

Interview with Koichi Paul Nii

Contributed by mark eakle
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In the first of a series of interviews, Koichi Paul Nii, the co-founder of Unsprawl.net, talks with Unsprawl about how he was introduced to the design and development of Artificial Land concepts. Future interviews in the series will explore such topics as design, technologies, environmental benefits, and social impact.

June, 2007 How did you become involved in designing Artificial Land Concepts ?

KPN> Well, the artificial land concept was first introduced to me by my mentor Kikutake sensei (Kiyonori Kikutake). He had been working on floating city concepts since the 1950's. So when I joined his office I got involved with a Floating City project. Was this at the beginning of your career as an architect?

KPN > Yes this was around 1970. I had just finished school at the University of California Berkeley in the US, and decided to return to Japan for a while. So because of my ability to speak English, Kikutake had me work on projects that were international. Like the Floating City Project?

KPN > Yes. Harada (Shizuo Harada), who had been working with Kikutake for several years before I started, was the lead architect for this project which was done with the University of Hawaii, Marine Engineering Dept. They had a limited budget, so it was decided that a single unit at 1/20th scale would be built, which enabled some proof of concept testing.

So this was your introduction into Artificial Land Concepts?

KPN > Yes, the concept, from Kikutake's point of view, was a problem of not enough land for people to live on, especially in Japan. Also at that time the structures there were mostly low and middle rise construction. So the idea was 'how to increase the land?' And at that time Mr. Honda came out with the concept of Stratified Structural Module which we refer to as Linear Terraced City. The idea was that these terraced structures could be built over existing highways, roads and railroad tracks, utilizing the unused air space above and without disrupting the traffic below. They actually tested this concept by creating the struts and universal connectors and then one night they went about constructing the module sections over a railroad track. How long did you work with Kikutake's firm?

KPN > I worked in his office for about two years, but have maintained a working relationship with both Kikutake and Harada since that time. Harada was Vice President of Kikutake's firm before going on to create his own company, ESCO CO LTD. We've worked together on many projects over the years. I would say that much of my understanding of Artificial Land concepts is a result of the work we've done together. Were these Artificial Land projects?

KPN > There were some proposal based projects like the Linear Terraced City concepts which were proposed in the 1980's at an exposition held in Brazil. But also Kikutake was very interested in 'mass housing' and how to make housing more affordable. So one of the earlier projects that I got involved with, dealt with creating a structural framework and then bring in a pre-manufactured house that would be put on a 'shelf'.

Is this what you refer to as 'software'?

KPN > Yes, that (the pre-manufactured house) I would call 'software', and the 'shelf', which is part of the main structural framework, would be the 'hardware'. So basically the Artificial Land concept is creating a framework to put the 'software' into. This 'hardware' & 'software' relationship is shown in the Unsprawl Presentation.

Have there been efforts to build an Artificial Land project?

KPN > Not really. Though there have been projects constructed and displayed at architectural and environmental expositions. For example the idea of the Stratified Structural Module concept was used to create the 'Global Loop' at the 2005 World Expo in Aichi Japan. The land there was very hilly and this concept showed that you could build a large structure with very little impact on the earth. In fact, after the Expo it was dismantled and removed from the site.

But there hasn't really been a full scale construction of an Artificial Land design – yet!

What do you think has been the biggest obstacle building a Linear Terraced City or other Artificial Land concept?

KPN > Well, there are so many factors. Up to this point not enough people have felt that there is a real problem that needs to be dealt with. This is starting to change because of people like Al Gore and his movie 'An Inconvenient Truth'. Now people begin to see that we can't keep using the earth like we have been. But also there are economic and political issues that get in the way of building these kinds of structures. People and regulations are changing slowly to accept things like 'green architecture' technology, which is good, but it only applies to the present system and the present system is the root of the problem. Which that humans are occupying too much land by building outwards.

So what will it take to move in the right direction?

KPN > In order to get the Artificial Land structures built, I think that everybody, not just the people in the United States or developed countries, but people of the world need to be on the same page. And 'the page' is that something has to be done with the way humans are occupying land and we have to return balance back to earth. People need to realize the problems we all face, are problems that we created. So we need to create the solutions.

Of course economic incentives are what usually gets people to anything. And there are many economic opportunities in the creation of Artificial Land structures and associated technologies. But what people don't realize is that there are not so many economic benefits if we continue to destroy the earth.

What has been the main motivation for you in pursuing and advocating these Artificial Land concepts?

KPN > Hmm? I've never really thought about that. But some people tell me that I'm a problem solver. I see problems and try to find solutions.

But it seems that just providing the solution is not enough for you. You are very active in trying to get the solution to be implemented?

KPN > Well yes, Kikutake, Harada and I have been working on these concepts for over 35 years, but our audience has been limited. We only mention it to our professional peers and certain people. Even if we put it into architectural magazines, who read those? Just a very few people who are already interested in architecture. So we need to become not just the technologists or engineer, we need to become the sales person. We need to take advantage of the current technologies for communication to spread the word to the greater public.

Is that why you created Unsprawl.net?

KPN > Yes. Unsprawl was created to expose these concepts to many people and also to listen to what people from all walks of life have to say about what kind of future we should create.