

The Deception of Speed

Humankind's fetish for speed is well established from the earliest marathon runners through to the popularity of today's super high technology of Formula 1.

"Speed thrills but kills" was a famous old warning used to deter youngsters from speeding and killing themselves on our roadways. It is common knowledge that a simple mistake which would be harmless at lower speeds, could be disastrous at high speeds.

This addiction to speed not only permeates our preferred sports and hobbies, but also today's high-pressured lifestyle where almost everything needs to have been done yesterday. One observation of the design profession is that the highly skilled are kept having to produce and perform at greater speeds and with greater care, whilst those less skilled make more and more mistakes on the great delivery freeway. Just as with road accidents, the toll on society is high. Much time is spent recovering, repairing and addressing these mistakes.

Speed is deceptive in that there is the appearance of achieving great feats and distances, but often at the expense of quality. With the advent of the computer and CAD, it's not uncommon to hear employers exclaiming that "now with the computer ... all the 200 revisions can be done in two days (lah)". Programming charts only set milestones for completion and submission of drawings for relevant approvals by the local authorities. Design time is often not even considered on the Gant implementation charts of projects.

A senior practitioner once lamented that in the good old days, design was transmitted through ammonia prints at meetings or by post. There was time in-between transmittal for thought and resolve. Then came the fax machine, where design drawings were printed in A4 parts and transmitted almost immediately. Response was possible within hours. One could still think. Today, design is transmitted instantaneously through the internet and the response can be within minutes. Slower transmission of emails result in a flurry of phone calls asking why it has not reached their mailbox yet. Work and heart rate has definitely increased, but has there been an increase in quality? Unfortunately the main casualty in this speed trap has been the design. If God is indeed in the details as professed by Mies, then unfortunately, He misses out again losing to a myriad of copied standard details with little thought for appropriateness, beauty and proportion.

Ivan Illich in his writings pointed out that society's dependence on speed is counter-productive. Its flow is broken and time is lost to congestion. Destinations are spread out and isolated, thereby requiring more trips, time, and frustration. Every day, people face the need to travel farther than they can physically go without internal combustion engines. His studies over time indicated that as a result of man's ability to move at greater speeds, it enabled him to cover more ground. With this, cities expanded. Distance increased between homes and work places. Time spent in cars each day increased. The hidden costs in time, pollution and noise is absorbed by society.

Interestingly, the bicycle is lauded by Illich as an excellent example of a convivial tool that works well within its own self-determined limits. They are extremely efficient in terms of energy, expense, and urban space. They require much less infrastructure such as parking lots, and less maintenance is needed for that infrastructure. They do not require wide roads and freeways. They do not guzzle carbon-based fuels and pollute the atmosphere with carbon monoxides.

Unfortunately, in most Asian urban cities that once used to have a proliferation of such modes of transport, they are often now frowned upon as unsightly hindrances to faster modes of transport and are seen as "old world"... not classy enough for today's modern life. Interestingly, we now see a semblance of such bicycles bolted to the floors of fitness centres that have sprouted up as part of the new hip world and sweaty riders exclaiming in delight that they had just done 20 kilometres on it... going nowhere. Well, that 20 kilometres could have been their ride home. Unfortunately, after a shower they get into their cars and drive a further 10 kilometres to get home. What an unusual lifestyle!

Ar Dr Tan Loke Mun
PAM President

CALL FOR PROJECT SUBMISSIONS

All architects are invited to have their works published by submitting their most notable projects. For further information contact blueinemediamedia (Amy) at 603 7880 0730 or email amy@lineofblue.com for submission guidelines, deadlines and enquiries.

THEMES

JUN 06 Renovation, Conservation & Adaptive Re-use

AUG 06 Architects' Houses

OCT 06 Schools and Institutions

DEC 06 Hotels and Resorts