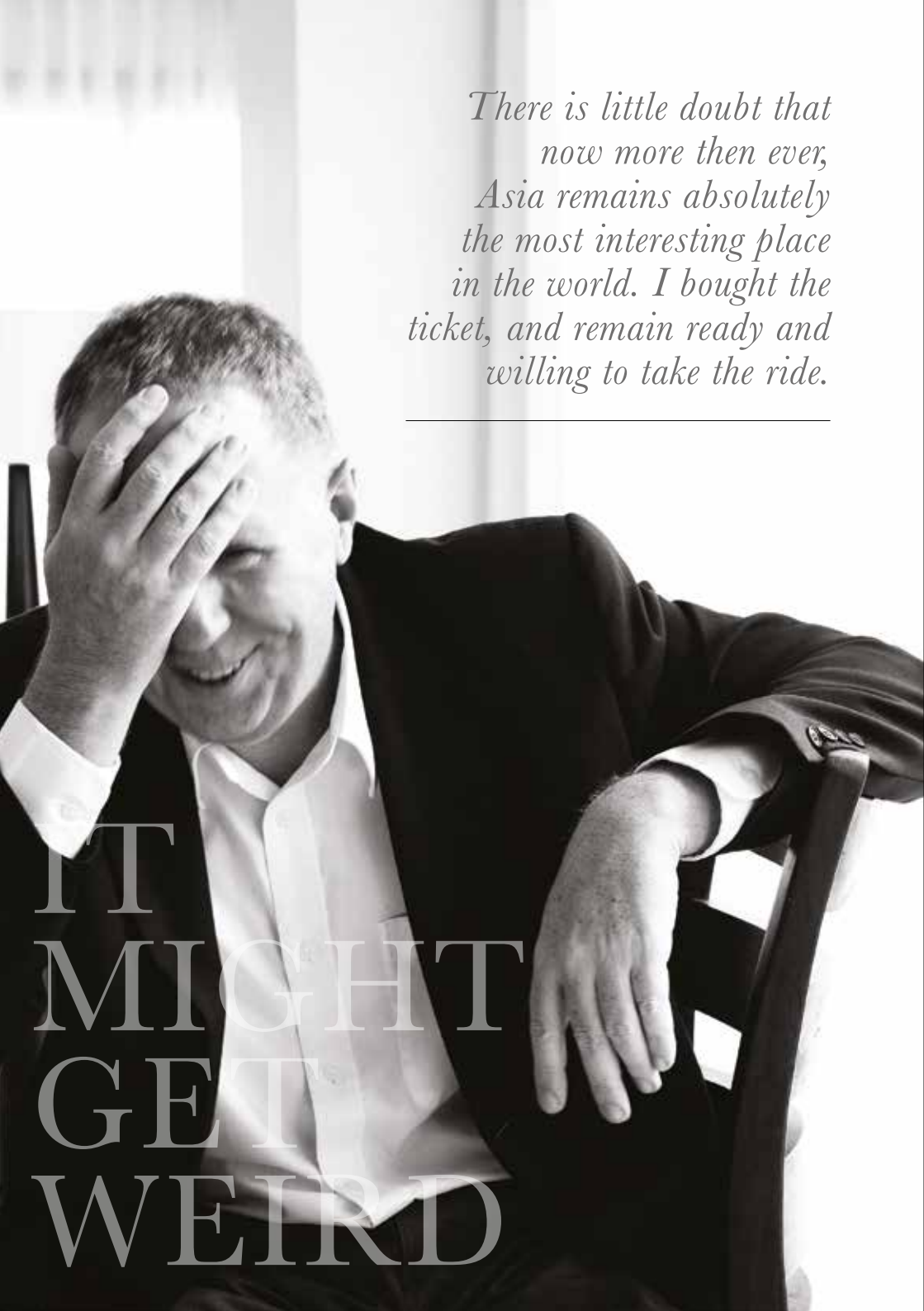


A black and white portrait of Bill Barnett, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, looking directly at the camera with a slight, thoughtful expression. His hand is resting under his chin. The background is a plain, light color.

IT MIGHT GET WEIRD

Bill Barnett

COLLECTED ESSAYS ON ASIA'S REAL ESTATE LANDSCAPE FROM THE PAGES OF
PROPERTY REPORT MAGAZINE.

A black and white photograph of a man in a dark suit and light-colored shirt, sitting in a wooden chair. He is covering his face with his right hand, but his eyes are squeezed shut and he has a wide, joyful smile on his face. His left arm is resting on the chair's back. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting a window or a brightly lit room.

*There is little doubt that
now more than ever,
Asia remains absolutely
the most interesting place
in the world. I bought the
ticket, and remain ready and
willing to take the ride.*

IT
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GET
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INTRODUCTION

As '13' is about to be done, dusted and archived to the cloud drive, my thoughts turn to the year that was.

I have managed to yet again avoid 'The Great Gig in the Sky', although I am writing this at 33,000 feet above an absolutely whacked-out world, sniffing the jet stream fumes and thankful to be landing at Phuket International Airport in 28 minutes, according to the inflight entertainment system.

My recurring storyline of day-to-day life has increasingly become a high-definition blur of airplanes, broken only by the thump of ink staining my passport. Life has somehow hit the fast-forward button, and when I close my eyes I hear the faint tune of 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' while dark images haunt the kaleidoscope of mercurial memory.

Be it on the cluttered streets of Yangon, or during the dawn patrol with a half-asleep taxi driver in Jakarta, my monthly Property Report columns* allow me the freedom to stretch beyond the confines of four office walls and step right over the sleeping elephant in the room.

There is little doubt that now more than ever, Asia remains absolutely the most interesting place in the world. I bought the ticket, and remain ready and willing to take the ride. One step ahead of the big sleep and never far away from the arcane comedy of big business.

I'll be seeing you on the other side soon – in '14' that is.

Bill Barnett – December 2

**A special mention to Jules Kay, my embattled editor at Property Report, who thankfully does not own a gun. Without him I might have gone completely over the edge.*

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January 2013

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Last night I had catfish for dinner. I know what you are thinking and no I have not gone all Cajun white trash, at least not yet. It wasn't the deep-fried, cholesterol nuclear bomb type that would send me to the emergency room for a triple bypass, this was the oh-so spicy Thai version with green mango. 'Phet phet', my little spicy salad chimed in. It's always a worry whenever the food starts talking back.

Catfish, in case you didn't know, are bottom feeders. It's not pretty so let's not even go there, but talking of submersible water vultures brings up the subject of real estate.

In my other persona, as an international hospitality and property consultant, my office regularly receives all manner of requests, cries for help and cryptic business propositions. Over the past 10 years, one recurring storyline continues to be those seeking out cheap deals. That, and those Nigerian lottery emails.

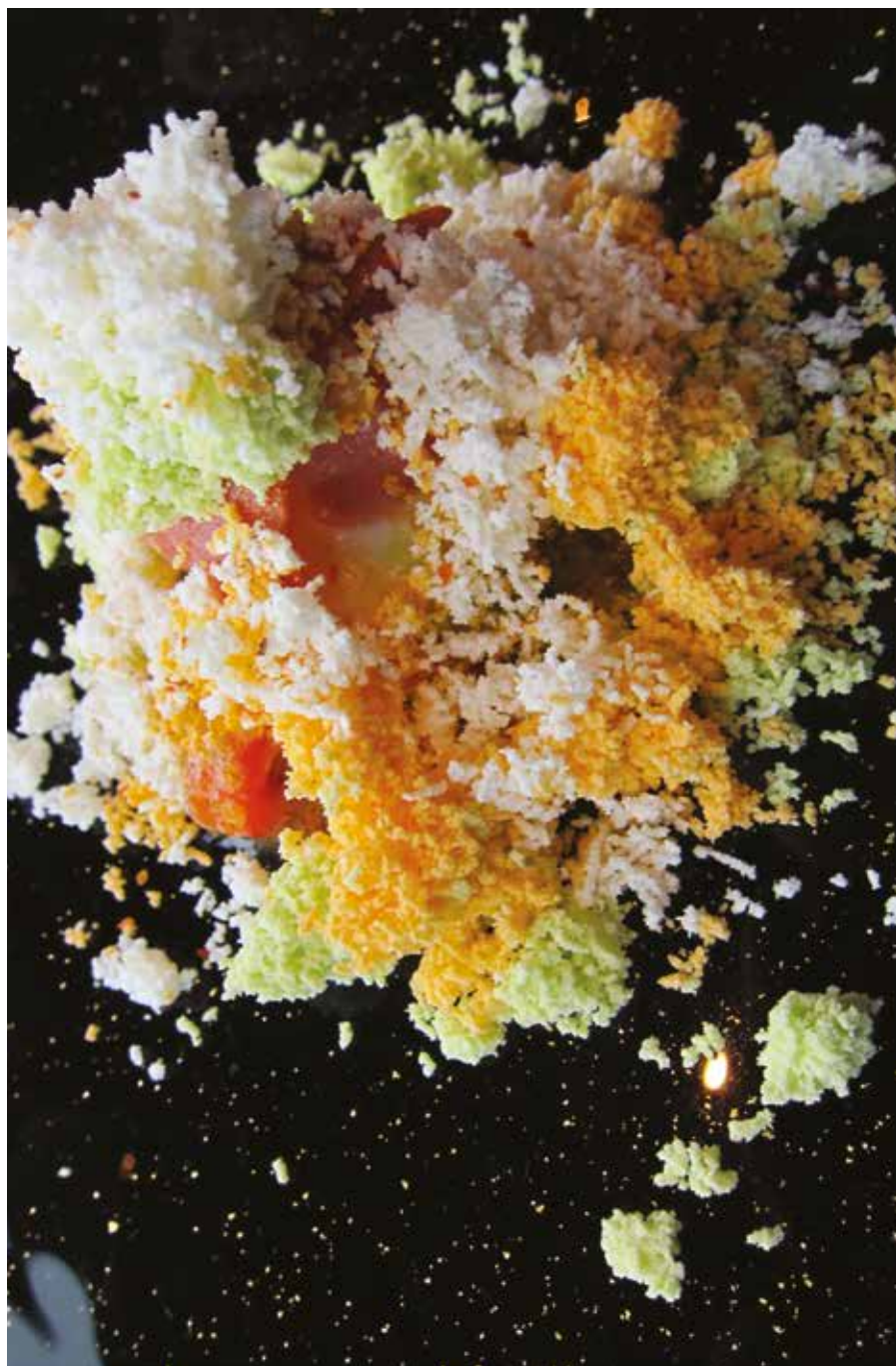
Good times, bad times, the global financial crisis or even the boom time pre-subprime, it is one constant that has remained part of the daily grind. Be they bottom feeders, or more politely what private equity players call 'opportunity funds', it's always the same deal. Undervalued assets, cheap land and distress.

Sure, some are called back and few are even chosen, but when you start to count the true deals in recent memory, a stutter starts to occur and words become long drawn-out slurs. In short – there aren't many.

Over the same aforementioned 10 years (pardon my corporate sounding slang), Asia has grown up considerably. We now live in the Big East and can effectively bin those colonial hashtags like 'developing countries' or 'the Orient'.

We may miss being exotic, but the rice bowl is overflowing and I find great comfort in having a Starbucks within easy reach wherever I travel. But Asia, as anyone who travels to Singapore, Hong Kong, or even escapes to Phuket or Bali will tell you, is no longer cheap. In fact it's downright expensive.

This includes land, buying hotels and the sheer cost of doing business. While there is topside, we have floated up closer to the surface. Our catfish friends are mere





We now live in the Big East and can effectively bin those colonial hashtags like ‘developing countries’ or ‘the Orient’.

memories as we try to get up closer to the warming rays of the sun. Real estate deals need lots of cash; liquidity and access to substantial debt are a must. As for margins, these are under attack by hyperinflation, skyrocketing wages and a competitive labour market.

If you want to run with the bulls you damn well need to get down to Prada and choose the right outfit. No sales or bargain basement deals there. Recently, we’ve completed a number of jobs in Myanmar and Sri Lanka and again, you get the same nonsensical wallflowers thinking that just because the country has been shut off with years of military rule or wracked by civil war, they are virtually giving land away.

Land in Asia is no bargain and it’s only set to rise higher given the failure of the West and the proximity to half the world’s population. If you want cheap, perhaps look at the rust belt in America, a condo in Spain or a nice little island in Greece. Upside? You might have to wait for a very long time.

My plate is ominously empty and starting to talk gibberish. Catfish apparently don’t make good house pets, so maybe it’s best to take on a dog. As the world goes upside down it’s hard to figure out just where the top and the bottom really are.



February 2013

DUDE, WHERE'S MY CAR?

Martin Scorsese and Paul Thomas Anderson, I still turn up for each and every Adam Sandler movie. I call on Will Ferrell, Ben Stiller or even Steve Carrell any time my mood turns grey, and you can expect no apologies for this.

Which brings me rather smoothly to the title of the piece, which was stolen from the hilariously funny flick which ranks high up next to 'Weekend at Bernie's' on my list of things to see before you die.

Unfortunately, the sequel 'Weekend At Bernie's 2' should be avoided at all cost. Place it in the same bin as the Paris Hilton CD you got five years ago for Christmas and incinerate them both immediately.

The point is that one of the unsung victims of Asia's exploding property boom and development supersized dengue fever is the magical vacant parking place. Forget Joni Mitchell and those rose-coloured glasses of 1970. They did pave paradise – but in many cases forgot to put up the parking lot.

Rising condo towers around every corner and the new affluent middle class who all want a brand new shiny automobile are wreaking havoc on the region's infrastructure. Cars line the streets, alleys and highways as far as the eye can see. So where to park? Hobbit-sized condominiums only provide the bare essential facilities, often in square boxes the size of my filing cabinet. Extra parking for guests? No way.

Developers are sucking up the profit from holding back on vehicle spaces to branch out into lifestyle offerings like retail shopping experiences, amusement areas and hotels.

The East's new age of consumerism is bringing about more mega mall complexes and also going local into strip-type community offerings where you can eat, drink, work and sleep (ideally not in that order). Getting between the grinds, however, is still a monumental task that is best termed 'carmageddon'.

Roll over road rage and going postal, bring on parking rage. Assaults with deadly weapons, fist fights, broken homes and all manner of insanity lurk in the mind



Joni Mitchell and those rose coloured glasses of 1970. They did pave paradise – but in many cases forgot to put up the parking lot.

whenever you simply want to park your car. The Asian workhorse economies are pumping out the cash full-time, but seemingly, most government officials didn't get the memo. Zoning, building controls, infrastructure? Bring on Comedy Central to tackle these as it's like playing from behind against Manchester United 10-nil in extra time, with only nine on your side.

So I think I can answer the comedic question at hand with some authority.

Where's my car, dude? It's driving around aimlessly for hours just looking for somewhere to park.

THE END OF CONVERSATION

Drawing comparisons between cave dwellers from the dawn of time and the budding Donald Trumps populating the nearest Starbucks is easy. Trace way back to those early raves at the local cave and you would find small circles of scantily clad folks swapping stories about evading a rampaging T-Rex or ducking to avoid one of those huge flying reptiles the size of an Airbus. Chronicling their lives, loves, fears and ambitions, they covered the walls in graffiti-like drawings – let's call it primeval Facebook.

Our model journey has now taken us from the wall of that cave to the small handheld devices we call smartphones, but the trek through the ages has left a need for rite and ritual indelibly tattooed on the human psyche. In this day and age, as our food arrives at the communal restaurant table, everyone reaches for their phones to first take a picture and thank the Gods by immortalising the moment.

As in any of the great religions of the world, worship and prayer to a higher power weaves intricately into our daily lives and today's devout individuals and groups can be seen at any hour of the day, in public or in private, with their heads hung low in silence. Most of the time, the only movement to show the difference between the living and the dead is light tapping on a screen.

As I journey through this so-called modern life, the hairs start to stand up on my neck. Sure, I am already a paranoid soul but there is something more sinister at work. It's not the noir or the slow-motion smack in the middle of chemical induced trip. Is it an altered state? Has a great power hit the mute button on life? Not the eerie trip from cradle to death or in a metaphorical way, but in the 365, 24/7 daily existence of us all.

We no longer talk. We tweet, Facebook, SMS, swap YouTube links, pin it, poke it, like it and when our souls cry out for something more, we journey far into the darkness just to recharge our phones – much like a holy pilgrimage as we hope to find a plug that works.

Sure we can trace back our techno journey to the start-up called Christianity, but how can you Adam and Eve the apple that Steve Jobs somehow worked into the storyline of the Bible? Early men were connected by the basic human need to speak, share



and engage. Today we've become self-inflicted by the fetish of commerce. Bring in the gimp and if there's butter in the refrigerator, throw that in as well – dance the tango with Brando.

The wild world of real estate has embraced the smartphone with the same fervour as citizen X. Apps, videos, property locators, every form of e-commerce with all the bells and whistles attached. Yet those who would buy property still desire to touch the ground, reach out and feel the lines of reality, and if possible, even speak to someone who is not a machine.

Technology is meant to improve our lives, save us time to engage in far richer pursuits than the everyday mundane. Yet we've become slaves to the smartphone (my head flicks onto one of those Planet of the Apes movies. Hmm possible, but I've not yet seen many monkeys with iPhones). When doing business in the modern world, you have to remember there is a time and place when you have to look someone straight in the eye, take the hands off the screen and actually have a conversation.

The mute button, after all, can be turned off as well as on.

DOWN AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR

As for the evil spectre of inflation, this looks to be down to a two-horse race with parallel economic highs.

I'm the biggest idiot in the entire universe. I recently spent those dim dark hours of early morning dashing between Bangkok's two airports: Suvarnabhumi and Don Mueang.

With a 6am flight scheduled to Bali, I smugly made my way to the latter airport by 4.45am and figured there was plenty of time to settle into one of those comfy chairs with a jumbo cup of caffeine. Instead, after a rude awakening at the check-in counter, I provided much amusement and solicited hilarious laughs from the airline counter staff and 20 taxi drivers who quickly gathered around in some sort of Gangnam-style circle dance. A white-knuckle fast and furious dash to Bangkok's other airport had my heart beating like a Jack Rabbit Slim.

Thankfully my blood pressure has since dropped and a cooling off break has prevailed over my badly damaged ego. I don't meditate, and yoga makes no sense at all. So all I have is bloodshot eyes and crusty computer keys to fall back on while wolfing down a crusty banana muffin.

Speaking about the need for cooling measures, two of Asia's top property markets are still trying to stick their overheated real estate engines into the deep freeze. Greater China and Singapore have both gone through a series of measures, which still have not done the trick.

Meanwhile, other Asian markets are reporting rising regional transactions from these pent-up giants. Strong economic growth and a skyrocketing middle class have continued to multiply a double dose of both end-users who want to trade up, and investment buyers looking for premium yields.

Throwing a wrench into the equation are the rapidly rising Asian currencies in countries like Thailand and the Philippines. Will the currency appreciation slam the large export sectors and chill down growth, or will the domestic buying pool look to take their stronger currency to buy properties in the UK, Europe and US?

As for the evil spectre of inflation, this looks to be down to a two-horse race with parallel economic highs.



First to blink dies. Don't watch the other guy, just focus on the finish. Still, Asia is struggling with the uncertainty of a continued domestication of its eight ball in the corner pocket go-to market. How deep? No one is certain. Will the cooling measures bring Asian buyers from nearby countries instead of those from the far away West? After all, this liquidity needs a home.

Blasting into the Year of the Snake, perhaps we need to substitute a coiled-up question mark as our logo of the day. Overheated property prices, and upward heat-seeking land values, which continue to defy gravity look set to rule for the moment. Still I hear this little voice inside of me crying out in the dark, and it's asking about fundamentals. The question continues to be bubble, burst or buoyant, my three drinking buddies, the 3 Bs are waiting for me down at the bar.

I'll have a scotch on the rocks, please. In fact bring me an entire bucket to help cool me down.

April 2013

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

It was a bit like an out-of-body experience as I found myself reaching around the quacking salesperson's head, put my hands around her neck and squeezed hard. Hard as in fighting for a loose ball in a rugby scrum and hoarding the prized trophy while all manner of mayhem breaks out around you.

Hold on tight, tight and tighter.

But in the blink of an eye I was back in the present, with only my mind drifting into criminal intent. There would be no OJ Simpson-inspired trial, nor were any gloves present in clear sight.

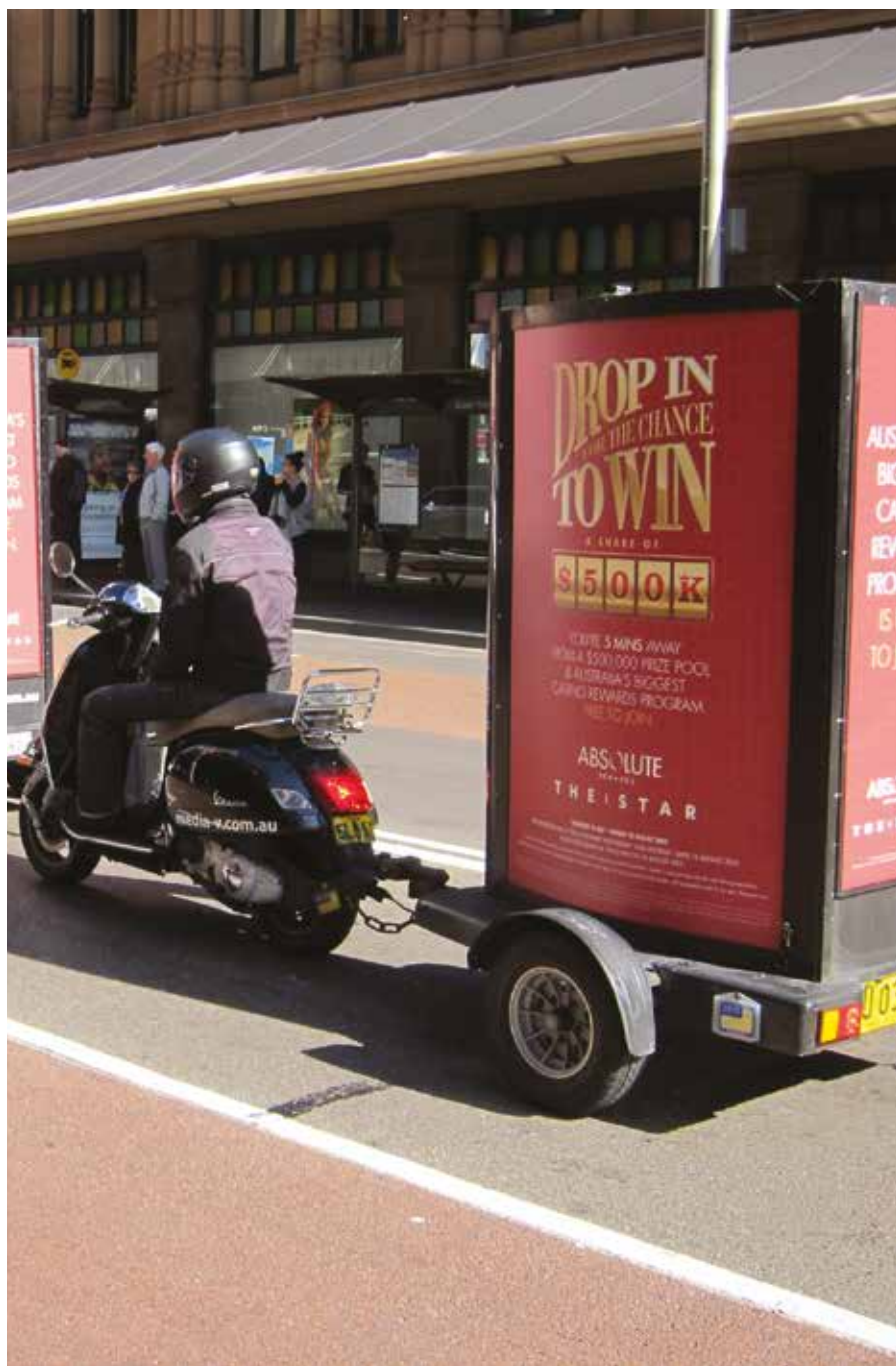
Welcome to the world of pitching property and a dreaded day of visiting developers' model show units.

Quasimodo couldn't stand hearing those ringing bells, but for me what absolutely drives me to the frayed edge is the mindless modern-day sales pitch.

Call me quirky but I find it highly annoying to first be given a set of rules rather than welcomed into the shrine-like aura of the highly esteemed and prestigious show unit. "No cameras" is the first quack that comes out of my host's mouth, along with "come now, we have others waiting." Worse still is actually showing up without an appointment, which seems tantamount to walking into the CIA Headquarters or the Kremlin and asking to use the bathroom. That first smile turns to a confused state, squinty eyes are up next and then the ultimate grimace.

Bring on the waterboarding, as walking in unannounced is a not dissimilar to a group of boat people showing up on the beach in Australia with Gucci luggage. There is simply no explanation.

Once the tour begins, the monotone voice-over kicks into top gear, combining the drone of a speeding motorbike and a Usain Bolt sprint from room to room.



So there you have it – the real estate industry’s trigger point of success in 2013 – the sales function is on autopilot.

Whatever you do, don’t interrupt or ask questions, as the memorised drivell must be delivered in full. This has to be one of those arcane sales SOPs (standard operating procedures).

Over the years I’ve encountered some pretty savvy salespeople who look you in the eye, grasp your hand and ask you questions. Suddenly it’s as if someone turned up the heat in the room and a Woodstock-burst of good vibes fills the empty space. Apparently those days are over. Though I have to say in the beleaguered timeshare world (whoops, make that the vacation ownership sector), those guys and gals know how to establish an instant BFF friendship.

But lets talk about the end game, what that salesperson really wants is not to answer a question, nor do they have any interest in what you think or have to say, but it’s the quest for your email address.

This is the end-all, be-all final goal. Once that’s obtained, an arctic-like chill comes over the room signalling it’s time you left. That means now, not later. Go on... get the hell out! For anyone who asks for my email, they all receive the same response – a quizzical look and a stunned humourless, deadpan serious answer: “What’s email?” This usually stops the request dead in its tracks. No, I don’t do the Yahoo. There is no G spot in my Gmail. I need to get off this train before it starts to get embarrassing.

So there you have it – the real estate industry’s trigger point of success in 2013 – the sales function is on autopilot.

Maybe demand is simply so strong that all we need are order takers? Or else the industry simply isn’t attracting the calibre of sales professional it once was. Okay, so you don’t believe me, go out and walk in my shoes for while. Just cut your head off and send over the rest of your body. Be prepared for a vanilla experience without any of the fun kinky stuff and above all – get ready to Yahoo*.

** **Note to readers:** I received no promotional consideration from Yahoo when writing this piece, though I am open and ready to discuss such consideration, provided it does not entail email of any kind.*



CONFESSIONS OF A BUBBLE BOY

It's a strange bizarrism that today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow, no matter if it's this very minute or ten years later.

I'm sitting sky high and the the pilot has taken a sharp left out of Kuala Lumpur heading to 37,000 feet. Soothing the savage beast is sounds of the Arctic Monkeys' 'Suck It and See'. It's loud and noisy but not nearly enough to muffle the sounds of the jet engine, which is oh-so close, and oh-so far away. 'Brick by Brick' goes the next track as I try to recall if Malaysian Airlines serves alcohol.

My inner beast, longing for a tasty beverage, turns to thought of all things bubble. Not that silly singer Michael whatever his name is (I can't recall and the lines all tend to blur anyway when it comes to suit-wearing youths trying to do a Sinatra), Sammy, Dean and the Rat Pack would sort him out in short order.

During my travels through Asia this year, at various real estate and hospitality conferences, one topic that often comes up in softly spoken tones, generally behind closed doors, is a concern over an impending property bubble.

Developers of course fear the bubble in a huge way. More so than cheating businessmen fear their wives or tepid travellers garner sweaty palms whenever bumps start to shake things up on a rainy night-time trip to nowhere.

I like the bumps. Bring it on. But the larger world of institutional capital, stock exchange and bankers live in terror of the unknown. Life must be scripted and don't deviate from the plan. Singaporeans know such a scenario all too well.

Ah, my mind drifts as I spot wine bottles being rolled down the aisle by the tropically clad flight attendants. Drinks are on the way, yet the menace of overheated property markets gone mad with success and greed continues to find its way into my subconscious.

Sadly in the West, those colonial misfits who remain living in the past have cast great sheets of bubble wrap across their own landscapes and now have reverted to dinosaur mode with the impossible task of popping each and every bubble. It's not going to happen, no way, despite gigantic feet the size of a largish SUV.



Asia's more highbrow, mature, stabilised markets have of course brought in a few ice cubes to chill out surging property speculation. While the guys in the emerging markets, hell they take their drinks straight and are out back downing shots like there is no tomorrow.

Clearly the fear of the bubble remains an underlying concern, and as the big machine known as property pumps long into the night, the inference of a far 'too fast' bubble-effect remains only a reality to those sorry paranoid souls who worry about global warms and true democracy.

My own fears go much deeper. Will Bella the flight attendant be back for refills before we descend into the 'carmageddon' traffic chaos of Jakarta? Did I pack my black shoes for tomorrow's conference or will I have to don the same black slippers I am wearing on the plane?

I don't want to be the one who popped the bubble, but if all else fails I may just have to wrap my feet in that bubble wrap tomorrow and hope for the best. And yet, no matter what – tomorrow is tomorrow and today is today.

June 2013

DECLINE OF THE EXPAT EXPERT

These days my life seems to have taken on a speed of its own, as if a stray cat wondered in off the street and hit the fast-forward button on my iTunes (no promotional consideration has been provided in the mention of this commercial offering but Apple please note, I can and will provide any type of irrelevant connections to any of your products should you be inclined to send me free stuff).

My change of status from domestic resident to expatriate happened nearly thirty years ago. I recall trips to Hong Kong where English generalists were hired by legacy trading firms. Sitting on a bar stool next to one of these pale-faced Brits, I'd quiz them on exactly what qualifications they had, or what they actually did in their present positions? A precursor was, of course, Eton or another of those old-boy institutions. Their answers, despite it being early in the evening and all of us being frighteningly sober, often amounted to jibberish.

In the old days, expatriates to Asia could often leverage themselves into positions of power and respect based on their (Western) country of origin. This, of course, did not apply to the 'Old Hands' who still wore those safari suits and hung out at the FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club). The latter rocked as they travelled further afield than their location clubs and wore instances of malaria or dengue as badges of honour.

Suddenly that damn cat comes in again, and with an intuitive paw lands right on the go faster button. I'm not going to say what happened next to the cat for fear of enraging the PETA crowd. Suffice to say that today, the expat world as we knew it is gone – forever.

Real estate reflects the same anxious shift. Sure, there was massive growth in the early to mid-1990s when anything and everything worked. At least until 1997. In the lead up, there was a massive migration of overseas property experts into the region. Certainly the Hong Kong handover, if nothing else, was a symbolic taste of things to come, but wanting to forestall the inevitable, many headed north to China.

In what may have been a last gasp effort, or as we say in American football that 'final fling into the end zone', the Millennium injected steroids into the system. But as Bad Lance or any speed freak can tell you, for every road that goes up, on the other side is dark fast descent down into oblivion.



During the GFC, the Middle East and Asia again saw an exodus of expatriate experts, and these days, it's become a bit like forestalling the inevitable. With the rising tide of domestication in each and every Asian country, why on earth do they need the long-haul foreigners? More telling still is the upcoming AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) with inter-Asia mergers, acquisitions and cross border investments taking centre stage. Enter the Asian expats: Indonesians and Malaysians who can both trade tables in Bahasa, Singaporeans who can switch to the language of the monied mainland.

I've often mulled over learning Mandarin, but then realise that trying to even get a decent command of English has been a struggle. I'm not quite sure what the future holds for the real estate expatriate in this changing world, but certainly, one's nationality is no longer really important – it's more basic elements like language, relationships, connections that count, or extraordinary skills which are currently still in demand.

The playing field has been levelled and not even a billionaire sugar daddy can buy his way into the top in Asia. These days, it's a simple matter of how good, or bad, you are. Mind you, keep an eye out for stray cats.

WAITING FOR THE BIG SLEEP

*All of the lasts, versus all those firsts earlier in life.
It's safe to be in the middle, but there is no avoiding
reality when the end is just over the rainbow.*

Chaos in Cyprus, bombs away in North Korea and talk of a property bubble in Asia. Will I live to see the bottom? Or will I grow old bouncing off the wall of one of those 20 square metre affordable luxury condos springing up everywhere around me? I'm not sure where my recent fascination or fixation on death comes from, but one sure sign that the dark side is prevailing is when you start actually reading obituaries. My eyes dart around each day through those 'now trending' Yahoo headlines, which seem to feature a lot more departures than arrivals. The computer mouse mysteriously travels to the headline and clicks on someone's entire life story in under 100 words.

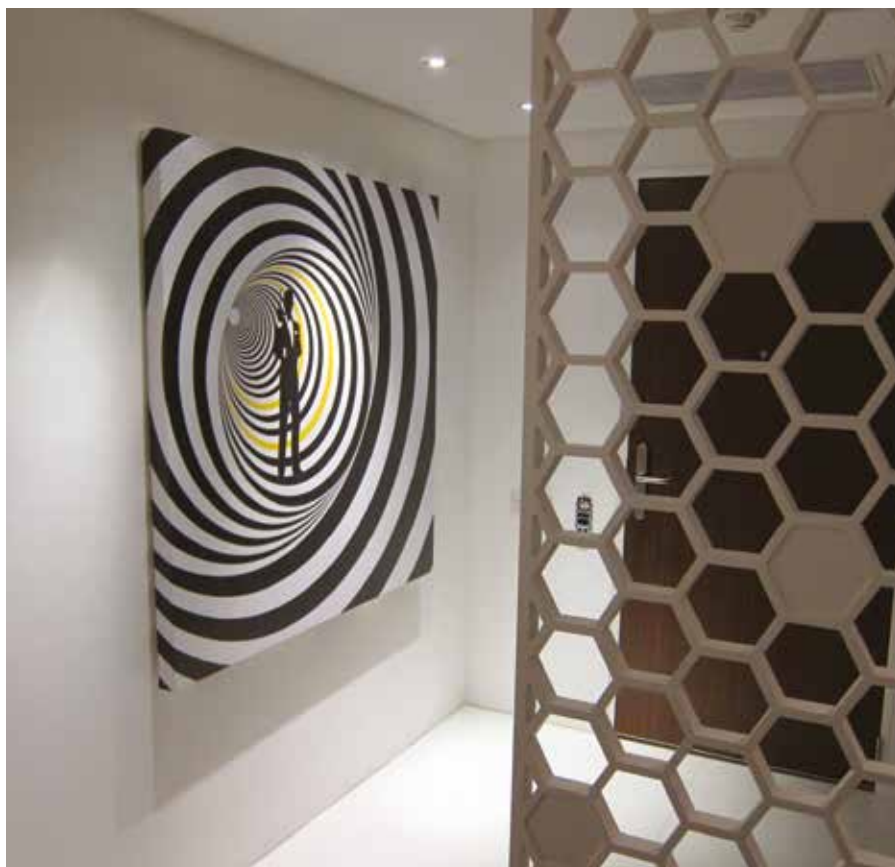
Even better is sitting on the plane to Singapore and reading the Straits Times backstories where the obits have those lovely little glamour poses. The eyes search out the younger ones and wonder how did they manage to go to the big sleep so early in the game? Of course, the devil is in the detail and for men, the odds are stacked again them. You see all the merry departed widows die at a ripe old age, their husbands long gone.

Very disturbing.

I accept that everyone (and everything) has a shelf life, but time just seems to go faster these days. I grew up slowly, with endless afternoons and far too much excess, just how many times can you listen to Stairway to Heaven over and over again?), searching for crazed genius and the true meaning of life in vinyl. Now I'm lucky to get to the break where Robert Plant's soaring vocals merge in heavy metal thunder.

It's the same with the property markets. It seems like only yesterday we were listening to the perfect riff of an Asian boom, yet already the next fade-out looms in the headlines and market predictions. It seems that, just as it is for post-50 males, property markets are far more likely to meet an untimely demise than take a slow, saggy trip to meet the grim reaper.

It's the lead up which is maddening.



All of the lasts, versus all those firsts earlier in life. It's safe to be in the middle, but there is no avoiding reality when the end is just over the rainbow. Life after death continues to be the ultimate perk, but I've yet to receive a Facebook friend request or an SMS from anyone I have known who is now dead. Of course, property markets stand a much better chance of a rebirth than humans, but the time in between may feel just as depressing as the devil's dog catching you in its fangs and slowly but surely dragging you under.

So there you have it, the crux of it all – a paradoxical start and stop for all things. Sure, there are moments of great hope, joy even, and endless days you wish would never end, but coming to terms with mortality, whether human or economic, really sucks.

My editor will probably berate me for the lack of real estate in this eulogy, but at this point I'm not even sure if I will make it to next month's column. How can you fit your life into 100 words or less when the big sleep is outside your door looking for the buzzer?

HEADBANGING REAL ESTATE

Did you ever wonder what manner of real estate broker Ozzy Osborne would be? Yes, it's quizzically interesting to imagine the Black Sabbath frontman handing out business cards with his picture on them, or even biting the head off a bat just to seal a deal.

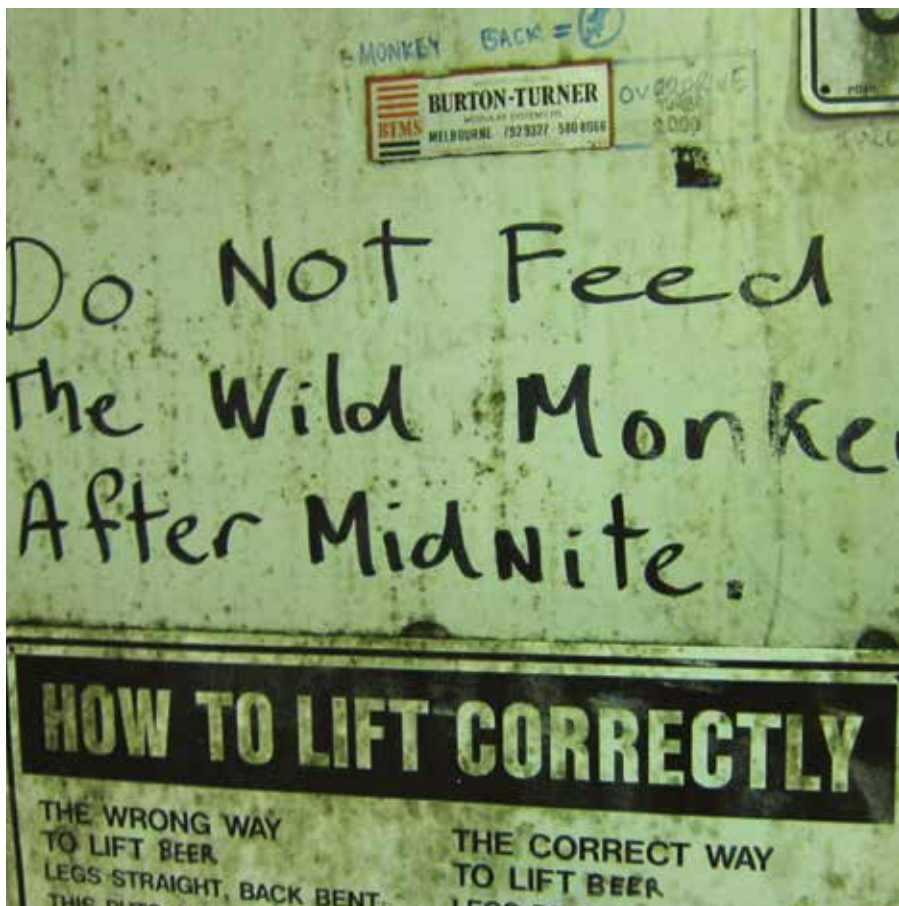
The marriage of a rock 'n' roller and the property industry just might be too arcane for the mainstream. Real estate is typically a plaid affair where the straight and narrow lines of normal are the path most often travelled. Look at the name games of endless boredom in the categories – apartment, condo, split-level, duplex, semi-attached, attached, detached, lots, townhouse, and penthouse. My inner dark side conjures up these mindless classifications as some sort of code – be it the Da Vinci or a brazen escort over on Craigslist who offers any and every type of carnal pleasure.

Rock 'n' roll in the old days had to be better, when you would head to Tower Records and troll the bins – heavy metal, punk, glitter, new wave, thrash, southern rock, progressive, soul, rockabilly, grunge, country and western. The list went on and on, but in the real estate industry hit a wall headfirst, blown up with airbags and a lobotomy.

Where is the imagination? It's no longer just '1,000 things to do before you die', but more likely '10,000 ways to include the term luxury' – be it 6 stars, bespoke, mega, ultra, sophisticated, chic, upscale, trendy, hip, or my own favourite, affordable luxury. Whoever coined the last one needs to be banished to a lifetime of Michael Bolton concerts.

Indeed, property today has become so 'pimped' that it can't even say, "who's your daddy?" (Its real dad went down to the 7-Eleven for a diet coke late one night in 2003 and never came back). These days, even Trump doesn't actually stand for truly inventive property – he's down at the bank cashing his latest royalty check for some astonishing property aimed at aspirational buyers which he has never even laid his eyes on.

Can Ozzy help us solve our malaise? Probably not, but perhaps six months on the road, mounting up some serious addictions and in the end, getting into AA may be the



answer. I hear it's a great place to network and do business deals. It is hard to hear the heavy metal thunder from up on the top floor, unless that is, the after hours party went straight up to the top.

To be concise, what I am proposing is not sheer madness. Yes, Tower Records is no longer with us, and the ghost of Cobain is fading. But sometimes late at night, when the wind outside my bedroom whistles I flick up the iTunes and turn it way up loud with Ozzy's Crazy Train.

As for Ozzy making it to a 9am client meeting, we'd probably have to shelve the entire day, but be very certain of one thing, he is not out shopping for a semi-detached townhouse which is termed 'affordable luxury'. Unless said property is a neverworld portal to an imaginary underworld where Michael Bolton and Donald Trump are singing a duet.

ALL NIGHT LONG IN JAKARTA

Sometimes it takes a journey off Wall Street or those gyrating bourses in London, Tokyo or Sydney to see where the real action is.

It's 4am at Jakarta's Soekarno Hatta International Airport and the red digital numbers simply add to my own personal version of dazed and confused. Any hope of badly needed caffeine has vanished in a mirage experience gone stupidly wrong.

The death march to the gate turned out to be like an episode from the Walking Dead, a beacon of hope was on the horizon. Yes, the Starbucks sign was lit and my pace quickened from a crawl to a flat-out run for the latte, but as in all mirages, my entry to the inner sanctum of java was barred by a rolled-down metal gate and an ignominious 'closed' sign. I did manage in a fit of punch drunk madness to kick the door, in what my own imaginary life was a Van Damme roundhouse. In reality, I actually missed the roller blind and fell over. Man down.

While laying face down on the cool bricks of the airport terminal I was able to relive the past few hours of my journey.

It started with a 2.40am wake-up call, and the sheer panic of one missing sock, which I thankfully later found on the final room check, stuffed into the minibar. Feeling a bit posh the night before I had upgraded my usual Blue Bird taxi booking into a Silver Bird to ease the savage early morning mind fog.

Riding through the dark streets of Jakarta I silently passed countless multiple versions of the same mini-mart: 7-Eleven, Lawson Station, Indomarket and even an all-night Starbucks. Bright white lights magnified the customers lining up, and out front these new age social centres had tables full of groups of people in deep animated conversation.

These days, Jakarta's economy remains cranked up 24/7, with the bright lights reflecting a whole new air of confidence – the promise and the buzz. I had been in town to attend the Indonesian Hospitality and Tourism Investment Conference. My own professional experience has mirrored the emerging dragon's trend with Bali, Jakarta and other markets, taking up such vast chunks out of our time that it would build Pink Floyd's wall in a few scant weeks.



Admittedly on the first day of the event, the Jakarta Post ran a headline which caused me to do a double take: 'Economic growth loses steam'. The story spoke about declining GDP and consumer spending and the real deal killer, inflation. As the song goes, Ei-Ei-O. The tune aptly spells out the warning flags for the country's economy with the oil subsidy issue continuing to be the elephant in the box. No single item on the national agenda has such a sensitive hair trigger that runs the gamut of the nation's population from top to bottom.

Next, throw in the uncertainty over the election and Indonesia's political direction post-SBY (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the current president), who has pulled off something of a Bill Clinton-like 'walk on water' drive for what is now Southeast Asia's largest economy. As in life, there are too many questions, and I didn't even make it to the prevailing crisis over inadequate infrastructure.

And yet Indonesia, like Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, are hungry tigers, increasingly becoming high big stake players in the global economy.

Sometimes it takes a journey off Wall Street or those gyrating bourses in London, Tokyo or Sydney to see where the real action is.

Despite risk, it's these countries that hold huge upside and remain Asia's shining stars. Yes, Jakarta's the kind of place that stays up all-night long, and whether you are running on adrenaline or caffeine, a mini-mart is never far away.

August 2013

THE CULT OF 'HYPE-NOSIS'

Whenever I hear the strains of that inspirational ballad 'I Believe I Can Fly' I'm overcome with the sudden urge to punch someone in the face. It's an instant reflex. One that flicks the switch onto common sense and quickly regresses into blind rage. Hate doesn't come close to describing my mood at this pretentious, faux-inspirational, do-good attempt at a song about uplifting our sagging spirits and reaching for the stars.

If I wanted to be an astronaut and live up in outer space, fine, but I'm quite content living on an island in Asia wearing shorts, t-shirt and flip-flops. Try doing that up in the solar system? My own inspiration comes about 6pm when the thought of opening a stunning bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon and catching the last glimpse of a sunset is on the radar.

And yet we as a race are so gullible, like those sheep set to plunge over the edge of a cliff, at a moment's notice. We really do believe we can fly – and what's worse than flying sheep?

My mind has stalled at 8,000 metres so let's move on, past the sheep, and talk about the errant herds.

Those who are religiously inclined might suddenly turn to a visual of Jesus tending his flock of sheep in some serene valley, but the J-Man never tried to sell real estate. Actually that's not correct, the whole concept of heaven and the promise of eternal life and a personal piece of property high up the sky started with the rise of Christianity.

Here it is, the ultimate conspiracy. Call in the Da Vinci Code. Who's the wolf in sheep's clothing? Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds has her own billboard on the expressway of happiness, so we can wrap in the Fab Four too. Call it hype, mass hypnosis or just plain steroids, but the truth remains that almost everyone just wants to feel good.

Real estate developers and brokers often attempt to translate that vibe and convince the monied Dr. Feelgood into buying a penthouse condominium. Growing a beard is not an option unless you want to end up looking like one of the members of the band ZZ Top or a water-boarded Gitmo Bay inmate. And yet how do you get those sheep over the cliff?



This is when the shiny little marketing guys come in, be it guaranteed returns, giveaway Apple products, promises of a sharper image, branded furniture, or an excellent espresso from a high-heeled Amazonian model type.

Damn these people are good. Can I buy two?

But what do you do if you are stuck in an elevator alone and the backup power fails, yet the strains of 'I Believe I Can Fly' continue to creep into your subconscious? Forget prayer, as you know where all this real estate stuff started. And you can't call Ghostbusters as the mobile service has been disrupted.

At the end of the line hype is hype and what we hate we love. And what we love we hate. There is a fine line between the two so next time you get too close to the cliff, just back away slowly – very slowly – and run for your life.

SMOKIN' JOE AND THE THRILL IS BACK

This year I've taken a number of trips to the land of 7107 islands and the storyline is reading well.

One of my favourite Muhammad Ali rants goes something like “Killa and a thrilla and a chilla, when I get that gorilla in Manila”.

Rewind back to one of the greatest boxing events of all time with Smokin' Joe Frazier squaring off and trading deafening blows with Ali that went 14 agonising rounds.

The often documented rise and fall of fortunes of the Philippines could well be likened to those of a lifelong fighter, going from early promise as a strong contender only to fall face down in an unanticipated defeat.

What's that line about you never hear the shot that kills you? Kick into the Rocky theme and like the franchise film series which not only jumped the shark but somehow ended up back at the meat packing plant.

Cutting to the chase, Rocky was knocked down more times than I can remember, but always came back swinging.

Yet as the protégé grows older and wiser, a comeback is staged, only to be cut short again.

Getting up off the mat he vows to try yet again.

In time, with hard work, true grit and a bit of luck, the tables turn and an aging yet graceful champion is crowned.

Sure the scars are there and you couldn't count the age lines on his face, yet after bitter failure comes the distant musical strains of success.

Hitting the news in similar style is Filipino billionaire Henry Sy, who is set to merge his real estate assets into what will be one of the largest real estate firms in the country, SM Prime Holdings, on the back of a market cap that Bloomberg estimates will be in excess of US\$14 billion.



I don't even want to imagine how many pesos that is, but it's one hell of a lot. Just a few short months ago, the Philippines also hit the world's financial news lines when Standard and Poor's upgraded the country with an investment grade rating. Even Southeast Asia's largest economy, Indonesia, hasn't hit that high note yet. In the land of mango, tango and fandango, the buzz was clearly on.

Not only did it exceed an American Idol Glee Club, but it elevated market sentiment more than a successful Manny Pacquiao bout could.

This year I've taken a number of trips to the land of 7107 islands and the storyline is reading well, It's imperfect, as is real life, but President Nonoy Aquino has been an able bodied inspirational trainer in the corner of our journeyman boxer.

He's coaxed the aging spirit along, stopped the bleeding, which could have ended with a towel thrown into the ring, and ultimately jumped up, thrusting his hands up in the air when a hard-fought victory was won.

Somehow I feel wherever Smokin' Joe resides these days, way up in the air, you can't help but feel he's cracked a smile at how the far the 'Thrilla in Manila' has come.

THE CAPTAIN CRUNCH CURRENCY CRUSH

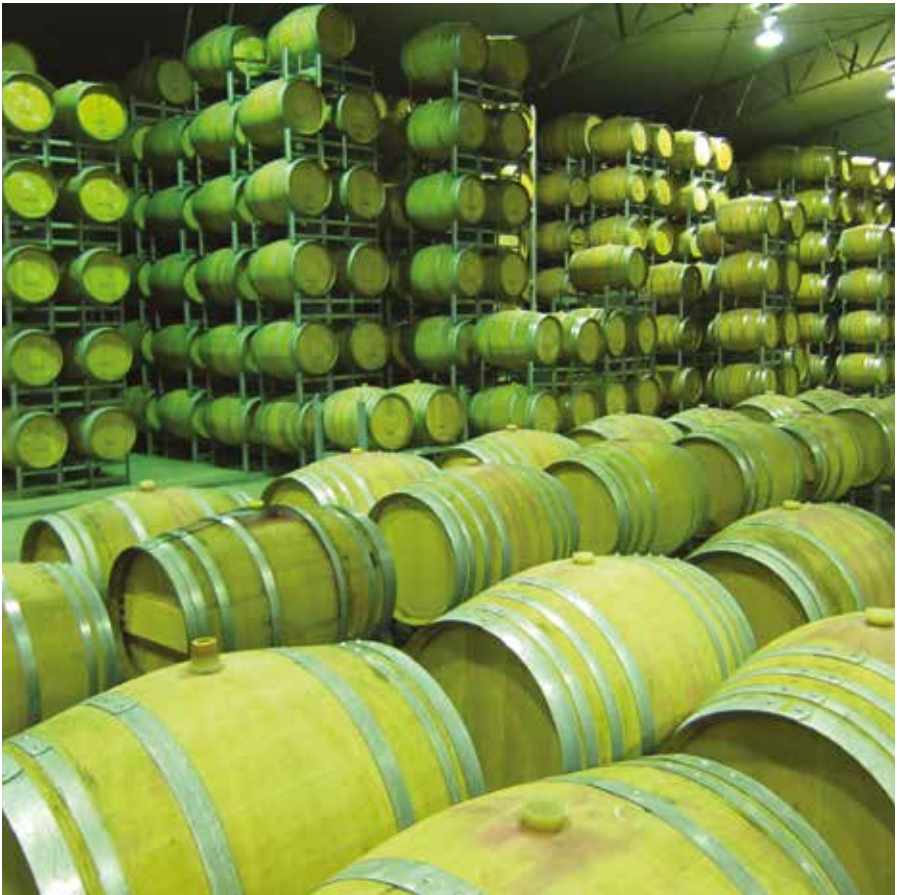
It's a Wednesday morning as I find myself sitting in a hotel room in Jakarta channel surfing between Bloomberg and CNBC. Back and forth my finger flicks the thick-as-a-brick remote control. Suddenly disaster kicks in as I mistakenly land in the unknown territory of TLC's 'Cake Boss' and then even further underground with Discovery's 'Amish Mafia'. Panic grips my heart, as images of Kurtz comes to mind: "never get out of the boat." These are words I have centred my entire existence around.

Looking around the hotel room, the stark realisation dawns that there is no boat. Indeed this is the broadside which so many property investors and developers in Asia now find themselves in these crazy, volatile days. Dude, where's my boat? Yet we continue on.

We continue despite the blaring nasal tones being emitted from lavishly liquid Korean LCD television screens warning of the possible meltdown of the region's currencies. Size does matter, and the TVs dwarf a baby hippo – one of nature's most dangerous creatures.

The interplay between exchange rates and property is oftentimes compared to dirty dancing. A frenzied exchange between two parties that gives off enough steam to cook up some really tasty dim sum. But the steam forms a large question-like cloud that just passed over in the dark blue sky outside. An apparition? Maybe... In emerging divergent markets such as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines what impact will big time currency depreciation have on real estate?

Splitting the teams into good versus evil; on the holy side, with currency adjustments these export driven economies will of course become more competitive on a global basis with cheaper goods and services (assuming anyone in North America or Europe has pocket change left to muster up a consumer rush). On the dark side; economic volatility often sidelines foreign property investors – a bit like a sports superstar who disappears after a doping scandal – steroids and property have, after all, been kissing cousins over the past three or four years of meteoric growth.



You have to wonder that despite widespread globalisation, broad markets in Asia have continued to be boosted by a rising middle class and domestic events. Do the ups and downs of currency really matter when the costs and expense are all a home field advantage anyway?

Heading down the up escalator, the gold rush of the post-GFC crisis still seems a distant memory. Neil Young said it best lyrically, echoing those beautifully haunting lines 'keeps me searching for a heart of gold.' We've seen skittish investors flock back to the perceived safe house of property as of late, finding that the glitter of gold becomes just a little too speculative, like the sporadic rise and fall of stock markets. Counting out some coins on the hotel table, my mind starts rambling over what they are really worth. Or does it matter? My dim sum is calling and it's time to cash up and spend. While I loathe that term 'glocal', the relevance to today's inevitable shift back to mono remains a locomotive on rails. Is property truly an international event or have the tables been turned back to one of inevitable domestication?

LISTENING TO THE MAN

In the new age of instant gratification, our love affair with social media is only outpaced by the pure and epic love of The Fast and the Furious.

My all too often side trips down memory lane seem to have taken the lead from Jack Rabbit Slim recently, despite taking place in a world increasingly punctuated by breaking news.

To go any further without musical inspirational would be tantamount to a teenage suicide.

All that potential wasted and so young to die – but certainly a much finer corpse left over than my sun-weathered lump.

Ah yes, the Spinner's 'Rubber Band Man', is found on iTunes, and I didn't even need to send out a distress signal. Asia and our hero, the soulful rubber band man, have a lot in common, an elastic span that suddenly stretches out so long you have to think it will break any minute and the next minute it snaps back like a slap in the face of a jealous lover. On Wall Street or even Main Street the amped up trip from hero to zero and back again seems to have taken on the magnitude of cooking instant noodles. As I write this, Southeast Asia's home of capitalism, Singapore, has been enveloped by a nasty case of the haze. Going back to the 1970s Jimi Hendrix turned it purple, but the current mood certainly is not a return to the 'Summer of Love'.

Scanning the annoying high pitch financial news channels, everyone is chatting about the cost of the haze, and what the cost to the economy will be. Millions, billions or trillions? Call in the Rain Man. My head starts spinning out – not another derailment.

Going back to the new Millennium, we've had 9/11, SARS, bird flu, sub-prime, red shirts, yellow shirts, tsunamis, volcanoes, terrorism and that screwy dictator in North Korea.

And yes, the breaking news for investors has come and gone.

As far as the Rubber Band Man travels, he snapped back from the edge at just the right moment.



In the new age of instant gratification, our love affair with social media is only outpaced by the pure and epic love of *The Fast and the Furious*. Like Asia, the number of rapid-fire high velocity sequels to that franchise film series just keep going. I stop for a minute and wonder, is it better to be fast or furious? Silence has pierced my ears and it is ready to tattoo a scorpion on my arm. More music, and up comes that blues classic *Sixty Minute Man*. Yes, going old school makes sense, back when there was real staying power.

This year, the world is continuing to reel in epic proportions, yet here in Asia we have managed to live long and prosper. I have to admit the China slowdown, easing of US monetary policy and potential impact on resource driven economies such as Australia and Indonesia worries me. Still, life goes on and for sure it's only going to get faster.

Hey Rubber Band Man, what you doin' next? Is there room for any more on the real estate *Soul Train*? I've got sixty minutes, and come to think of it, maybe sixty more.

October 2013

MANDARIN DREAM

There is a wave sweeping our basketball-shaped globe of more than 80 million mainland denizens venturing outward.

Whether they are wheeling a sturdy Samsonite, or the uber-chic Rimowa in pastel colours, the flood gates are open.

Hoteliers, while not always the sharpest tools in the shed, have at least for a number of years led the cultural revolutionary charge by providing noodles in minibars and putting dim sum and congee onto their breakfast buffets.

Sure, you think these are only token gestures, but check out the line that extends from the 7-Eleven across the street when the tour bus arrives and the hunt for comfort food is unleashed.

My early memories of China, growing up in America, were full of stereotypes: academics carrying dog-eared copies of *The Little Red Book* or pre-hipster era fashionable Mao caps.

There was of course my hero Bruce Lee from *The Green Hornet*, and the ultimate wanderer Caine on the TV show *Kung Fu*.

Remember this was prior to China's open door policy, and the anti-hero Nixon recognising ping pong as an idiom for the fact that there was more to the world than the West.

Slowly the curtain was lifted, and the left and right met somewhere in the middle of what started out as a trickling stream and is now a raging river.

Shifting our thoughts to real estate, one of the lurking questions in most Asian countries is how to tap into the vast potential of Chinese property buyers.

Tourism has been an easy nut to crack, but bricks and mortar – except in the cases of Hong Kong and Singapore – have been more elusive than finding life on Mars. My attempts at embracing Chinese culture pretty much end at the intersection of



It's more than apparent that the tables have been bizarrely turned and the flow is going from the East back into the West.

knowing how to hand out a business card the proper way, being able to pick up peanuts with chop sticks, and having two mainstay karaoke songs at the ready, which I can stumble through no matter how much I've had to drink.

To say my attempts at a cultural crossover are weak and pathetic is an understatement.

And yet I, like so many, recognise the changes in the wind, see the freight train coming down the tracks and know who will likely be a main market force for decades to come.

So where do you start? I'm not quite sure that at the moment there is anything to do but let the market evolve and shift into a higher cycle.

So much of the demand comes from Mainland Chinese who are connecting the dots of property, education and even immigration, and see the UK, North America and Australia as the immediate fields of play.

It's more than apparent that the tables have been bizarrely turned and the flow is going from the East back into the West.

This could last for quite some time and while there is merit in trying to convert the horde of excited travellers into property buyers, with numbers clearly too big to ignore, the trickle down effect is likely to be a long-term process.

Bruce Lee said it best as "I'm not in this world to live up to your expectations and you're not in this world to live up to mine."



UNPLUGGED IN YANGON

*The market remains starved of cash
and the easiest solution according to
the experts is a joint venture.*

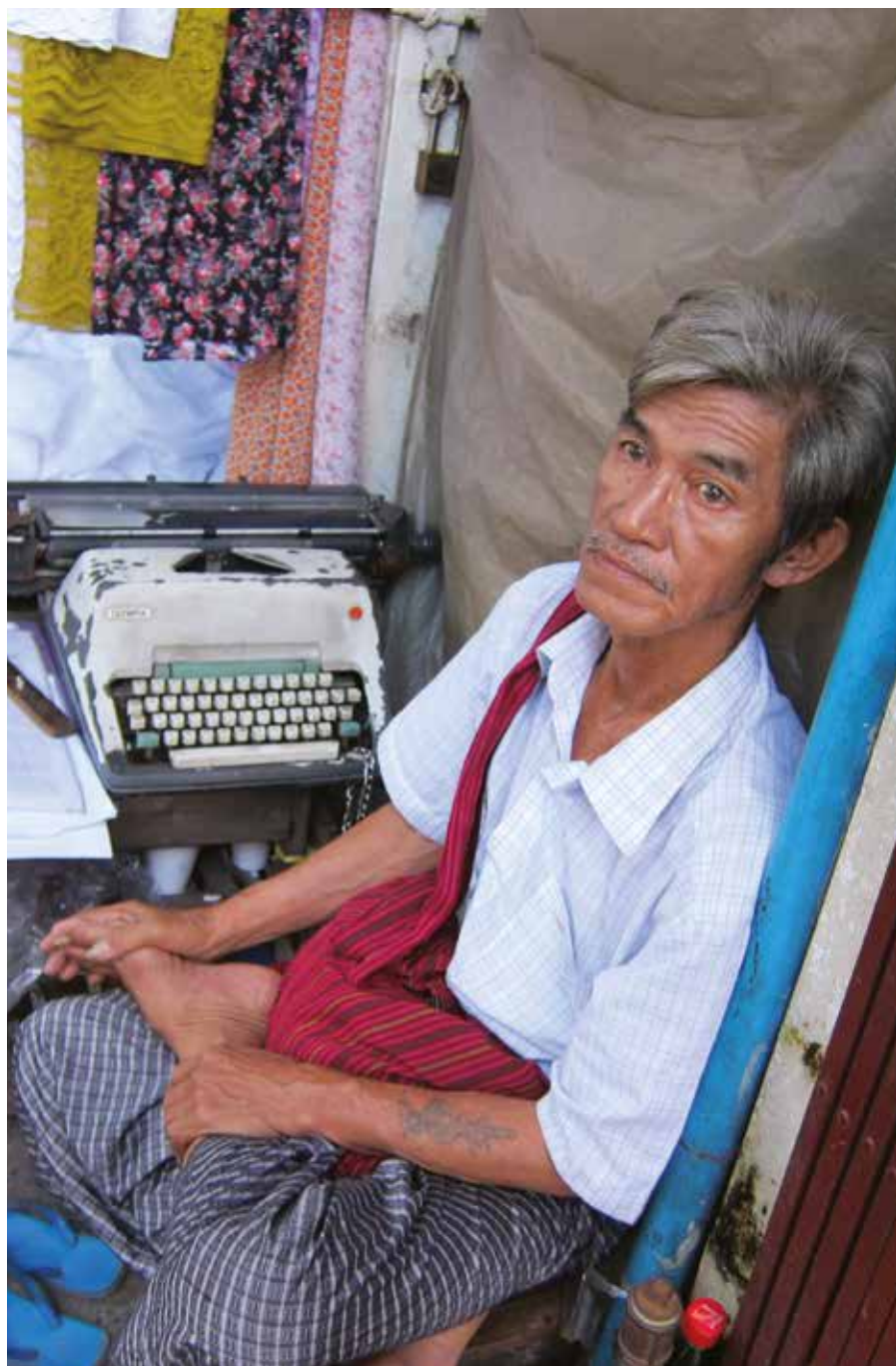
Man's best friend without a doubt is a dog, but coming a close second has to be his personal mobile computing device. My friends often compare me to a vanquished dinosaur when they spot my Blackberry, but I make no apologies. My fingers are the size of young coconut trees and all sorts of spelling catastrophes come up when a touch screen comes into contact with my bear-like paw.

In a life spent going from near disaster to the end of disaster, my latest cliff-hanger started when I tried to boot up my MacBook Air while transiting Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport and heading off to a real estate conference in Yangon. Pushing the button once, twice and then a rapid staccato only brought a blank screen. This of course was not good, given a three day journey laid ahead and the promise of going unplugged for any period longer than an hour brought fear to my heart.

The fear continued until I landed in Myanmar and resigned myself to a fate worse than death – being bare naked crazy in Southeast Asia's emerging market storyboard. I recalled the fragile hero of Somerset Maugham's 'The Razor's Edge' who sought out spiritual awakening when the world came crashing down around his ankles. Monkhood was not an option, as I simply can't wear a robe – a black t-shirt yes, but not one of those voluminous flowing things which remind me of accidentally wrapping myself up in a hotel curtain during an alcohol-induced bender.

Somehow I managed to make it through the first night and rose as dawn broke and a new day came up over the nearby Sule Pagoda. Hitting the streets of the city, one thing that became swiftly apparent is that in the short span of a year or so, a new urban phase of 'carmageddon' has taken over in a python death grip. Cars, taxis and buses were everywhere and it was absolute gridlock.

Weaving my way to the Parkroyal Hotel for the 2nd Annual Myanmar Real Estate Conference was somewhat of a chore, but I was on a mission, one that had me unplugged but with a faint whisper of hope out there somewhere. And yes, this hope



As in all conferences or meetings of any sort, there must be caffeine. In most instances this can be classified as the good, the bad and the ugly.

followed closely behind, not dissimilar to a cold war plot which trailed along dodging behind trees and a street side samosa stand.

As in all conferences or meetings of any sort, there must be caffeine. In most instances this can be classified as the good, the bad and the ugly. On this particular Tuesday, it was hard to pinpoint exactly which measure applied, so let's go with 'not too bad, but not too good'. Geared up, eyes wide open and my mind clear of any outside influences caused by surfing the Internet, I felt like a North Korean, until a platter of chocolate croissants brought me back to the future.

Throughout the conference, being in with the vibe was good, it was not dissimilar to the Maugham classic novel, 'High's and low's, optimism and yet self doubt'. There is little doubt Myanmar's property sector will emerge, but the biggest question has to be does it have the same engine which has driven most of Southeast Asia's broad real estate sector over the past five years? This is an emerging middle class or more exacting, a consumer class? How deep is the market?

Yes, property ownership is possible on a 50 year lease with two 10 year options, though finding suitable titled land at a reasonable price is proving harsh. The market remains starved of cash and the easiest solution according to the experts is a joint venture. My heart skipped. "Remember the massive failures in China and Vietnam over the possibilities of mutual cooperation," said a Tiger Lily whisper.

A positive remains on the horizon for condominium-type legislation that may allow foreigners to own 20 or 30 percent of units in a building, but no one can say exactly when this will happen. Hotels on the other hand are coming in full force and global chain ACCOR already has eight management deals in place. Foreign investment is also visible in projects by Yoma Group and a JETRO planned port development, so things are moving, but not at the pace the world expects. Things in Myanmar are going to take just bit longer.

Driving back to the airport, after some 72 hours of being unplugged, my mind was full of ideas, thoughts, stories and inspirations from the weirdly wild streets of Yangon. All I now needed to do was get plugged back into the rest of the world as fast as possible.

THE FIRST RULE OF FIGHT CLUB

Insomnia. Raw violence. Anarchy. Sounds like real estate to me. Let me twist the rubber band tight, real tight, then let it unravel at both ends. Faster pussycat. Don't blink, otherwise you just might miss something important.

You may recall one of my favourite movies, *Fight Club*, and that sublime, waterlogged line "What is the first rule of *Fight Club*?" – Wake up! You! The one at the back of the room! – Now that I have your attention, the answer, of course, is that the first rule of *Fight Club* is: You do not talk about *Fight Club*."

In the mass hysteria we know as property, without a doubt more blood has been spilled by brokers over deals than ever was laid to waste in the dark side of Hollywood. Forget getting all kinky. Is that a rope you're holding behind your back? No, sex stops here. We want a blood sport.

Let's have a look at our anti-hero in this tale, the broker. A broker is someone who arranges a transaction between two consenting parties and earns a commission. Sure, the trip between point A and point B sounds simple but the true trophy is not just closing the deal, but taking the money to the bank.

A good number of deal trails are not that dissimilar to running the prison gauntlet in maximum security. Badass, back-stabbing infidels who claim to be your friends are ready at every twist and turn to knock you flat on your feet and put the squeeze on your client. The term 'hero to zero' is a completely appropriate way to describe being marginalized at any point of the process, and there is no award for second place. Yes, call our heroes kings or queens of the cage, modern day gladiators out to make a few dollars more.

But other blood-sucking brokers are not the only creatures our anti-hero must slay on his way to the prize, and your clients are not merely gullible saps writhing in your enemy's clutches.

Make no mistake: where buyers and sellers are involved, they want to make the most, or pay the least, and whoever gets the job done is the flavor of the day. Over the span of the last decade in the trade I've seen things that make my skin crawl.



Wildly successful sales where jubilant buyers are cashed to the hilt, and still they try to evade paying the dealmaker in a way that would make Zeta's warlords seem like the Powerpuff Girls.

While I am dogmatically opposed to civilians carrying guns, I'm not totally averse to supporting the use of tasers or even brass knuckles, which can be used on clients who don't honour their obligations. Of course, brokers' own worst enemies are not their customers but other agents who attempt to worm themselves directly into the path of an oncoming commission.

Bruce Lee would know how to deal with this, but Bruce is dead. So what I am suggesting here is perhaps forming a Real Estate Fight Club to deal with these blatant injustices, which occur in the name of God, Country and Commission. Suddenly, glancing over my shoulder, I hear the crescendoing howl of discontent take charge of the noise brigade. I take a moment to compose myself, wipe the perspiration off the palms of my hands and, in the interest of self-preservation, skip rule two and go straight to the third rule of Fight Club: if someone yells "stop", goes limp or taps out, the fight is over. Until the next fight, that is.

EAVESDROPPING ON DEAD PRESIDENTS

Down through the years, the US' two passions for war and getting rich have often collided and collaborated, but these days it's a one trick pony.

In a world gone mad it's becoming increasingly apparent that politicians remain intent on wrecking havoc on global property markets.

The most fitting example, of course, remains the smiling global poster child for countries that still think they rule the world, yet can't even master the task of taking the top off a can of potato chips.

Imagine for a moment if the US President had the vision to refocus all of the might of the NSA, CIA and military away from a continual search for the next great war, and instead turned to real estate.

Forget listening in on Angela Merkel, get the unlisted numbers for Donald Trump or the Candy Brothers. Instead of the constant buzz of killer drones in the skies over Pakistan; what about airborne promotions for condos in Karachi? How about having the US Treasury provide long term zero-downpayment financing for that oversupply of one million vacant residential units in Spain?

Tap into the new markets – Palestinians, Rohingya – relocate entire populations from those sinking Pacific islands. There is no need to settle for retail sales to drive the global economy – tweak up to investment grade baby and maybe even offer some perks like a furniture package. These people have nothing, so imagine the economic upside of selling them everything? Now we're talking.

Down through the years, the US' two passions for war and getting rich have often collided and collaborated, but these days it's a one trick pony. Death, destruction, but with little thought over the next big deal. I'm not quite sure if Obama is a condo man or in the market for a fixer upper, but a real estate reality fix might bring him back from that eye in the sky.



Of course, it's not just the US. Everywhere you turn in Asia politicians continue to act irrationally with little interest in the prosperity of the people they are meant to serve. There's pork barrel talk in Manila, Jakarta's wayward liquor ban, Thailand's hell-bent amnesty push and Malaysia's conspicuous lack of an opposition. As for China, torch one more car in Tiananmen and all hell is going to break loose.

Despite a love-hate affair with political personalities, most nations still mostly put dead politicians on their currencies. With hard cash being a symbol of capitalism and property sitting on one of the highest branches, this unsettles me. Forget the deal-killing political faces on paper money. Incorporate something more exotic that depicts our real aspirations – sexy girls, or guys, or both, whatever your inclination. Or cars, retail brands, luxury goods – even Steve Jobs.

My point is that politics and politicians are the real enemy of economics. It's not populations – people are generally too stupid. Consider Bieber Fever or K-Pop, or even Formula One. Germany should just replace Merkel with Sebastian Vettel and I can guarantee Obama would cease and desist all spying immediately. In a manner of speaking it would be like a collective sleeping pill. Calm, devoid of interest and so vanilla life-like it would make a Scandinavian blush.

Certainly the NSA has my number, but all they will hear is muttered conversations about dog-grooming appointments and calls from telemarketers that start with "I'm not here to sell you something", followed by me hanging up the phone or blowing a whistle into the ear of the Filipino on the other end of the line.

Perhaps I have dug too deep? But next time you reach into your pocket, purse or punch up an ATM, just imagine what it would be like if all those dead presidents hadn't turned up at the party and only the shining face of Vettel was staring back at you from the crisp new note?

THE GREAT TOAST CRISIS

First, let's fully dismiss the notion of what came first, the chicken or the egg. My current state of early morning hysteria deals with the aftermath of the two aforementioned commodities. In plain talk, I have evolved past the addictive jolt of caffeine and am now fully dedicated to fried eggs, sunny side up, and toast.

This is, of course, a baptism of fire and brimstone, or at least radiant heat and a fine piece of bread. Not one but two is where the rubber has hit the road. And yet my journey falls out mid-flight when the toast disappears at a rate not equal to that of the running yellow eggs. Call Stephen Hawking: the math has gone haywire.

Desperate situations call for either divine inspiration or absolute violence. Yes, Jesus did multiply loaves but what was his stance on toast? And where are those pesky little disciples when you need them to make a 7-Eleven run? There, of course, is the more abject course of throwing the plate onto the floor, turning red like a Manchester United fan and stomping out. But what would that achieve?

Who has dictated that eggs must come with only two pieces of toast? Why not one or what about three? Indeed what government body or unilateral, multinational NGO governs over the global standards of breakfast? These ovoidal observations are not going to get me anywhere, so I am put into a position of abandoning the eggs just like those Titanic sailors who missed the lifeboats and started to sink. This will undoubtedly get just as ugly in no time at all.

Real estate in many ways is like breakfast, or, shall we say, eggs and toast. Some divine body in a backroom decides what designs our condo must come in – be it modern, classical, art and design-oriented or just a plain white box with four walls reminiscent of the insane asylum. (I'm not clear if those still exist but certainly the current trend of shoebox-sized flats in Asia's urban centres can provide a suitable alternative). Can you fit a toaster in 20 sqm? Apparently not.

Even worse than institutional insipidness is when enlightened property developers come up with all sorts of elaborate alternatives in their endeavors to 'think outside of the box'. Getting out of the box can be dangerous, as all manner of stupidity exists in the world of hype-nosis. Some bigger condo projects offer themed units such as Hello



My only true friend – the bartender at a dimly lit drinking establishment – has said that the only place mint belongs is in a mojito.

Kitty, or units splashed with colours that shouldn't exist outside of the bakery aisle, like vanilla, almond or mint. More attempts at forward-thinking gets an eco green-theme, landing us squarely in the ubiquitous world of 'lemongrass'.

My only true friend – the bartender at a dimly lit drinking establishment – has said that the only place mint belongs is in a mojito. I'd add that the only person drinking the mojito better be wearing a skirt, but since I live in Thailand the entire skirt thing just flies out the window. That is of course assuming you even have a window in your absolutely fabulous long-tail selection of endless property options.

This is premised on the fact that no one who buys into one of these schemes – breakfast or property – actually wants, needs or desires a third piece of toast.

THE WINTER OF MY DISCONTENT

It's been said you can't please all the people all the time, but world leaders and warring factions have brought down the house and at the end of the day, it's nearly impossible to please anyone.

Writing this column from the comfort of an Airbus, some 38,000 feet above the Andaman Sea, remains fraught with disaster. In this case it's the curse of hard copy, which requires lead time and casting your eyes up over that looming thunderstorm onto the limitless horizon. Naturally, you have to imagine it because the bloody clouds are in the way.

No one wants to be out of date. And while the Web provides the opportunity for instant gratification and a fast track from hero to zero; print media allows for deeper thought. Too much time on your hands to ponder life's great questions, of course, is never a good thing – Ayn Rand, Adolf Hitler and Deepak Chopra bear testament to just how wrong things can go.

This year's real estate headlines are left roaring in my cluttered subconscious mind. First there were the boiling property markets trying to let the steam off and simmer down. Then came the bubble talk, countered by a seemingly limitless rising middle class. Just how much of Asia's 'half of the world's' population can afford a condo or maybe a nice little semi-detached townhouse exactly?

So yes, as '13' draws to a close, my head is full of dread over what comes next. This is no Midsummer Night's Dream, frolicking around in Adam and Eve garb. It's more like the stark freezing landscape of the Coen Brother's ' Fargo ' – a blood trail in the snow leading to a certain dead end.

Somehow everyone on the planet got a little crazy this year, except for me of course, and a few select others (I'm not naming names – even Edward Snowden and the jolly man in the white beard don't have my list). As a human race, we've somehow backtracked to become sheer raving dogmatic lunatics.

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to please anyone. This includes me, in my drab black and grey attire, endlessly strolling through airports and openly cursing the arrival of Europe's snowbirds who have migrated south.

Meanwhile 'glee syndrome' in Asia has continued to inflict careless optimism into regurgitated headlines about the rise of the wealthy masses. Welcome to the C List – cash, credit cards, cars and country clubs – and last but not least, condos.

We've gorged, but not yet pushed back from the table. What about a tasty dessert or a double espresso? But the party killers are lined up outside, waiting for a table to open up. The faces looking in are somehow terrifying – politicians, economists, fanatics. Didn't a Chinese tour bus just pull up in the parking lot? It's like an episode of *The Walking Dead* with faces pressed against the windows and smoke rising above the growing crowd.

To hell with them all. Billy Shakes and I are heading to the bar for a nightcap. Keep the door barricaded and don't let the riff raff in. My horizon for the moment is the bar to order a drink. Predicting what's coming up in '14' for the whacked-out world of real estate is just too complicated for a self-appointed man of discontent.



About the Author

Bill Barnett is the Founder and Managing Director of leading Asian hospitality and property consulting firm C9 Hotelworks. Based in Thailand, he has over 29 years of experience in the region, and his background includes corporate roles with leading international hotel groups and listed firms.

Aside from writing a monthly column in Property Report Magazine, Bill is a regular columnist for The Phuket Gazette and authors articles in a number of newspapers and magazines across Asia. He also writes the industry-focused online news source www.thephuketinsider.com.

Last year Bill's first book was released, entitled: "Last Call: Never Trust A Mayan Selling Real Estate".

On the days when he's not up in the air or looking for a parking space at Phuket Airport, Bill can be found coffeed-up, at his favourite local island haunt – Bake.

All photos taken by Bill Barnett (except image on page 47)

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