



Antony Wood

ED: And I presume that there is a good reason for you being both in Dubai and in my studio this morning?

AW: There is a very good reason, which is that we are two and a half months away from hosting our eighth world congress here in Dubai which will take place from the third to the fifth of March 2008.

ED: Now this is a world congress on tall buildings, I suppose it probably makes sense to have decided to have it in Dubai.

AW: Yes, absolutely. I think you could probably say that Dubai is the epicenter of tall building activity around the world. There are other places, Shanghai, for example. But, in 2006, four of the tallest buildings in the world constructed that year were constructed in the Gulf region.

ED: So who are you going to be bringing over here for your world summit? Who are the celebrities of the tall building world?

AW: Well, it will be a key gathering. We have a conference every year but a congress only every four to five years and all the experts from around the world will be here. We are going to convene the session with an opening plenary that will focus on the sustainable vision of three cities that are now taking sustainability and tall buildings very seriously; Chicago, London and Dubai. And so we have the mayor of Chicago Richard Daley joining us for that event, we have Peter Rees who is the head of the city of London corporation to talk about the sustainable vision of London, and we have an as yet to be determined high level representative from Dubai to talk about his highness Sheik Muhammad's vision for Dubai.

ED: Now, we are looking obviously at some massive tall buildings coming up here in Dubai, but your focus for this summit is going to be on tall buildings becoming green buildings. Is this not a bit of an oxymoron? Can tall buildings be green, be environmentally friendly?

AW: Absolutely, I mean the title of the congress is Tall and Green: Typology for a Sustainable Urban Future and I think the important thing there is 'a sustainable urban future'. If you're asking me do tall buildings have credentials and a history of being green buildings I think the answer is no, but there are two things at play here. The first is that tall buildings on an urban scale have a major role to play into the future in that they are about denser cities, and denser cities have got to be one of the ways forward to cutting down energy consumption. Denser cities mean less urban spread, which in places like America and the UK is a major major issue. So tall buildings have a role to play on that level. But also tall buildings have an opportunity to reinvent themselves as a sustainable building typology. Not only at the urban level, but if you compare it to a smaller building, you'll find that the financial and professional investiture in a tall building gives it the opportunity to become, if you like, experimental; to incorporate for example experimental technologies, wind turbines etc, that you would find difficult on a low rise building.

ED: What you're saying there is that because they are expensive anyway, you might as well use some of these new fangled technologies that would be too expensive for someone building a smaller building?

AW: Cost is one part of it. There are other factors involved. It is important that I stress what I started with, it is about concentration of people on smaller areas of land which has an impact then in terms of the reduction of energy and transport networks and all the rest of it. But it's not just about the large amounts of money spent on these buildings so why don't we throw in some environmental technologies. You know for example, wind energy; the energy output from a wind turbine increases, quite logically, with wind velocity, and wind velocity at height increases massively over the urban plane so tall buildings have the opportunity to harvest wind energy that you would never get with a low rise building. And it is a similar scenario with photovoltaic technologies and various other elements.

ED: Do you think that Dubai has an advantage? You mentioned reinvention earlier on, but starting from scratch all the construction we are seeing in Dubai at the moment, does it pay off to get it right the first time rather than trying to reinvent yourself later on? Is there an advantage for Dubai from starting at the moment with its construction?

AW: The short answer is yes. Dubai has major advantages. I think the main advantage in Dubai is where a lot of people just talk about doing it, Dubai has done it. I'm not saying necessarily in terms of sustainability, but what I'm saying is that from a place that even ten to fifteen years ago had virtually no high rise buildings, no density about it at all; what has been created here is absolutely remarkable, just on a construction activity scale. So when his highness Sheik Mohamedd says okay, now fifteen years later there is a whole new agenda which we all have got to sign up to, we can not deny climate change any more, we have got to find more sustainable patterns of life for humanity - everybody now recognizes that. Even two years ago there were some very big countries who doubted it, the one for example where I am based [USA], and now everybody recognizes that. That's a turning point, everybody realizes that something has to be done. And when somewhere like Dubai says "okay we're now going to take this seriously", then the world has got to sit up and look and listen because as I said before, Dubai is not just talking about making tall buildings, they have made it happen. So you have got to believe that people are going to start to take this seriously. This is the important thing, you know we are at a very early stage in this stuff and I'm sure that in terms of green buildings, there are lots of paths that companies and people are currently following which history will look back on and say, well that was a bit of a dead end, because we are in this experimental stage. So Dubai has the opportunity, because of its energy, because of the backing, to really start to lead the way in terms of implementing these technologies and working out for the world what is going to work and what isn't. And that is one of the reason that we are convening our congress here, to bring those world experts and share that with the local community.

ED: Now when you are talking about one of the things we are doing of course you are referring to the green buildings ruling that will see all new building developments having to take these sustainable measures when it comes to energy used, water, waste, etc. etc. by the beginning of next year, that's a pretty tall order.

AW: Yeah, well you know it's the start of it. It's impossible to just say overnight everything is going to become green. It's the start of it, and that is the important thing. And as I have just said to you, I think Dubai has the opportunity to lead the way because of the energy and the backing behind what's going on here. When I say it's the start of it, there are other places that have been doing this for quite sometime, and as I mentioned before Chicago and London are two cities from which I think Dubai can learn. Ken Livingston, the mayor of London, has implemented some very brave decisions. For example he has implemented a rule where all major developments should have ten percent of renewable energy generated on site. Now I am not exactly sure about the directive in Dubai, how it has manifested itself in terms of policy, but the London thing is interesting because there is debate about that. There is one half of the community saying that this is excellent, this is a step in the right direction, this is what we need to see, and the other half of the community is saying well really it is a little bit silly, putting small wind turbines and photovoltaics and biomass in buildings and decentralizing that i.e. what we really should be doing is taking all that energy and investing it in new alternative power plants, off shore wind turbines, off shore photovoltaic solar farms because it is inefficient to try and fragment it within the urban realm. However the counter argument to that is then your power source is farther from the need, and then you get inefficiency in distributing the energy.

ED: What do you make of our Burj Dubai then in terms of sustainability?

AW: To begin with I think it is quite clearly a seminal building. Now it was conceived probably seven or eight years ago in terms of its initial conception, so I think it is unfair to look at that against the current directive and criticize it for not being a sustainable building. I mean I go back to what I said before, there are urban principles at play here in terms of densifying cities, and I think that what the Burj Dubai does is show the way to the world as a potential model for densification of cities. There are certain technologies in play in the Burj Dubai, for example using ice cooling for the air conditioning system, which are quite radical; but the thing with the Burj Dubai, and this is what I think Dubai and the world recognizes, it is a massive technical achievement. This building is going to be more than three hundred meters taller than the previous world's tallest building. Technologically, what this building is doing is absolutely phenomenal and I am sure that Dubai is very proud of that. So I think it is unfair to rate it against current buildings - eight years is a long time in the construction industry.

ED: That comment of unfairness though would make me wonder whether you feel that it is not very sustainable?

AW: I think it is sustainable on an urban level. I think as a model for denser cities it shows the world that you can concentrate population on a smaller footprint of land. So I think as a model, it starts towards more urban sustainability. In itself, I think what you are asking me, is it loaded with gadgetry which is going to create energy and I think the answer is no. The other thing is this, and this is really important; it's a residential building and this is the first time in the history of the world's tallest buildings that we are going to see the tallest building being residential. Generally, unsustainable towers, or lets say more energy consumptive tall buildings are office buildings and this is one of the incredible things about the Burj Dubai. Everybody talks about height when you talk about the Burj Dubai, but actually, having been here several times in recent months and just passing by there yesterday, the thing that is most striking about the Burj Dubai is not necessarily the great height, but the proportion of it and that is because residential floor area is much smaller than an office floor plate. So it is the proportions of the building as well as the height. You know this feeling of it as a needle rising up above the plane.

ED: Unfortunately that's all we have time for this morning. Antony Wood, executive director for the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat thank you for your time.

AW: Thank you very much.