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The West still needs to think big



By [Bill Durodie](#)



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 ([more information here](#)).

(Photo: Getty Images)