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MIDDLE EAST

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Engaging with the edge

LWK+Partners' Kerem Cengiz and Jason Ho address minimising the impact of waterfront developments while maximising the user experience

"It is a planning adage that cities with water tend to be more interesting," said Jason Ho, director of planning and urban design at Hong Kong-based practice LWK+Partners. "Waterfronts are natural assets that should belong to everyone. They are public realm and should be accessible for the enjoyment of all, except when they are used for very specific and strategic uses that require direct waterfront access, like ports and naval installations."

Ho's comments were part of a larger conversation that addressed waterfront developments and the challenges they present to architects. According to Ho and Kerem Cengiz, LWK+Partners' MENA managing director, such projects require a well-informed approach that considers a multitude of factors. Chief among them are the impact of waterfront developments on the natural surroundings, as well as enhancing integration and creating harmonious and activated environments for better interface and end-user experience.

"As rapid urbanisation and population increase in and around coastal and riverside cities, the environmental impact on the river, coast and the ocean ecosystems will increase as well," said Ho.

"As planners, we need to be aware that natural environments have their own carrying capacities," he added. "If this is left unchecked and over-population occurs, then the harm done to the natural ecosystems could be difficult to reverse.

At the same time, we have the opportunity to transform these waterfront environments into places that are interesting, unique, engaging and special not only for tourists, but also for the people who live, work and play there."

IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

According to Ho, the most common challenge presented by waterfront projects to architects and planners is the impact of development on the natural environment. In facing this dilemma, technical assessments are required to determine the existing conditions and provide recommended solutions to mitigate potentially negative effects of riverbank or coastline adjustments on land and water.

Planners and architects, said Ho, need to integrate these recommendations into their overall concept to ensure that a balanced approach to development is applied.

"The consequences of global warming and rising sea levels are becoming more apparent," he said. "We are witnessing a higher occurrence of tsunamis and hurricanes that have devastated large coastal areas, towns and cities. Governments are starting to realise the mega problems caused by not preparing for such natural disasters, as most people, assets and wealth are concentrated around waterfront cities."

Ho then noted that further research and engineering solutions need to be considered to protect waterfront



Danzishi Old Street



Jason Ho

communities against such disastrous environmental risks.

"With the advanced technology that we have today, we should be able to address and tackle these risks on lives and property," he said.

One opportunity to alleviate the impact of waterfront construction on the natural environment is reclaiming coastal land that no longer serves its original purpose. The sustainable reuse of existing buildings, while still bearing impact on surrounding land, reduces the negative effects of construction.

One example is a regeneration project in China by LWK+Partners. While originally a manufacturing zone where coal and steel would be imported, the waterfront area had opened up to potential redevelopment as manufacturing and business zones started relocating outside of the city.

"As time passed, we engaged with local authorities and proposed this huge opportunity to repopulate or reactivate this amazing artery," said Cengiz. "Rather than demolishing these mid-20th century industrial buildings, we proposed reusing them, which allowed for adaptive reuse, permeability, new communities to thrive and an activated, vibrant waterfront connected to the rest of the city."

INTEGRATION

Across the GCC, waterfront developments are largely manufactured rather than organically developed over time. This can provide a number of advantages, such as creating solu-

tion-based designs that pre-emptively tackle planning and urban development issues, including isolated building and not making the most of the waterfront in terms of connectivity, mobility, amenity and views.

While waterfront developments come in different types and sizes, from sea fronts to riversides, integrating such projects into the surrounding urban realm is part and parcel to delivering successful projects that not only meet commercial demands, but also those of the relevant community.

According to Cengiz, one of LWK+Partners' projects in Chongqing, China successfully balanced this seeming dichotomy. Called Danzishi Old Street, the multi-award winning project is a residential community underpinned by large retail components, community-based street retail and food and beverage offerings, which integrated an existing part of the community.

"We believe that one of the biggest challenges in the GCC is that our developments tend to be very community centric," Cengiz said. "And so, the response of the developer or the client is to meet the needs of that specific development, rather than make it a more permeable offer that integrates all the various amenities, including the water."

"One of the ways we dealt with it in Danzishi Old Street is that in front of the residential towers, which were obviously private, was a broader retail and community context that then fed out into a more organic, mixed-use environment. We worked with a professor from Beijing University who is an ex-



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Kerem Cengiz



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Waterside Lantau

pert in the history and development of old hill-side villages, and how that works with contemporary urban culture, orientation and building. So, while we had that strong backbone of commerciality, there was also a deeply ingrained cultural approach that gave an interesting duality between modern and historic.”

Cengiz added that the incorporation of such complementing factors attract visitors because it creates a cultural quarter through the arrangement of buildings, spaces and uses.

In contexts when a surrounding environment does not yet exist, Cengiz noted that the challenge for waterfronts then becomes ensuring they don't become independent and isolated islands.

“In these scenarios it is important to respond to the needs of that development while also planning it in such a way that the engagement with the waterfront gives you different offers,” he said. “That edge between urban developments and the natural environment is an opportunity to create a nuanced setting. It is essential to create varied environments through different types of plazas, pocket parks, play areas for children, public and more private spaces. Create other amenities and offers around it, too, so people can come and enjoy that development for the day as a visitor, not only as a resident. And in that, you allow that permeability, which mitigates, in time, what might happen adjacent to it.”

While it's difficult to predict how the surrounding urban environment will develop in time, Cengiz insists that you can still address those edges in a way so as not to “turn your back”.

“Through sensitive predictive planning and integration,”

he said, “you can offer an edge that would add value to not only the development, but also the adjoining properties and broader community.”

CREATING HARMONIOUS ENVIRONMENTS

LWK+Partners is working on a number of waterfront developments across the Middle East and North Africa. While one in the GCC is a hospitality initiative that has special cultural criteria, such as separated areas for men and women, another in Egypt requires the resolution of existing issues. According to Cengiz, LWK+Partners' role on the project in Egypt was very much peer review – the firm was brought in to address issues of inconsistency as well as to establish a “coastal look and feel appropriate to the location and adjacencies”.

“The question was how to work with an existing set of criteria and commerciality, which in some cases have already been sold and in construction, to create an environment that feels harmonious,” Cengiz said. “And that largely comes down to materiality, looking at the masses and voids, hierarchies and use of colour.

“Sometimes, being by the coast can be very playful, light-hearted and enjoyable. So how do we enhance that? Through integrating softer edges and touches, creating a lived-in feel. There's no hard or fast rule – it's about finding the sense of being by the sea and communicating it.”

Written by Rima Alsammarae

Images courtesy of LWK+Partners