



HWA CHONG INSTITUTION
JC2 Preliminary Exam
Higher 1

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General Paper

8807/02

Paper 2

26 August 2015

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1 hour 30 minutes

INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

RECLAIMING OUR CITIES

- 1 Today, the majority of mankind lives in soul-crushing cities plagued by belching traffic, bloated roads, emaciated sidewalks, and shrivelled trees. In a hostile environment where the automobile is the alpha predator, the pedestrian has become an extremely fragile, virtually extinct species. Under the right conditions, this creature thrives and multiplies, but creating those conditions requires urgent attention to a broad range of challenging criteria before our urban environments degenerate into post-apocalyptic nightmares. Success in the transformation of our cities will depend upon the adoption of a holistic approach that integrates efforts to make them engaging, enriching, and liveable. 5
- 2 Civic spaces are key elements of individual and social well-being, the places of a community's collective life, expressions of their cultural richness and a foundation of their identity. When they work well, they serve as stages for our public lives: they can be the settings where celebrations are held, where social and economic exchanges take place, and where friends run into each other. Civic spaces are also bridge-building places which draw a diverse population that can include the elderly, teenagers and children, as well as an ethnic and cultural mix. A successful civic space acts as a common ground which encourages people to integrate, get involved and take pride in the area. While this ambitious mixture of attributes is a complex puzzle to piece together, it is increasingly sought after by civic leaders who are desperately trying to reknit the unravelling fabric of urban life. 15
- 3 While only a century ago public spaces almost everywhere were crowded with people, many are nearly empty now. Walking through certain communities can be an alienating, not to mention extremely unnerving, experience, as if the whole place had been evacuated for an emergency that no one told you about. "Cultures and climates differ all over the world," notes Jan Gehl, "but people are the same. They will gather in public if you give them a good place and reason to do it." Gehl, an international consultant and professor of urban design, has charted the progress of Copenhagen's central pedestrian district since it opened in 1962. At that time, the pavements were deserted and cars infested the streets. The pedestrian zone was conceived as a way to revitalise a moribund city centre. It has been expanded incrementally each year ever since, with parking spaces gradually removed, and biking and public transport facilities improved. Sidewalk cafes, once thought to be exclusive to the Mediterranean, have become the life blood of Copenhagen's social life – places of encounter, conversation and debate. The pedestrian district is now the pulsing heart of a reinvigorated city. 25
- 4 Too many cities suffer from streets dedicated to moving multitudes of cars quickly – a goal that effectively eliminates foot traffic and precludes the social intercourse vital for healthy street life. Rich rewards, Jeff Speck, author of *Walkable City* argues, await cities that move to tame traffic and put pedestrians first by creating attractive streetscapes with congenial environments: in other words, truly walkable places. More than a utopian notion, the walkable city is an eminently feasible solution to a number of pressing problems that affect our overall health as a society. Much more than a faddish amenity, walkability is an ecological imperative, and to an increasing extent, as fuel costs spiral, a financial one as well. Revitalising streets for walking, gathering and shopping also makes broader economic sense. In New York, greenmarkets are not only helping to bring conviviality to neighbourhoods but also providing opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurship. In Arkansas, Little Rock's River Market has helped bring the city's downtown to life, spurring the development of cultural amenities such as museums and galleries as well as a host of recreational facilities such as a skateboarding park and a sports arena. 35 40
- 5 Truly walkable streets need to be lined with aesthetically appealing buildings, not the cold monolithic monstrosities with grim facades that most modern cities erect to trumpet their global status. This is where the conscientious conservation of heritage buildings plays a crucial role in injecting architectural charm, testifying to a city's unique historical personality and celebrating its rich cultural identity. But meaningful conservation is not merely about preserving the façade of a building, much less converting vital places into mouldy museums. Whilst they have tremendous value as historical icons, heritage buildings must also remain organically connected to city life. This requires not only careful resurrection but also judicious repurposing to maintain them as living entities that breathe character, proclaiming the identity of vibrant communities where people still live and work. Such edifices not only strengthen a sense of belonging by forging emotional bonds to places but also sustain a sense of collective memory even as we move into an uncertain future. They anchor people securely amidst the swirling currents of globalisation which threaten to cast them adrift. 45 50

- 6 For cities to thrive, their inhabitants need to encounter art, to enjoy performances and to participate in a wide range of cultural activities. From *Shakespeare in the Park* to string quartets at a downtown plaza, good places foster and enhance a city's cultural dynamic. In America, 'Creative Placemaking' is a new concept pioneered by a number of foundations such as ArtPlace America and the National Endowment for the Arts which involves reimagining and reinventing public spaces using arts and culture as the lynchpin in building vibrant urban communities. In San Jose, a grant was awarded to a project to turn an abandoned park into an 'urban living room for the arts'. Whether on a local, state or national level, Creative Placemaking is not only a potent strategy for civic renewal, but also a window into something deeper. Starting with the first cave paintings 40,000 years ago, we have been using art to transform places that feel dark and menacing into places that are inviting and vibrant. From primitive hand prints of blue and red pigment on gloomy cavern walls to *Project Storefront* in Connecticut which transforms abandoned and derelict New Haven storefronts into artists' studios, the creative process that informs placemaking is an unbroken chain. What defines us, and the places where we live and work, is our art.
- 7 Finally, our dismally grey cities desperately need to go green. Genuinely green cities are a far cry from those of today where token trees camouflage congested roads or manicured shrubs in concrete troughs vainly attempt to prettify shopping malls. The Urban Greenspaces Institute of Vancouver wants to create 'liveable and loveable' cities where the built and natural environments are interwoven, not set apart. Collaborating with government agencies, businesses, architects and landscape architects to achieve its mission, it is committed to the restoration of a vibrant green infrastructure in our cities comprising interconnected systems of healthy ponds, parks and recreational nature trails. Its motto, 'In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild', reflects its philosophy that a prerequisite of any well-designed city should be that it is 'nature-rich' for the ecological health, civic vitality and overall quality of community life.
- 8 Cities today are social, cultural, aesthetic and environmental wastelands. Transforming such inhospitable and arid landscapes requires equal parts sensitivity and rigour. Sensitivity, because planners need to realise that every city is not only a unique cultural and historical product, but also an evolving organism. Rigour, because drastic measures need to be applied and scrupulous attention paid to enable their present revival and ensure their eventual blossoming.
- 9 But before the resuscitation of the city can commence, we need to first rid ourselves of the soulless planners whose cookie cutter designs suffocate them, banish the faceless corporations whose colossal towers smother them, and outlaw the gas-guzzling brutes that choke them. We need to return the city to its rightful owners – the people. As American author and urbanist Jane Jacobs so astutely cautioned several decades ago: "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."

Adapted from an article by Alissa Walker

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