

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, royal highnesses, and excellencies. I am deeply honored to be here and I thank the Jeddah Economic Forum for inviting me.

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My subject is "*Why & How to civilize the mega-project.*"

But I come not to decry the urban real estate mega-project but to improve it. I am here to offer ideas on how to develop a mega-project which might not only give drama to the skyline but which also will enliven the streets and sidewalk next to it. . But let me offer a warning. I am not an expert on the Middle East. In fact I have never visited Saudi Arabia before nor anywhere else in the region. I do believe that what I have observed about cities of the USA, Canada and other western countries has applicability to human settlement all over the globe. And I believe that my subject "Why & How to civilize the mega-project?" is of particular importance to Saudi Arabia and the region because of the enormous development plans on which you are embarking.

Here's another proviso. With some significant exceptions I usually don't get excited about mega-projects. I admire the competence which produces them. And of course like everyone I am impressed with mega-projects. The spectacular and grand is imposing but typically, neither one is heartwarming. For frame of reference, I am impressed by the great spaces of Washington DC and admittedly even moved by some of them, such as the Lincoln Memorial, But I prefer the smaller-scale neighborhood such as Georgetown where there is much to look at close-up and the street-scape encourages one to walk. Or rather, let me qualify that. It's not the height of the building which is the issue for me but the diversity of the street-scape at its sidewalk level. I like fine-scale streetscapes where there is something interesting to see as I walk along. I put it that way because I believe firmly that even very large buildings can be "humanized" if we pay attention to the pedestrian environment around them.

For me, "comfortable city" means "walkable city" -- the pedestrian-oriented city where the car is not the only means of transportation. To speak of "civilizing the mega-project" then means to make it into a place where people want to walk, where they can bump into old friends and make new acquaintances. A contributor to the social city. Definition. First, to make sure we are talking about the same thing let me set forth my understanding of the term mega-project. It's a term usually attached to infrastructure -- a dam or series of dams (Three Gorges, TVA), a tunnel (the Chunnel) a highway system such as the US Interstates and so on But there is also the "real estate mega-project." Its definition is somewhat fluid and will vary with the context. In a district of small houses, an apartment building of ten stories would well be a "mega-project."

But generally, a real estate mega-project would have most or all of these characteristics:

1. significant capital -- at least a billion dollars
2. usually one owner
3. on one site or in a one confined area
4. done to create income-producing property.

So what's the problem with the mega-project? Why would I even suggest that it needs civilizing? (And I am using "civilizing" in the sense of making it more courteous and well-mannered.) I suggest it needs civilizing because in the USA I have only seen a few very large construction projects which have been able to be both huge and comfortable, able to create both a stirring skyline and also a charming street-front.

The problem is summed-up by the component terms: "mega" and "project."

"Mega" is very large, huge, gargantuan. Mega suggests beyond human scale or even comprehension.

"Project" is an abstract term which can be used to describe almost any human endeavor: the writing of software or a novel, a scientific experiment, the construction of an airplane. Using such an abstraction divorces the enterprise from the vividness and concreteness of the city.

So the first problem with the "mega-project" is its name which suggests that its most important characteristic is spectacular, spell-binding awesome. Comfort and comfortable don't come to mind. So the corporate culture of the organization can all too-easily become oriented to scale and grandeur rather than human-scale where, for example, it is easy to walk about.

Its huge size brings complexity and many moving parts. In order to keep such a huge project on time and budget there is a natural and understandable drive to simplify it because of the enormous logistical difficulty of keeping track of so many conditions, finishes and materials etc. In that simplification details get lost -- the very details and idiosyncrasies which make a city interesting. So — and of course I am generalizing — most mega projects are out of human scale. They don't create the sense of place which accrues to a location when it evolves slowly, bit by bit. That's the problem. No soul.

Here's a little personal Irony. I am here speaking to you this afternoon because I wrote a book titled *"City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village."* It's a book about the

many small details and the few simple rules which make cities comfortable. The book emphasizes human-scale. It's a view of the city from close-up. So the prospect of speaking on mega projects struck me at first as ironic and amusing (in a nice way) because my work is about the opposite end of the physical scale — the detail level. And then it struck me as quite reasonable that I should address the issue of mega-projects precisely because I believe that the problem with the mega project is that it very often lacks the simple human-scale details that would make it comfortable and even, dare I say, cozy.

So the basic question: Can hundreds of millions of dollars, even billions, be deployed into physical form in a mega project without it being a “mega project” in the bad sense of the term? I believe the answer is “Yes.”

Some suggestions. So what exactly do you do? What does the planning board tell the property owner? What does the owner tell the architect? What does the chief architect tell the associates? And so on? Obviously a lot of the answer depends on what one likes and what one dislikes. I start from the position that the great city or neighborhood is friendly and favorable to the pedestrian, the kind of city where there is always something interesting to see on the next block and it generally feels safe to keep wandering.

So my short answer: pay attention to the details. For example, with reference to skyscrapers — and that can mean anything over 4 stories depending on the context — particular pay attentions to what is happening where the building meets the sidewalk. And here's what to look for: If the building at sidewalk level is mostly blank walls, or if it is setback from the sidewalk by extensive lawns or even beautiful gardens,

then it will fail in creating a pedestrian environment. The building must have windows and doors at sidewalk level and something going on behind them. The building must be designed to allow people to see into it and people to see out of it.

The short answer is to make the manner in which the building meets the sidewalk a priority on par (or higher, really) with how the building looks from two miles away. Paying attention to the distant view --which is almost the only thing one ever sees of a proposed big building --means you can't see the pedestrian environment at the ground, which is the most important place about a building.

There are things you can do at the first level of “management” or “strategy,” thinking about and staffing-up to do an urban real estate mega project.

Probably the first thing to do is simply stop thinking and talking about the real estate mega project as a mega-project. Think of it as extending or filling-in a piece of a city and

creating a new neighborhood. Your project is not supposed to be a stand-alone piece of art, a series of mammoth sculptures but part of a city. Every element of the development team must internalize the idea that the endeavor is not only a real estate mega-project” (for of course it is still that) but that it is also or even primarily about creating neighborhood and community.

Focus on the city — and I am speaking here of the commercial city — as a place for encouraging human interaction. In the words of Christopher Alexander, cities are a “mechanism for sustaining human contact.” The public spaces of the city should be designed to encourage the casual and serendipitous encounter which is at the heart of why we like cities. Furthering the commercial city as a place to communicate and meet should be one of the project’s core development goals. It’s also good business. Any business person will be able to tell a story of the chance encounter which lead to a successful deal. Conventions and meeting such as this one are opportunities we create with great intention so that we can accidentally bump-into others. So too the commercial city should be built so that it has active street-life so as to explicitly encourage the accidental meeting.

Look around cities you think are successful and copy what works. Don’t innovate, copy! Figure out the elements of the city that you like copy them. Innovation per se is not important. In fact, whenever I hear the term “innovative design” used in reference to an urban building I get nervous as the designer is probably going to break some time-tested rule of urban design and will end up with a building which is anything but urban. Urban buildings have a time-tested form. Learn what it is and copy it. There is an old expression that “brilliance innovates and genius borrows.” The superior insight of the genius allows it to see beyond flashy novelty.

Get out of the mental trap of seeing it as one big project. Break down the scale of the mega-project by thinking of it as a series of buildings. It then becomes logical to hire different architects for different buildings. Hiring one designer drives the project to sameness, no matter how talented he or she may be. In fact on a very large project which might involve dozens of structures let the site designer lay out the streets and sidewalks and building plots and create what amounts to a private zoning code of rules. Then have other architects design the buildings. You might even go farther and sell off sites to several different developers, taking the profit (and accruing the risk) on the land development only.

Then each developer will hire its own design team and bring a host of perspectives and intelligences to the site. The goal is to create diversity, not uniformity.

From the public interest perspective I urge “more capitalism.” Resist big glamor projects. Very often the mega-project is driven more by reasons of state and politics than of economic necessity. It may be driven by the desire to inspire awe and respect in the viewer but not necessarily love or comfort. In fact the leading book on mega-projects — *Mega-Projects and Risk* — offers a short list of prescriptions and I think that the leading one is “more capitalism” i.e. make the mega-project stand on its own legs and try to strip away societal subsidy. The real estate mega-project would often be much better if it really had to respond to market conditions and didn’t have the insulation from the market of government supports.

Be an active client. Don’t leave it all to the architect. The building should reflect far more than the self-expression of a particular designer. For example, whether the building should orient itself to the street is in the absence of public policy a business decision — meaning “business” very broadly. It’s a not technical much less “artistic” ones. Don’t succumb to the mystique of the “starchitect,” In fact, don’t hire starchitects unless they promise to follow the rules of good urbanism, which starts with making sure the building faces the street in a manner which encourages street life.

However, there’s another important point. Even flashy and spectacular architectural eye-candy can contribute to a pedestrian street-scape if the design addresses the street. There is no inherent contradiction. So it’s possible to have designs by such starchitects as Rem Koolhaas and Frank Gehry which are also good urban buildings — the client simply has to lay down the priorities and make sure that architect knows that a streetfront which encourages walking is also very important. Understand the design. Sounds obvious. Probably is. Without enormous effort it’s very hard for anyone except the designer of a building — any building — to really understand what is going on with it while it is still a proposal on paper. And the mega-project or mega-building is even more difficult because it is so big that its very size makes it hard to grasp. Of course that’s unfortunate because it is precisely before the building breaks ground that it is most amenable to change.

So here’s a handy technique for those of you who have to review a project as either owner, public official or interested neighbor: *walk around the building in your mind.* Rather than asking the project architect an abstract question such as “Is this building pedestrian-friendly?” ask him to sit down over the plans and mentally walk with you along the building’s perimeter. Have him stop every twenty or thirty feet and tell you what you would see? In real life? You’ll quickly get a detailed understanding of how the building meets the ground and you’ll be able to assess for yourself whether it provides

an experience which is pleasant for the walker. If the architect's refrain is "blank wall." "blank wall" and "parking garage entrance," then you may indeed have a problem.

Last but not least, break down the scale of the mega-project by using the time-honored city structure of streets, sidewalks, blocks and lots. They provide a template within which many decisions are already made. By no means should such a template be seen as "stifling creativity." Consider the sonnet, the cantata and other art forms which have a very tight and defined structure; artists of skill are able to work within these tight forms to create works of genius. Traditional urban forms provides incredible flexibility in design, construction and financing. It also makes a lot of the things I suggest above pretty easy. For example, conceiving of the mega-project as a series of buildings designed by different architects becomes obvious when the starting point is the template of separate lots and blocks.

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Now we get to the level of tactical detail: what do people experience when they are in your project as users? The variety of ways to be a good host — and that's the role the city official and real estate developer take on when they understand their job includes making the city a more comfortable place to be -- is vast and limited only by human imagination. Nevertheless there are many tried-and-true methods. For example:

Acknowledge that people like to walk together and create the opportunity for what I call the social stroll or as it is called in Italy and Spain the *passagiaeta* or *paseo*. The after-dinner perambulation is one of the joys of summer in the USA. But the social stroll needs more than merely a sidewalk. It needs a route which is continuous, forming a loop so that one doesn't have to think too much about the route relatively level & easy so that older people and families with baby-strollers have no trouble with it .not very long --that's so people can pass each other more than once to greet, re-greet and introduce people to each other wide enough for two small groups to pass each other without either one having to move aside.

Make ground-level retail spaces small to allow individually-owned shops i.e. design large bays so that they can be divided into small bays, each one with its own street-access. Of course large national and international retailers are essential and have their role. But it is the unique, personal even idiosyncratic shop which gives a neighborhood and city its special flavor. Such shops can be as small as 2-300 square feet and can fill-in odd and unusual leftover spaces.

In fact one of my favorite ways to activate the streetfront of a parking structure is to place a row of shops — at most 25' deep — along it. This narrow band of shops eliminates a very few parking spaces but makes the streetfront immeasurably more interesting.

A city comfort can be and often is something as simple as multi-lingual signs and I know my country is very weak in them.

Place benches in a quiet “eddy” on a busy sidewalk where one can sit down and rest. In fact why not place playgrounds for small children in or directly adjacent to shopping districts? Both children and parents get tired when shopping so give them a place to rest, especially the parents! This detail is probably most suitable for neighborhood shopping districts. But it's a good idea in a host of other places; I've seen one in a ferry terminal for instance and I can't see why it wouldn't be a fine idea in an airport.

In a park where one expects a great deal of sitting, why not use non-fixed, that is, movable chairs so that people can adjust for different preferences in privacy or the amount of sun or to create new social groupings.

Water fountains are traditional sign of hospitality; but I imagine I hardly need to mention that here.

Adjust traffic lights to give pedestrians — especially older ones — enough time to cross the street; and for that matter don't make them wait so long for the light to turn to “walk.” *Giving people time* is a sign of respect.

And speaking of rude young drivers, why not include a section in high school driver education on being polite to pedestrians and cyclists?

In a cold climate it might be nice to have gas-fired fireplaces to encourage people to gather outside. I've seen such an amenity in a shopping arcade in New Zealand and it was a delight.

Here's something at a vastly larger scale. Freeways can be very disruptive to neighborhoods and acts as barriers. In Columbus, Ohio. there's a freeway overpass that is much more.. It's quite a bit wider than a typical overpass, wide-enough to be lined with shops which hide the interstate below. so that as you are crossing it you are not even aware that you are crossing a freeway. It starts to join together two neighborhoods which had at one time been one neighborhood.

To add safety in parking garages — we've all seen the movies! — make the stairwells visible with windows.

You can put baby-changing tables in restrooms. Gentlemen's as well as ladies.

Slow-down traffic. Now that mean seem an odd thing to suggest in a big city with traffic jams. But "traffic-calming" techniques provide many many ways for traffic engineers to design streets for drivers and for walkers.

Use lots of awnings. We like them in Seattle to protect us from the rain but they are also useful to provide shade from the sun.

The list goes on and on and on and you can probably add to it by looking around your own world for the little details which make city life more comfortable and often, walkable.

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Now what does the future hold? Much to my own personal dismay, I surmise — and it is just a surmise — that real estate mega-projects are inevitable.

Why? The availability of capital and plain old politics.

1. Vast pools of capital exist and can be deployed efficiently with the aid of global communications. The very existence of the capital offers a dare to inventive entrepreneurs and bankers. The money is assembled in huge pools; why not deploy it in huge pools? And it makes sense for lenders to draw on the economics of scale in lending i.e. it takes little more effort to make a loan for \$100 million than it does for \$1 million.

There is little demand by individual consumers for gargantuan projects per se and if there was, real estate mega-projects wouldn't need the hand-outs and subsidies they seek from society at large through such things as property-tax "holidays," tax-increment financing and eminent domain.

2. Mega-Projects are useful for politicians. Some large projects actually respond to genuine social needs such as shortage of affordable housing. Some, like sports arenas, are supposed to have great popular appeal. But in any case getting things done makes the politician look good and provides jobs, jobs and more jobs to secure his political base.

So while I may have misgivings about the benefits of such projects, I am not arguing against them as it would be useless to do so. They will be financed and built. So making sure such projects have long-term value is of genuine importance.

Closing. The prospect of visiting a place makes one more interested in it. So for the last few weeks I have been paying even more attention to this region and its future than

I normally would. And I have been staggered by what I have learned. And my astonishment raised a question on which it might be wise to close.

Just a few weeks ago I saw a story on a major American TV show about the huge, spectacular mega-developments in Dubai. Then I ran across news stories about your own Saudi Arabian King Abdullah Economic City and Kuwait's Silk City and I was even more amazed. It's hard to describe the shock of seeing the scale and ambition of these two built-from-scratch city-building projects. The two cities are, respectively, planned to be home to 2 million and 750,000 people. Those are significant cities. They make the mega-projects with which I am familiar in North America look tiny.

But what will these new cities be like? No doubt they will be new and shiny and perhaps with very large buildings. But will they be real "places" and not just "locations?" Will they be "communities" or simply "projects?" Will the children who grow up in them and go away to college desire to return? I have no idea, of course. I haven't seen the plans so I have no basis on which to judge. But the great cities of the world have grown up over many hundreds or even thousands of years. And it seems to me that the task of engaging such mammoth projects, simply by their enormous scale and the complexity which goes along with scale, will make it a challenge to create comfortable cities. Obviously I am not saying that it cannot be done. In fact I think it can be done and must be done and done by paying attention to the simple comforts which reduce the mega-project's perceived scale.

But it will require conscious intention by the leadership which will have to permeate the development organization. It's the small things which make the difference between coordinates on a map and a cherished, comfortable and comforting place and they can easily be overlooked in the enormous task of simply pouring concrete. One wants people to be impressed but also feel invited.

In my wandering around the web to learn something of our host city I ran across an excellent article titled *Discovering Old Jeddah* which offered an insight into the question "How do we know when we are making progress?"

I think that the answer is to trust your own senses and where they lead, as this striking passage from *Discovering Old Jeddah* did:

My first encounter with Balad is something I will never forget. It was during a vacation in 1995 when I arrived in Jeddah along with my husband John and two French friends, after a very long and indirect drive from Riyadh.

We arrived late in the afternoon and were cruising along the streets and boulevards, fascinated by a place which was new to us. Then, just by chance, we came across a section of the city which was completely different from what we had just seen, and we stopped, dumbfounded. We parked the car and started walking around this curious place...

“We parked the car and started walking around.”

What a simple and vivid standard! And so appropriate for an auto-oriented society.

A place which is interesting-enough to grab your attention and get you out of the car to walk around. When you can mega-projects which meet that test, you have succeeded. I think that it is a pretty good and homey criterion: you have succeeded in creating comfortable mega-projects when people want to get out of their car and walk around in them, for the sheer pleasure of the stroll and not just to buy.

I gather you have at least one such place here in Jeddah in al-Balad. I hope you will preserve such historic “old towns” and I wish you luck in creating many more cities *where you want to get out of your car and walk around.*