

The growing scourge of consumerism

At the moment, I am idling in Thailand with plenty of time to reflect on the big issues of the day and how they affect the delightful corner of Greater London which I occupy, together with diligent readers of this newspaper.

Pattaya has a lovely coastline but has degenerated into a ghastly concrete sprawl and has now grown to be Thailand's second largest city, embracing all the problems that urban communities share the world over.

Yet like most over-developed conurbations, it still has pockets of stunning beauty and some of the new residential developments that are springing up thanks to foreign investment stand up comparison with the best architecture in the world.

Most early mornings I journey to the far end of what is known as Jomtien Beach Road, just outside the city limits, where the air is a bit cleaner, there is more vegetation and the water clearer.

About three miles before the road turns inland, a handsome new development is being put up which boasts, '15 VIP residential suites of the highest standard' and is fringed by a fancy serpentine swimming pool - all overlooking the gorgeous gulf that stretches to the South China Sea.

When it is finished it will be a valuable addition to the city, representing all that is best in modern living, nestling against a little rocky tide breaker that fences the golden sand.

But on my dawn excursion yesterday a horrendous sight suddenly sent my thoughts back to East Sheen, my nearest shopping centre, where passions are

running high at the moment over a proposal to double the size of the Waitrose supermarket.

Although I am a customer there occasionally myself, I share residents' concern about this expansion - and struggle to sort out in my own mind why I think it would be a retrograde step to replace what was a shoddy down market Sainsbury with more aisles of a smarter Waitrose.

It was the obscene sight of the ghastly plastic and polystyrene flotsam and jetsam that was wedged between the rocks and embedded in the shingle which focused my mind - for this alarming pollution extends as far as the eye can see.

Cellophane, celluloid, plastic chippings, yogurt containers, margarine packs, polystyrene trays that once housed apples, empty cans that contained beans and pulses, plastic spoons that had been in one mouth on one occasion and hundreds of plastic bags that presumably were used to contain larger bags for transportation from shop to point of consumption.

I have seen similar affluence in the most idyllic bays in Devon and Cornwall, on Greek Islands and in remote Moroccan bays. It is becoming so commonplace that people seem to scarcely notice.

Can all this offensive accrual be laid solely at the doors of the likes of Waitrose, I pondered? Of course not - but at least when I buy my bananas, apples and rice at the little open air market that nestles alongside my Thai housing complex, I am generally presented with a simple brown paper bag or a sheet of old newspaper - which if it finds its way to the beach will rot down within a couple of days.

The relentless march of the corporate retail giants which is being experienced in Richmond upon Thames and Hounslow is coming home to roost in every part of the globe. Tesco has an enormous complex here, together with Big C, Carrefour and hundreds of Seven Eleven and Family Mart franchises.

The ring pull culture - rip open, consume and throw away - is fostered by these ruthless conglomerates and it shaping our values and the way we live far more powerfully than any government agency, academic establishment or religious sect.

The temples of mammon - convenient, air conditioned, full of pre-wrapped amusements - leave in their wake havoc and destruction, their delivery trucks clogging the roads, their profligate packaging filling our landfill sites and spilling onto beauty spots.

That is why so many of us who live in Mortlake and Sheen fear the Waitrose encroachment and can see only worsening conditions if our town continues to be steamrollered by the elephantine multiples at the rate we have seen in the last two decades.

I shall do my best to discourage this by supporting the modest family businesses that still function here in the Land of Soudas and when I return, visit the farmers' market, street stallholders and handful of independent shops that survive against all the odds in Mortlake High Street and on the Upper and Lower Richmond Road.

There seems little else we can do - except voice our objections when planning applications are put out for consultation and make our views known through the columns of this newspaper.



The Malcolm Richards Column