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**The Hong Kong-based Dutch planner has been fascinated by Asia ever since she spent a year in Xiamen during her university days. She has since worked on both sides of the border; after a stint as a researcher for Jones Lang LaSalle in Hong Kong, she switched gears and began consulting with the government of cities such as Yangon, Hue and Macau on how to better manage their built heritage. A passionate advocate for meaningful preservation and adaptive/reuse strategies, van Steekelenburg founded Urban Discovery's City Challenges as an interactive way to get locals more in tune with their hometown's urban fabric through a friendly competition that is a little like a relay race. She speaks to *hinge* about her favourite cities, what the URA can be doing better, and how LEGO set her on the path to her career choice.**

***hinge*: Why did you pursue a career in urban planning?**

Ester van Steekelenburg: Growing up, I was always playing with Lego and creating my own cities. Even now, I love spending an afternoon playing Lego with my kids – twin seven-year-old boys. It's a fantastic toy; it allows you to imagine and build. I was never a girl who played with dolls. So I guess my interest in planning started then, from an early age.

When I attended secondary school in Holland, there was a lot of emphasis on creative thinking, performing and writing. We were encouraged to think critically; to formulate and argue points. I was never top of the class in math. I would have pursued an architecture degree but I also really liked the social aspects, such as making a contribution to societies and countries. Planning was the perfect combination of the two things I'm most interested in – building and community – so I enrolled in an Urban Planning degree at The University of Amsterdam.

***How did you end up in Hong Kong?***

I completed the final year of my undergraduate studies in China, as part of an exchange programme. I lived in Xiamen and spent a year learning Chinese. I was really intrigued by the urban changes taking place in Xiamen and other Chinese cities, and I eventually wrote my graduation thesis on this topic. No one from the University of Amsterdam was able to grade my thesis, as they were unfamiliar with urban planning in China! I had been to The University of Hong Kong a few

# ESTER VAN STEEKELLENBURG

times for research during my undergraduate studies, so I asked one of the professors, Anthony Walker, if he could please assess my thesis. He did – and then offered me a PhD scholarship!

I started at HKU in 1997. At that time, there were very few foreigners on campus. Now, there is a Starbucks on nearly every corner and many people speak English and Mandarin.

It was an interesting time to be working on the topic of land and real estate in China. The market had just been privatised and it was booming. I was part of a research team studying the aspects of this phenomenon, such as housing affordability and how it was affecting the population.

China was – and still is – so different to anywhere else I had experienced before. I could clearly see that it was a very cultured environment. It had a long history and beautiful architecture, yet it had the opposite values to what I had been taught in the West, from how to behave at school and how to liaise with people. The fact that it was so different was what really attracted me; I was impressed and intrigued. China made me question that what I'd learned so far was not necessarily the only way.

## ***Then you worked in the Hong Kong property market?***

Yes, I worked for Jones Lang LaSalle in its research department. It was a good fit. I was there for two years. I was coming out of an academic environment and suddenly had to deliver my message in a commercial environment. It is very different writing a thesis compared to something that has to appeal to a consumer

audience. Eventually, I found the environment too commercial for me. The work pressure was tough, along with working Saturdays and having only 12 days of annual leave. I moved back to Holland and worked for the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies in Rotterdam, an educational institute for people all over the world, on housing and urban development issues.

## ***How did Urban Discovery come about?***

I have always worked on the consultancy, academic or research side of urban issues.

After a certain point, I became frustrated by what I was producing: papers and reports; attending workshops and meetings. About one out of ten projects got me really excited and actually made an impact; the other ones were just keeping the economy going. This time coincided with my having children. I began to question why I was producing a report that will just sit on a shelf and gather dust. I grew increasingly frustrated with beautiful cities that were transforming at enormous speeds. In a quest for more modern, more Western and higher developments, cities in Asia were all starting to look alike. I wanted to move away from other urban issues to concentrate on heritage. And I needed to work in the same city in which I was living. I had a good professional network but not in Hong Kong. I was in interesting meetings and discussions in Kathmandu, Hanoi and Jakarta but spending too little time there. I felt the need to do something hands-on and practical; real and people-facing. So I started my own consultancy, Urban Discovery.

Urban Discovery and our City Challenges and the iDiscover City Walks app all achieve similar objectives: to make people more aware of their urban environment and, in doing so, make heritage more tangible. The City Challenge product was always a side business; I continued doing advisory work. But I really enjoyed the City Challenges; they were so much fun. They were like a neighbourhood edition of the reality TV show *The Amazing Race*, and brought out the competitive spirit in participating team members. We had brilliant afternoons roaming the streets of Hong Kong, taking people to hidden gems in different neighbourhoods, and we all learnt a lot. Participants who had lived here in Hong Kong for 20 years would happily tell me: 'you've brought me to a place I've never seen before'.

Our clients began asking for unique things for smaller groups, so we developed other products, such as a food walk, which uncovers the intangible side of heritage. We produced books and treasure hunts for children. We kept rediscovering different parts of Hong Kong. We ran City Challenges for four years.

Then my consultancy work really took off and I didn't have the time to properly devote to City Challenges anymore. We recently sold the food walk and other parts of the business, but every year we continue to help organise a City Challenge for charity.

## ***Tell us about your Yangon urban regeneration project.***

Yangon is an incredibly fascinating place. The city is now at a turning point. For such a long time, it was caught in a time



warp so consequently a lot of the heritage architecture has been left untouched. It has a fascinating, cosmopolitan heritage, with waves of Armenian, Jewish and Indian people who settled there and contributed to a vibrant, cosmopolitan economy. Its stately merchant mansions have interesting design features, with elements derived from all over the world.

Last year, I was involved with a training programme for the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) to formulate a vision for the historic core and how it can fit into the city's development plans. What exists in Yangon is unique and there is value in uniqueness. If YHT manages to preserve some of the heritage buildings, there will be an economic benefit. Fortunately, the people who realise this are in the local government's municipality, not just employed by YHT. Together, we looked at case studies and mistakes made elsewhere, such as Jakarta, Hong Kong and Bangkok.

The new project underway this year is financed by CDIA, part of the Asian Development Bank. This funding will allow a team of people to live in Yangon for six months and work on the revitalisation of three areas in the historic downtown district. Our contribution and objective is to develop an investment programme that brings plans to realisation. It is an incredibly interesting project.

#### **You also worked on a project in Hue, Vietnam.**

That was a difficult situation. Hue is a UNESCO World Heritage-listed city. The management of Hue's sites is in the hands of the Hue Monuments Conservation Centre. When UNESCO gives a place World Heritage status, it comes with all kinds of requirements. There has to be administration in place, and the responsibility is given to the entity that takes care of those requirements. But in Hue, the entity acts more like a caretaker; it has no authority regarding zoning, building heights or permits, and there is little control over tourism operators. However, these types of controls are exactly what it needs. Hue needs continuing help with formulating plans and implementing systems to manage modern development in a historic city context. High buildings are going up all the time. UNESCO is putting its foot down and saying: 'Guys, you have to get your act together or you will lose your World Heritage status'.

#### **And you've done some cultural mapping in Macau?**

There is a reason why old buildings in Macau are still standing: the city hasn't developed as quickly as others in Asia. Macanese people are inherently proud of their roots and the Portuguese presence is still alive. They care about their churches and intangible heritage. The Macau government realises the value in uniqueness and devotes a lot of manpower to it.

There are a lot of things happening now in Macau. In St Lazarus, the government has implemented some zoning and height controls, as well as invested in a few strategically located projects. Otherwise, it has left the district up to the market and creative entrepreneurs. It has encouraged creative entrepreneurs to take

over and it's working. We run a cultural mapping module at IFT Institute of Tourism Studies on their degree course leading to a Bachelor of Science in Heritage Management. It's for people who are interested in pursuing heritage as a career. We are using the cultural mapping research results from St Lazarus and other districts and creating an iDiscover City Walks app for Macau.

#### **What are some of the lessons you've learnt in southeast Asia and how do they compare with what is taken for granted in the Netherlands?**

The legislative framework for heritage and urban regeneration are worlds apart between Asia and Europe. Here in Asia, it is very much left to the market. There are few financial incentives for preserving old buildings. In Europe, the emphasis is on subsidies and there is stronger government influence. Living in a heritage building comes with obligations and restrictions, and the government tempers them with sweeteners.

There is stronger legislation in terms of heritage buildings. Holland has more than 100,000 listed buildings. There is no way that anyone living in those buildings can make any significant alterations without specific approval. In the historic centre of Amsterdam, you can't even put up anything more than four storeys.

Singapore has been successful in area-based conservation. The government is not giving financial incentives, but it has created an environment that is enticing. Its zoning restrictions and pilot projects set examples and there is a lot of promotion to raise awareness. The guidelines put in place seem to be working.

There are all kinds of policies at both ends of the spectrum. What I learnt as a child is the complete opposite in China. Since living here in Hong Kong, I have become more of an advocate of leaving things to the market. In Holland, it is extremely regulated in every aspect. Here, you just get on with it.

#### **What are your favourite cities, and why?**

Yangon is currently very high on my list. It is magical there; the people are friendly. It is so different from anywhere else.

I feel most at home in European cities. Berlin is very vibrant, in terms of urban regeneration. Antwerp is a fantastic place where they've done some cool stuff in the former dockyards, while Barcelona is a classic example of how they've revamped the dilapidated neighbourhoods in its historic city.

#### **What can the Hong Kong government or its Urban Renewal Authority be doing better?**

It should do more with its revitalisation scheme. I have to commend Carrie Lam for initiating it, and they have delivered some beautiful projects. In January at a conference at the Jockey Club, I interviewed the operators of the Blue House in Wan Chai, Tai O Heritage Hotel, and other projects. They are all incredibly passionate people working on beautiful examples of adaptive

reuse. None of them would be feasible without the government's initiative. The Blue House was the only project that had existing residences; all the others were vacant, so it was not as difficult. It is very challenging to revitalise a project in a community with people residing in it. We are doing the same thing in Yangon.

The Blue House is a fantastic example of how you can work hand in hand with people occupying the premises to keep its narrative and character. It sets an example for the rest of the neighbourhood. In Wanchai, there are all kinds of shops and restaurants in the old Hong Kong style, and they have an impact on the environment. I would like to see less Lee Tung Street-type of developments; they look like Disneyland. They tried to keep the narrative alive by making it romantic, but it's a farce. The character is gone; the community has disappeared.

What I find intriguing is Sham Shui Po and Shek Kip Mei, neighbourhoods with two revitalised projects that are close to each other. There are a lot of students in the area, studying at SCAD and JCCAC and in the middle is Mei Ho House, a hostel that attracts a lot of young, edgy travellers. It brings a new vibe to neighbourhood. People are inspired by the surroundings; they roam the streets selling fabrics and set up exciting new shops, such as leather-making, cycling, hostels and cafes. If you talk to people, there are two reasons why they are there: it's cheap and all their friends are there. The market is doing that. The government shouldn't demolish these old Sham Shui Po and Shek Kip Mei buildings; they should keep the existing urban fabric and character and can create something exciting.

I'm a fan of adaptive reuse. A building has a life and needs to reinvent itself, especially if it needs to stay alive. I'm more of the view that, especially in Asia, you can't keep it like it was 200 years ago. Good Point Flower Market in Mong Kok is a project that I like. It brings five bookshops into the neighbourhood and links with the flower market and the area's residents. The architect has shown great respect for the building's original features. With this project, it shows that the government has learnt from its early stages; there is progress.

#### **Do you still do some teaching?**

I am a guest lecturer at Kadoorie Institute's Environmental Management Programme at HKU and IFT in Macau.

#### **What do you do in your spare time?**

Well, I work and travel a lot, so I have little spare time. When I do, I like to roam the city as well as escape the city. We live in Clearwater Bay and I love hiking. I practice yoga; it calms my mind and helps me focus. Yoga is something that I can do everywhere and in all the places I travel. I can always find a yoga class that I enjoy.

I really like Hong Kong. We have the best of both worlds here. It has a vibrant city centre but you can escape urban life really easily, and the variety of people that you meet here keeps it interesting.



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