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Interview With Mr Flemming Borreskov

Mr Flemming Borreskov is the President of the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP), and former CEO of Realdania, a strategic philanthropic foundation, based in Denmark. He is also a current member of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Council. In this exclusive interview, Mr Borreskov shares with us his views on sustainable cities.

Building high-quality sustainable cities is very complex and difficult to achieve. How do you see cities in emerging economies working towards building sustainable cities?

Mr Flemming Borreskov (FB): Designing and building sustainable cities make economic sense. Both in developed and emerging economies the cities hold the key to growth. If you want sustainable growth, sustainable cities are needed. Sustainability is not all about expensive investments, a lot can be achieved by having a green agenda and thought-through planning. It's crucial for cities to understand sustainability in its broadest sense capturing economic, environmental, and social sustainability, all being inter-related.

As more people move to cities, do you see infrastructure being built vertically (as in more skyscrapers) as against horizontal expansion, since land is limited? Is there a sustainable way of building cities?

FB: A highly dense city usually does not have much choice but to make efficient use of every square inch of its scarce land. Yet city planners need to do this in a sustainable way that does not make the city feel cramped and unliveable. Most often this implies going vertical.

Your organisation Realdania supports projects in the built environment within three focus areas: cities, buildings and built heritage. How do we put these three areas in the context of building sustainable cities?

FB: Both our built heritage and buildings at large are an integral part of our cities. Our building mass constitutes the fabric of our cities. We strive for some facet of sustainability in all of our undertakings, be it social sustainability and/or environmental sustainability, and hopefully in all cases economic sustainability.

Different cities have vastly different challenges. Asian cities face immense challenges, such as rural migration to cities, increasing transportation challenges, sanitation, etc. Do you think solutions from successful sustainable cities such as those in Western Europe, can be replicated in developing Asian cities?

FB: I think that globally we can learn much from each other. This is exactly one of the great ideas behind the IFHP – a platform where best practices and knowledge can be shared. Urbanisation in Europe is in many ways like urbanisation in Asia. The challenges are generally the same – pollution, noise, social sustainability and balancing of an often very car-centric approach. Europe is looking at Asia's dynamic urban development requiring sustainable solutions on a large scale, while Asia is looking at Europe for urban liveability. A very important challenge in both contexts is the provision of affordable housing as being key to inclusive cities and social cohesion.


Climate change is a reality of today, as global temperatures rise, how can cities become environmentally sustainable? What kind of measures do cities need to take of this emergent threat?

FB: Environmental sustainability should be the priority in everything that cities do. The everyday decision-making in the town halls can have a big impact towards environmental sustainability. At the same time, global warming, climate change and CO2 neutrality are big concepts. To understand how to gear our cities for the future, we need facts and knowledge. Constant improvement of our analysis of environmental impacts is important.

Environmental challenges are some of the most critical challenges that cities face today. However, cities in Western Europe, such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen, have managed to be sustainable. What lessons can be learned from these cities?

FB: Both Amsterdam and Copenhagen are cities of small, relatively wealthy, nations. It is not surprising that these cities pave the way in the pursuit of sustainable solutions. Having said that, it is also a matter of traditions and ambitions, and it reflects a public will to address the challenges. The bulk of the population is well educated, well-provided and have the energy to take on an interest in environmental matters and the liveability of their cities.

Are you optimistic that cities can get it right in terms of building a sustainable future?

FB: I am an optimist by nature and have quite an optimistic view on cities as well. Mankind's ability to innovate is tremendous. Cities harbour a critical mass of wealth and know-how that foster solutions. It is cities rather than nations that are the key to a sustainable future. 



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Mr Flemming Borreskov is Founder and President of Catalytic Society, is the President of the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP), and former CEO of Realdania, a strategic philanthropic foundation, based in Denmark, with the objective of initiating and supporting projects that improve the built environment and subsequently improve the quality of life for the common good. Furthermore he is Chairman of the Board, DAC: Danish Architecture Centre; co-founder of the Strategic Urban Governance masterclass program for Danish urban executives, and Chairman of the Mission Design Montreal – Urban Design Committee; Member of Sustainia Founding Fathers, as well as Member of the World City Summit International Advisory Group and Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Council, Singapore.