

Prominent American urban designer Michael Freedman addressed a full house on November 30, 2009 at the *Bangkok Creative City* seminar, organised by Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC).

In a talk entitled “Creative City Design: Urban Design and Planning to Stimulate Innovation,” Freedman traced back to the historical failure of the 20th century cities and called for a new habit of urban design, to nurture and foster a new economy.

Back in the 20th century industrial economy, cities were built to generate mass production and labour productivity. But in today’s creative economy, the focus is not on quantity, but ideas. Accordingly, this new economy requires a new type of city – a place that cultivates knowledge and cross-fertilisation of ideas.

“We need a new city design which is different from what we’ve been pursuing,” he said.

“Because the city’s diversity is the source of innovation and economic growth,” Freedman called on urban designers to create opportunities for face-to-face interaction and “serendipity” – unexpected encounters that will lead to new ideas and solutions. Physically, serendipity refers to proximity, density, and an abundance of mixed-use of public spaces.

Freedman has extensive experiences in urban “redesign” across the United States and Thailand, as visiting lecturer at Thammasat University’s Faculty of Architecture and Planning. Freedman’s expertise is in urban planning area. He did a project which replaced the lifeless 20th century model of a workplace – ‘tech parks’ and industrial estates – with what he calls “vital centers.”

In a classic example of his work, Freedman discussed the redesign of Silicon Valley’s Cupertino district. Home to over 60 high-tech companies – including Apple, Hewlett-Packard and IBM – Cupertino is a city that requires a nurturing and stimulating environment for innovation. Freedman identified the causes for Cupertino’s lifeless urban landscape: building setbacks, front-facing parking lots, ‘superblocks’ with no internal streets, single-use buildings and low density.

“We just got used to building workplaces like this,” Freedman said. “It is a hole in the city, rather than a city center.”

To foster innovation, Freedman reshaped downtown Cupertino into a “vital center” with diverse opportunities for human interaction. Instead of building setbacks, he moved storefronts forward, to increase pedestrian accessibility and street life. Freedman moved parking lots to the back of buildings and added mixed-use public spaces such as shops, banks, and Internet cafes.

Freedman revitalised large blocks by adding bike lanes, walking paths and internal circulation roads. At the same time, he reduced the need for cars by adding residential land uses near office locations. By adding more people and more life to the city center, Freedman said he turned the city “inside-out.”

In addition to his urban design work for the Silicon Valley, Freedman cited a number of cities worldwide that have used urban design to either foster innovation or attract innovators, which he called the creative class. Among them, he commended Tokyo's Marunouchi district for successfully replacing the ground floor of "boring office buildings" with attractive storefronts, more pavement, better lighting, public art and nightlife. It is now one of the most trendy and competitive real estate in Tokyo.

Freedman reminded the audience that an attractive city for the creative class cannot be built completely from scratch. On the contrary, it often needs to retain grunge and history. In the Lodo district of Denver, USA, the city preserved what Freedman called the "authenticity" of an old city through building restrictions. New buildings were required to have the same proportion as old ones and must retain similar features such as alleyways.

This is in contrast to Soho district in New York, which formerly known as the artists' enclave. Soho's neighborhood of the 19th century cast-iron factory buildings is now overrun with designer stores like Louis Vuitton and Gucci, and will soon lie in the shadow of a glass-encased skyscraper. Allowed to grow without restraint, Soho is losing its unique character and clientele, according to Freedman.

The visiting professor at Thammasat University then turned to Bangkok. A rapidly-growing city has to choose, Freedman said. Do we want Siam Square to retain small shops to encourage small stores, run by young fashion start-ups? Or do we want to allow Siam Square to change into a complex of large-scale shops owned by established brands, like an outdoor version of Siam Paragon? These are important choices for a creative city.

In conclusion of his talk, Freedman emphasised that creative city design is *not* creative building design. Beautiful sculptural buildings have no impact on city life, if the spaces between buildings are lifeless. Likewise, faster mass transit will not make the city move faster, if people do not participate in the use of landscape around the train stations.

"Building the trains is not enough," Freedman said about Bangkok's Red Line. "What we want is accessibility."

Freedman introduced his latest work, a "transit-oriented development" or TOD design for the Red Line station at Rangsit, the hub of several academic and research institutions. Instead of the 20th century park-and-ride model, Freedman moved concrete parking lots further away from the station, and filled the central area with a density of mixed-use spaces – small blocks of shops, offices, and public plazas. He linked the area to nearby residential and university districts through a network of bike and pedestrian paths, which run alongside existing canals.

With few exceptions, Freedman has never seen an urban design achieve its goals without government support. The task requires collaboration beyond individual property owners. In addition to challenging urban designers to change their habits, Freedman called on the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority to take the leading role in fostering a creative city.