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EDGE

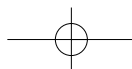
ON PARACENTRIC ARCHITECTURE

The answer to ecological architecture does not lie in technological solutions but in creating poetic everyday spaces that continue the natural primeval course of architecture as shelter and mediator between man and nature.

Inside the urban hubs of the western world a feeling of safety prevails. We continue to enjoy the highest standard of living ever known to humankind. At the same time we are kept fully informed of the results of our culture of consumerism. Therein lays the greatest paradox: we are forced to actively forget the reality to be able to enjoy the facade of excess we have created around us. It is this facade that we keep on designing. Yet it is outside the main stages of metropolis where our work is most needed. There are some architects who challenge the conventions of the profession and the ever-dictating

forces of the market, who will face the real problems and try solve them with insight, economy and wit. These people are the pathfinders towards the next revolution in architecture, which will not be focussing on style, but on the balance between man and nature, or in a word, survival.

Architecture is a complex subject to be described satisfactorily with only words. One reason is that it is a language system in its own right, which man uses for expressing his need for shelter, understanding his place in the universe and his mere existence. Architecture is the language that leaves the most permanent traces



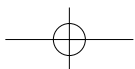


of human intervention and therefore presents us with a high responsibility as professionals. Like a mother tongue, this language system is also learned during childhood, but through spaces and experiencing different atmospheres. We all are formed by the houses we have lived and worked in. Every person carries a sense-based bank of childhood memories, a collage of smells, touches, sounds, contrasts of daylight and shadow. This material is the result of pure perception and is therefore reliable information. Moreover, much of this raw material is commonly shared by people.

Today there are around 6,500 spoken languages in the world. 5,000 of them have less than 100,000 speakers. It has been estimated that in 100 years there will only be some 1,000 languages left. This other side of globalisation is affecting architecture too. We are losing local architectural languages and dialects, formed by the necessity of local climates, local materials and the needs of local work forces. In other words, what is at stake is ecological architecture that could inspire contemporary solutions. This could be called the human biodiversity. We architects are responsible for preserving it. Besides man, language and architecture are also by definition integral parts of nature. The spaces we make have their roots in the reading and understanding of our natural surroundings, and these qualities are still present in good architecture. The problem arises when architecture becomes self-referential and loses its connection to the users and to nature. Architecture has become the introvert language of architects, a pathological form of communication.

Yet architecture belongs to everyone, as we all have the same right to well-being. Therefore, we have to open up the process of producing human infrastructure. And this is not, from an architect's perspective, "letting them in", it is rather about "letting us out there". In this way architecture would regain its wider meaning outside professionally produced definitions and return into the realm of everyday life. Good architecture is not a matter of taste or education; it is a passionate unification of a person and a space.

The new ecological ethics and consensus, which is currently being born around the globe, necessarily requires an aesthetical dimension. The new meaning has to find its shape. The answer to ecological architecture, in my mind, does not lie in technological solutions, where the focus has mostly been. It is in creating poetic everyday spaces that continue the natural primeval course of architecture as shelter and mediator between man and nature. The way we build our buildings is a serious matter, as good architecture is a sign of vitality in any given culture. Today, more than we are perhaps willing to admit, we need spaces filled with an atmosphere of hope. Then again, going back to some form of simpler, archaic, pastoral hippie life sounds like betrayal against the previous pioneering generations that invented electricity, split the atom and populated the earth. All forms of life have been given Latin names, the micro and macro cosmos become more and more complex the further one delves inside them. Paradoxically, the more one tries to identify and utilise, and thereafter rule over other things, the





more distance one creates from them. Governing over the whole of nature is a lonely job. So where does this leave man, in the middle of all the ever-growing knowledge and refined army of instruments for entertainment? Are we more at home in the world now?

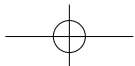
Our capitalist faith, the only winning philosophy of the 21st century, leads us to accept – as the natural starting point for any productive activity – the idea that you should invest as little as possible and gain as much as possible as soon as possible. The unavoidable side effect, when this thinking spreads to the making of homes and human environments, is that this ideology is the exact opposite to that needed for achieving lasting quality. Raw capitalism cannot – and will not – create good environments. Besides language, architecture is our primary tool to express our values and mere existence. Whether we accept it or not, there are some signs of pathological expressions of a society that does not want to see the reality around it. It is true that big systems need big buildings, but I feel there are enough architects and other consultants competing out there to find out. And these needs and problems are, after all, created by corporate managements, bankers and politicians, many of whom follow the given dogmas of productivity and with a strange lack of common sense. We could perhaps leave it to them for a while.

“In the Middle Ages, a large building had about 200 square metres (2,152 square feet) of space, by the Renaissance it might have been 10,000 (107,600 square feet), and in the 19th century it was 40,000 (430,400 square feet). Today we

build complexes of 500,000 square meters (5.4 million square feet)”, stated Rem Koolhaas in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*.

And where there is no cultural resistance, the local developers follow suit: in my small Arctic hometown Bodø (47,000 inhabitants), 100 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, there are plans to build a 17-storey high hotel on top of a mountain. This contradicts not only the scale of the surrounding buildings, the fragile northern natural environment, but also the clever local tradition of placing houses in a good microclimate to save heating expenses. Fittingly, the project is called “Arctic Edge”. While its inherent machinery grinds on using the apt and selling slogan “Yes is more”, we could turn our gaze back from “market to garden”, and design some good homes and work places for the people who happen to live and share the same time with us. I want to say this especially to students of architecture reading this: do not be lured by the illusion of the World Number Two of the magazines, media and professional ivory tower jargon. Maybe we are lost already, but the next generation could make amends.

What then could be the mental landscape suitable for us today – in other words: how to live now and exist in balance with our surroundings? In my mind, we should experiment at a small scale, closer to our real body size, not the size of our egos. As Mahatma Gandhi simply put it: “We have enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.” Yet, let us not fall in the trap of dogmatism again: there is no single strategy, attitude or philosophy leading to





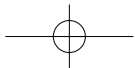
better solutions. Like in the ancient Indian Jainist philosophy, I believe in a kind of big, collage-like, faceted world: every aspect of life contains truth, and by changing perspective one finds new sides of it. Therefore, one should listen to opposing ideas too, to find the fractions of truth in them. This might be the only way to become closer to the real nature and essence of phenomena. Following one dogma just takes you further away from the truth.

What would the perfect future architecture be like, then? As stated earlier, not following a singular idea, but instead a sensitive many-faceted system, capable of changing according to the site, task and local culture. I would like to mention some practices from the geological edge areas, which have produced outstanding examples for architects to follow. Carin Smuts' low-cost dwellings have political courage. None of the star architects today have half of the daring she has. Patama Roonrakwit and Anna Heringer practise down to earth participatory building and teaching methods. Architecture is not just aesthetics and techniques; it is a way to make life and living conditions better. Hollmen/Reuter/Sandman are three young architects who know that action speaks louder than words. They engage in fine solidarity projects to help women and children in poorer countries, funded by Ukumbi, their own NGO organisation. Bijoy Jain's working methods contain his own metal and wood workshops for making 1:1 scale models of details and a deep personal involvement in the whole design and building process. Jain proves that it is possible to ground

architecture to its roots, make it grow day by day, like some magnificent plant that thrives only at the given site. His work is a fine contemporary continuation of the magnificent and potent Indian building tradition. Francis Kéré is a visionary with energy and devotion, and also a fine spokesman. He reached a position that allowed him to change things in his native country. He shows us how to convince other people to participate in constructive processes. Moreover, he shows how important it is to be fully convinced oneself that architecture can make a change, and to act accordingly. Dan Rockhill is known for his hardcore traditional professionalism. Understanding the local climate and culture, his projects are balanced, clever and anti-monumental houses that are based on the vital rules of good architecture: economy, beauty and structural clarity.

With these architects, I would like to coin the term paracentric architecture for this alternative way of producing socially and ecologically aware, strategic architecture. In all these practices there is a new kind of diversity, I find necessary to include to the realm of contemporary architecture. It is a collage of human, social and political dimension, innovation and transmission in the form of participation, teaching and publishing.

During man's existence on this planet we have achieved a special position due to the supreme cooperation of our hands and brains, and subsequently from our ability to communicate and finally accumulate information from previous generations' experiences and wisdom.





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This cultural evolution has over time led to a situation where technology and the handling of information have begun to shape society, starting with cars and television, and continuing with internet and an explosion in air traffic. At the same time, the biological needs of human beings remain the same, and innovations are not even trying to fulfil these needs directly. The stage for our primeval social and individual behaviour is architecture. In my mind, it is important to see the difference: architecture is the fulfilment of our biological true selves, not a trailblazer for the latest innovations.

Another negative development is alienation from our own real surroundings. On the one hand, society systems reserve the right to regulate, construct and maintain the urban environments, leaving few opportunities for individuals to take any influence. On the other hand, our skills to construct anything by ourselves, unless a professional builder, are next to nothing, when the results should be high quality, lasting and site specific. Moreover, people are using more and more of their increasing free time in the media entertainment world, which logically lessens the interest in and discussion on urbanity. The city becomes a no man's land, an archipelago of corporate or private structures. In between lie traffic systems, grassland and malls, areas that are passed through on the way from one activity to another; it no longer is a place of interest in itself, but a non-place.

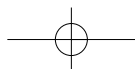
The reclaiming of human space has to start at home, continue at the work place and finally recapture our cities for ourselves. Perhaps

technology can actually help us by replacing cars and TV with better solutions, which are not there just to make life easier, since it is already easy enough.

This is the situation in the northern hemisphere, in our western civilization. At the same time, on the edges and in the southern hemisphere, the urgency of the situation leads to innovations that are often more radical than in the north. This makes it necessary to learn from and communicate with each other, making it possible to establish globalised shared ethics and goals. Every piece of architecture is after all a reflection and fragment of the whole world. If we make houses that people love, they are maintained and become sustainable in the very sense of the word. At the same time they could become vehicles of cultural change.

Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*, remarks on a certain pattern in the development of cultures that approach their brink of collapse: the less raw materials left, the bigger the structures built. This was often due to the restricted geographic area to harvest from, as for example on the Easter Islands or Greenland. And this is the way we are heading today. The limits of our harvest on the planet are visible. We need architecture that resists this kind of development and understands its biological task to provide shelter, protect human life and as a vessel of the continuation of a civilization.

There should be nothing unclear, incomprehensible nor nostalgic about this attitude. What we need now is good architecture and to give meaningful form to it.





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