

A quick survey of the world tells us that the odds are stacking up against mankind's chances of ever achieving universal happiness. On the contrary, our very survival appears clearly at risk.

Liveable and cultivable space is shrinking literally and metaphorically in the face of a world population that has doubled from 3 billion in 1959 to 6 billion in 1999, a matter of just four decades. In the ensuing 43 years, ie, by 2042, 9 billion people will be jockeying for a share of earth's 150 million sq km. that is being diminished by degradation, rising sea level and desertification. With the aid of technology, our extractive industry is devouring

ever so voraciously the remaining non-renewable natural resources even at the greatest of depths and at the highest of costs to be processed, consumed, wasted and to poison our air, water, land and sea with no thoughts for future generations. All this is supposedly in the larger interest of economic growth - to meet the demands of insatiable consumers.

The consequences are climate change, biodiversity loss, diminishing fish stocks, ocean acidification and loss of green cover and species. Food, water and energy crises, as also financial crisis, are becoming the norm. Man, animal and crops face new and greater survival challenges, not the least being the frequent and devastating disasters of which UN SG Ban Ki-moon declared, "*So far, this century, direct losses from disasters are in the range of \$2.5 trillion*". But the monetary value of the loss of life, irreparable psychological and emotional damage can never be assessed. Quite literally, our much-abused ailing planet's capacity to support life is ebbing away and as weaker species disappear one after another, the threat to all other species on earth cannot be clearer. It was this reality that prompted George Monbiot of the Guardian to ask, why are we "*sleep-walking to extinction?*"

The pain of all these could be easier to bear, though never right to accept, if only we have no cause to feel shame and guilt. It is the poor and the weak that are the direct and immediate victims in all these circumstances, caused too often by the greed and callousness of the rich and powerful. UN reports state that inequality is on the rise with some 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty, while 60% of the world's population suffer hunger and undernourishment. And as more than half of the world's

population now live in towns and cities, a billion people struggle to survive in urban slums without access to the most basic services.

Trust and wholesome relationships, the foundation of society, are losing ground; families are falling apart, communities are disintegrating, governments failing and conflicts escalating in number, scale and devastation. Even as youth unemployment and disillusionment have become a serious problem, the world is ageing and more of those who ought to be venerated risk marginalization. Social insecurity, loneliness and mental illness plague an increasing proportion of our society. According to Lord Richard Layard of LSE, a happiness scholar, about 10% of world's population suffers from clinical depression and crippling anxiety disorders. Regrettably, even in advanced countries, only a third of these receive available cost effective treatment – not because they are unaffordable but because we do not care enough. As such, it comes as no surprise that, worldwide, suicide ends the life of over a million people each year with an average of one suicide every 40 seconds, resulting in a suicide rate increase by 60% in the past 45 years.

What can we do? How much and how many of these sad and worrying trends are reversible or can be halted or controlled? We do know most nations cannot succeed on their own. Should not the world act in concert as indeed the Danes seem to believe? We need to tackle the fundamentals, the deeply engrained but flawed beliefs that have guided society thus far. We need to change our way of life!

When ruthless competition is the rule of the game, how can it be that equality will prevail? When wasteful consumption is the engine that turns the wheels of our market economy, how can the relentless extraction of our depleting resources be slowed with concern for generations yet to come. How can we maintain ecological balance and stability and ensure the vital functioning of our natural life support systems? When human population is growing at such rate, how do we promote equitable growth and distribution? When more are competing for the less that we have, how can we hope to prevent greater and more devastating conflicts? And in a world where nuclear capability is spreading, and where vulnerabilities and hazards of such installations of both peaceful and offensive kind are becoming starkly clear, how can the world be safe?

We need to relook at what constitutes true societal progress at the human level in the human context. We need to understand what constitutes real wealth and prosperity and what it is that truly promotes human well-being. We need to develop a consensus on the purpose of development beyond the senseless economic growth that will eventually come to a grinding halt. The signs are very clear with the warning bells tolling ever so often. We need to develop and agree on a new and rational development paradigm that will sustain what we have attained as a civilization and ensure continued human development and advancement in ways that are meaningful and promote human contentment and happiness. We need a shared vision. We need collective action.

It is indeed heart-warming that nations can and do come together as they have, under the aegis of the United Nations. There was the

earth summit 21 years ago, that gave birth to the concept and pursuit of sustainable development and an in-depth review of its progress a year ago. Likewise, in crossing the threshold to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world leaders acknowledged the unconscionable nature of the plight of the poor, the vulnerable and the dispossessed and took an unprecedented decision to act in concert. They adopted the 8 millenium development goals (MDGs) to be realized within a period of 15 years and became the focus of national policies and development assistance. Sadly, despite having made remarkable achievements, many poor and middle-income developing countries, will not have realized some of the core elements of the goals by 2015 when the period ends.

The good news is that the world is waking up from its *sleep-walking* and as the director of Earth Institute reports, “*the world is now in the midst of a major policy debate about the objectives of public policy. What should be the world’s Sustainable Development Goals for the period 2015-2030?*” An intergovernmental working group of the UN is tasked to propose a new set of universal goals. And you the architects of Denmark are obviously engaged in this debate. Certainly, directly or otherwise, architecture must offer its own share of solutions while enriching the substance of this global discourse in general.

Bhutan, on her part, began in 1998, to share with the world her own long experience in pursuing a holistic, inclusive and sustainable development path to promote conditions that enable citizens’ choice and realization of happiness. Measured through a set of indicators, these conditions are aimed at raising the physical and mental wellbeing of citizens, which we believe is the purpose

of development and therefore, the primary responsibility of state. This gave rise to a plethora of books and articles on happiness by fringe and mainstream academics and researchers leading, finally, to its study and promotion as a global vision.

In the introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the World Happiness Report, the special advisor to the Secretary general, Dr. Jeffery Sachs writes; *“In July 2011, the UN General Assembly passed a historic resolution. It invited member countries to measure the happiness of their people and to use this to help guide their public policies. This was followed in April 2012 by the first UN high-level meeting on happiness and well-being, chaired by the Prime Minister of Bhutan. At the same time, the first World Happiness Report was published, followed some months later by the OECD Guidelines setting an international standard for the measurement of well-being”*.

Dr. Sachs insists that, not to be used lightly, *“Happiness is an aspiration of every human being, and can .... be a measure of social progress”*. The Secretary General, in his 2013 report entitled, *“Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development”* advises that, *“ the new goal should embrace the emphasis on human wellbeing and include the use of metrics that go beyond standard income measures, such as surveys of subjective wellbeing and happiness, as introduced by many countries and the OECD”*. The countries he lists are France, Italy, Japan, Qatar, the UK and Bhutan. There are many others as well. He also lists the European Union, the OECD and the UN system and the regular supporting surveys conducted by major international and regional surveys such as the Gallup Poll. These are indeed, encouraging signs.

Now, how does one measure happiness, one might ask? To begin with, a common understanding of the word happiness is critical. We believe it is a sustained subjective condition that arises when the needs of both the body and mind are attended to within a secure, supportive and peaceful environment. Pursuit of happiness is an equitable, holistic and sustainable endeavour unlike conventional GDP guided development models that promote limitless growth in a finite world. Happiness is now being increasingly accepted as comprising two aspects: the affective (the emotional) and the evaluative (life satisfaction). Together, they provide a subjective measure of an individual's or nation's wellbeing at a particular time.

Bhutan has developed an index founded on what we normally refer to as the four pillars of GNH. These are:

1. Equitable and sustainable socio economic development,
2. Environmental Conservation,
3. Cultural preservation and development and
4. Good governance.

These are elaborated into nine happiness domains, they are measured through a comprehensive index. No policy or plan is approved by the government unless they are GNH positive as is determined through a mandatory GNH screening process. The nine domains are:

1. physical wellbeing,
2. educational attainment,

3. income security and distribution,
4. environmental resilience,
5. cultural diversity,
6. community vitality,
7. balanced time use,
8. emotional and psychological wellbeing,
9. good governance.

I should point out that the Bhutanese development model does not reject GDP altogether. Rather, it is put to the limited use of measuring the sum of goods and services produced and exchanged in the market at a particular time as was intended by Simon Kuznets, its author, as a part of the strategy for recovery from the Great Depression.

Now, going back to the role and responsibility of architects beyond the immediacy of satisfying clients, I had the special pleasure of speaking at the “World forum of architects” in Tokyo in 2011. There, I raised several questions that some thought were quite provocative. I am hopeful that some members of the association may have found the time to read and reflect upon them. I urge you to continue to contribute to the on-going global debate toward defining societal goals beyond 2015. I urge you to examine each of the challenges that I have listed, and more, so that you might determine how you as architects can help find solutions that will make our world safer, equitable, sustainable and happier.

The world in which the architects function has changed drastically. It is no longer a world of plenty; of boundless natural resources and capacity. But as we aspire for greater wellbeing, economic

growth and social development must continue. Conservation, sustainability and equality are the slogans of the day and growth of any kind must take place within such conditionalities. The time has come for the architect, like the economist, the teacher, the banker or the farmer to think beyond her traditional role and see the larger picture and responsibility that she must bear as a global citizen. It is, after all, the global society, global economy and a single environment that now condition our individual life. In our interdependent world of shrinking space and time, we have no choice but to think globally and act locally.

Beyond designing and causing structures to rise, the architects must realize their deeper role in shaping and influencing human relationships and interaction, the thread from which is woven the fabric of society - the vitality of families, communities and now, most importantly, international understanding and cooperation. You must play your role in defining the post 2015 societal goals on the basis of a new understanding of what constitutes true wealth and prosperity in terms of human needs and aspirations. The time has come for us to listen to our innermost yearnings. Once again, we must allow our intelligence to prevail and not remain the mindless consumerists that serve the goddess of the market at the cost of our own wellbeing and that of the planet. I believe we no longer have the luxury of time or choice.

I wish this conference great success. May each of you return home with satisfaction and happiness knowing that you will and are making a difference for a sustainable, inclusive and happier world.

TASHI DELEK, THANK YOU.

