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The West still needs to think big

2



By **Bill Durodie**
Battle of Ideas, Eagle Eye
Thursday, 30 September 2010 at 11:42 am

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As the F1 cars sped around the Marina Bay Circuit at the Singapore Grand Prix recently, viewers the world over may have noticed a new addition to the City's skyline: [Marina Bay Sands](#) (picture right). It consists of three incongruently curved and offset 55-storey tablets bedecked by a "SkyPark" – longer than the Eiffel Tower is tall – complete with the world's largest suspended infinity pool, a 2,560 room hotel, casino, theatre, museum, convention centre and a shopping mall with indoor canals.



It is a truly awesome feat of engineering – designed by the US-based architect [Moshe Safdie](#) – and one that was bringing in visitors the world over to gawp at long before its completion last summer.

In an age of ever-present cultural pessimism about the supposed problems we will face in the future and the threats we have to handle in the present, alongside humanity's assumed hubris in seeking to shape a fetishised "natural" environment, its construction and completion act as a salutary reminder of the benefits of engineering in inspiring people.

Despite delays brought on by the global financial crisis, the entire project took little more than three years to complete. In the meantime, New York still awaits any significant construction at the site of "Ground Zero", and I can't remember the last time large numbers came to London simply to view a large-scale construction project. Maybe some did come to look at the Millennium Dome in Greenwich – before they realized that there was nothing of merit inside it.

Sadly, today many engineers in the West have to look East and South if they want to pursue their dreams to build something big and lasting: whether that be a vast hydroelectric dam, a gigantic pipeline, magnetic levitation transport infrastructure or simply airports and buildings.

It is not just that the West is saturated, but rather that it feels exhausted. "Small Is Beautiful" is what we tell ourselves when we need to justify running out of steam. We see potential problems at every turn through our "precautionary" gaze, but by doing so we also fail to see, and seize, the opportunities and benefits there too.

BP's "Deepwater Horizon" was drilling too deep, we are told. Rather than wonder at the scale-equivalent ability to hit an oilfield the size of a coin, using a drill as fine as a human hair suspended from a floating matchbox effectively two storeys above, we accept that the pain was not worth the gain. But as a society we only learn to handle risks by taking them, not by avoiding them. And the solutions to problems – painful as they may be at times – are of benefit to all thereafter.

Much of the time today we are not even looking for answers. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) only looks for problems. It has no working group looking into large-scale technological solutions to the problems of climate change at all. Maybe that would be to put itself, and the army of interested parties it supports, at risk of making themselves redundant?

The sad thing is that rather than looking to the future today with a view to shaping it, we instead do so to circumscribe the present. And accordingly, we find ourselves dictated to through the prism of our own anxieties.

Without the wild imagination of engineers and the realization of projects like those in Singapore and elsewhere, our spirits become stultified, our potential attenuated, and the problems we fear will arise become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Throughout October and November, The Independent Online is partnering with the [Battle of Ideas festival](#) to present a series of guest blogs from festival speakers on the key questions of our time.

Dr Bill Durodié is senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is speaking in the debate [Engineering the future: cautionary tale or utopia?](#) at the Battle of Ideas festival in London on Sunday 31 October

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 **Robin Baldock** 10 hours ago


Yes, lets build more overblown hubristic concrete lumps to go shopping by helicopter in. We could put them where the poor people live thus solving social problems too. Where is the instant gratification of grappling with real issues compared to just gazing at giant piece of toxic Leggo through a haze of self importance.


Worried about the fainforest, stick a tree in the foyer, change it every year if you want, hell, stick a hundred in there, its big enough! Water shortage? Build another swimming pool, suspended out over the plastic infested sea (which by the way just goes to show how bad a job nature is doing!).

And don't forget the very real engineering issues that such masturbation helps us to learn. Would the three gorges damn have ever got off the ground if we it hadn't been for the concept that we know best ,bigger must be better and we can manipulate our world to do and acheive anything we want, with out any consequences ever?

Even if these tails about biodiversity, climate and pollution turn out to have any basis then simply by using the methods, techniques and mindset that created them we will solve them.

Forward to the future and why worry about other resources when there's plenty of concrete left.

 porkfright liked this

 **Matt Kuhns** 13 hours ago

So, let's review. BP's slipshod attempt to dig more profits out of the bottom of the ocean without bothering to have any kind of proper failsafe is to be praised because it was "daring" and "risk-taking," while anyone calling for a response to climate change which involves making practical changes today to stop making the problem worse (as opposed to saying no, let's put that on hold until we've spent more time dreaming about a magic "techno-fix" that will have more razzle and dazzle than boring old conservation) is probably part of some Crichton-esque conspiracy to perpetuate the entire issue for the sake of their own job security.

Brilliant. You're certainly thinking big in terms of "spin," Bill. Indeed I'd say you're taking it to a whole new scale.

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