1. Alternatives in Architecture

I don't suppose that there is anyone here who doesn't feel that we have an architecture of alienation, eminently visible here in Sheffield: the alienation between the designer, the maker, the product and the consumer. What joy does the physical setting of public life, industry, commerce, education, administration, leisure and housing give to the designer on the drawing-board, the operative on the site, the user of the building, or the passer-by with a seeing eye?

Now that the modern movement in architecture has spent its force, we can see that its ideological foundations were elitist or crudely mechanistic, that it ignored in the first place the environmental preferences of ordinary people, and in the second, the fact that modern bureaucratic systems, whether of the Western or the Eastern kind, would inevitably subvert the humane aspirations of architects, turning the professional either into computers producing packages or prima donnas producing jewellery. Yet there are, and always have been, alternatives.

The first is the vernacular alternative. Most of the world's buildings were not the result of the work of the professional architect. Everywhere, people built for themselves, using such locally available materials as were available to them. A decade ago Bernard Rudofsky's exhibition of Architecture Without Architects dazzled the visitor with its demonstration of the sheer perfection of the many forms that vernacular building had developed all round the globe, yet he told me last year

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that in the United States (it is less true of Britain) the teaching
of architecture leaves no room for the study of unpedigreed,
undated buildings. The monstrous growths, from Babylon to
Brasilia, as Rudofsky put it, are all documented, what is left
out is the ordinary, which is like restricting the science of
botany to lilies and roses. Vernacular architecture has never
been homogenised; it can never be an international language,
for it is rooted in places and their indigenous materials and
patterns of life. Its most disturbing feature for the business-
man is its longevity, and its builders, Rudofsky emphasised,
never thought of themselves as professional problem-solvers.
But it would be a mistake to suppose that it was produced
by people who were naively unaware of the elements of design.
J.M. Synge wrote of the Kerry peasantry that they "would
discuss for hours the proportions of a new building – how high
a house should be if it was a certain length, with so many
rafters in order that it might look well ..."

In the West today, for an architect to design a vernacular
building would (and does) simply result in Disneyland, but
there are many countries where, just at the time we are
discovering the virtues of the still-extant vernacular tradition,
considerations of prestige and status are leading to the adoption
of Western-style high-technology building, using expensively
imported materials and often providing a climatically
unsuitable result. In Egypt, Hassan Fathy made heroic efforts
to recreate the vernacular tradition, and produced structures
which were cheap, efficient and beautiful, but could find no
one in the ruling elite to support his activities. Indian
architects like Charles Correa have had a similar experience.
They want to use their understanding of traditional
techniques for the poor, but only the rich can pay for it.

The vernacular is dead in the developed countries, though
tribute is paid to it in neo-vernacular – or what Rudofsky
would call volks-vernacular – buildings: the ranch-style house,
etc. What may lead to the development of a new kind of
vernacular tradition is the crisis of energy and resources.

So my second alternative is that of the ecological impulse.
Contemporary building is distinguished by an extravagant
energy input, because of the use of synthetic and

highly-processed materials, because of the heavy use of
power-plant on the site, and in terms of the continuous high
level of power consumption in the working life of the building:
permanent artificial lighting, heating and air-conditioning and
mechanical services. The rising cost of energy and of raw
materials will increasingly suggest the positive advantages of
buildings which make fewer demands, especially in running
energy costs.

This is a new factor in architectural thinking, although it
would have been so obvious to our ancestors that they would
not have needed to spell it out, and its implications are being
studied at several levels. At one end of the scale is the study
developed by Alex Gordon when he was president of the Royal
Institute of British Architects, of Low Energy / Long Life /
Loose Fit, and at the other are innumerable individual
experiments in ‘autonomous’ housing using such devices as
solar water-heaters, solar walls, wind generators, methane
digesters, heat pumps, use of subsoil and other on-site
materials. The research of this kind in the Department of
Architecture in Cambridge (England) has as its objective “to
device a house with an integrated services system which is
self-sufficient, making no demands on the centralised network
system but at the same time providing a level of amenity
similar to that currently enjoyed by the average householder”.

On a wider scale is the attempt to devise an ecologically
sound pattern of urban settlements as a whole. At either level
the rediscovery of constructive methods of controlling the
internal environment of buildings (for example, the ‘bad-gir’
or windcoop as a method of air-conditioning from
Hyderabad) and the avoidance of materials whose original
cost or processing cost would make their use prohibitive in the
future, will lead to a new kind of architecture, as will the
adaptation of existing structures.

And this leads me to my third, adaptive, alternative.
Vernacular buildings waste nothing; they hate to destroy a
structure, and will adapt the most unlikely buildings for new
purposes. It is only a very few years since the orthodoxies of
architecture encouraged the idea of throw-away buildings
because most existing buildings had outlived their original
uses. But this idea itself is by now more obsolete than the
buildings to which it referred. Adaptability – which again was
taken for granted by our ancestors – is an important criterion
for an alternative architecture.

But an adaptable or malleable environment is important in
another sense. The fully-finished objet d'art which was the aim
of the great names of the modern movement (the environment
designed to the last teaspoon and curtain by an architectural
genius) relegates the occupier of the building to the role of
caretaker. There is a school of thought among architects (for
example, N.J. Habraken and Herman Hertzberger in the
Netherlands) that seeks an architecture of alternative uses,
which can be called in Ivan Illich’s language convivial, because
they give each person “the greatest opportunity to enrich the
environment with the fruits of his or her vision” as opposed
to those environments which deny this possibility to the user
and, as Illich says, “allow their designers to determine the
meaning and expectations of others”.

A fourth way of looking at alternative architectures can be
called the counter-cultural alternative. The official culture
prescribes certain architectural forms: the individual
one-family house or apartment; the office beehive (luxury
accommodation for the queen-bees, standard cells for the
worker-bees); the giant factory complex (different entrances,
canteens and lavatories for separate levels of the hierarchy);
the huge educational institution; agro-industry on a vast scale,
and so on.

The counter-culture postulates quite different building
types: the multi-family house or commune; the reintegration
of agriculture and industry and of brain work and manual
work (in, for example, Kropotkin’s Fields, Factories and
Workshops, and the reflections on ‘The New Commune’ in
Paul and Percy Goodman’s Communia); or the free school
or college, which might be totally de-institutionalised, using
the whole environment as an educational resource. Not only
would the alternative culture prescribe quite different building
forms, it would also combine them in quite different ways: the
school which is also a workshop, the market-garden which is
also an academy of music ...

For a fifth approach to alternatives, I have to turn to the
populism of Simon Nicholson of the Open University, and his
Theory of Loose Parts, to embrace the idea of an environment
that can be shaped and re-shaped by its users. His Theory of
Loose Parts claims that “In any environment, both the degree
of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibilities of
discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kinds
of variables in it”. This insight is closely linked to a sixth aspect
of alternatives, the question of who is in control. We are
fortunate that, once again, the principle has been very clearly
stated, this time by the architect John Turner who, after years
of experience in unofficial settlements in Latin America, set
out precisely the concept of dweller control in the book he
edited with Robert Fitcher, on Freedom to Build (Macmillan,
1972). As the publishers say on the cover of that book, “from
their worldwide experience the authors show that where
dwellers are in control, their homes are better and cheaper
than those built through government programmes or large
corporations”. But their aim is not merely to save government
money. They are concerned with personal and family
fulfilment. Nor are they suggesting that their formula
necessarily implies the owner-built house. But it does imply
freedom from the exploitative or neglectful landlord. In new
building, it does imply that, individually or collectively,
the dweller should be his or her own general contractor. Nor does
it necessarily mean doing without an architect. For example,
one much-respected architect, Walter Segal, has, over the last
ten years, been unlearning his previous assumptions and
designing houses which achieve great economies by a
meticulous use of stress-graded timber and of standard
building components without any cutting to waste on the site.
They are usually built by one or two carpenters who have
become firm friends of his, with the help of the clients
themselves. Current American experiences of ‘sweat equity’
and ‘urban homesteading’ are also relevant here.

And the reference to the particular skills of the building
trades takes me to another nuance of the spectrum of
alternatives, that I would call the syndicalist alternative.
Bertolt Brecht asked one of the great questions of history in
the poem that begins “Who built Thebes with its Seven Gates?” and goes on to wonder where the workers went when they knocked off for the day on the Great Wall of China.

Most of the monumental constructions of history were built by armies of slaves, and while the notion that the cathedrals of the Middle Ages were the product of dedicated bands of autonomous craftsmen is now regarded as a romantic myth (they were paid the current rate for a day’s work), the very existence of this myth tells us how attractive is the idea of building as a communal activity, a cooperative enterprise in which the gap between designer and executant is closed, and in which the individual has pride of craft, skill and responsibility in the product.

Is it possible to create the kind of situation where this myth becomes true? And what effect would it have on actual buildings? There have been various attempts to change working relationships in the building industry itself. One example is that of the Building Guilds which had a brief life in England after the First World War, or the *sindicats de bâtiment* which exist to this day in France.

But from all these nuances of alternative approaches, I have to turn to the changing roles of architects themselves. The ethos behind their education and the assumptions behind the constitutions of their professional organisations is that the ethos of the architect is that of an independent professional. Actually a minority of architects, usually in small personal practices, rarely function in this way. Most are employed workers, either for other architects or for public authorities or private businesses. The majority of architects cannot be described as independent professional people, and the claims for specialised wisdom, judgement or expertise for the architect as ‘leader of the building team’ rest on assumptions that cannot be sustained.

Furthermore, the shift in the twentieth century in architectural training from pupillage or apprenticeship to university degree courses has been a matter of ensuring social status rather than of handing on professional wisdom. For example, John Turner asked 50-60 fourth and fifth year architectural students at the University of Morales in Mexico City how many thought they would be earning a living as architects five years after graduating. None of them thought it likely, knowing that there was no effective demand for their services, nor for those of the 6,000 students of architecture in Mexico City alone.

At one time the architect’s skill was considered to rest on his ability to manipulate the ‘orders’ of classical architecture, or the vocabulary of styles in general, or in the massing of volumes and spaces. These skills are irrelevant to all but a minute proportion of the designers of contemporary buildings. At one time, too, the architect was considered to be a ‘master builder’, but today is content to devote constructional and technical wisdom to specialists and technicians. If architects have a professional future at all, it is, in the phrase of Geoffrey Vickers, as “skilled understanders enabling people to work out their problems”. This is not a matter for regret. I know several happy and fulfilled people who work in just this way, at the service of local community groups. Their reward is the friendship of everyone in the locality. Their problem is that of finding a free evening to pursue their own interests.

And if you ask them, they will tell you that the experience has transformed their lives. This is something that cannot be claimed through earning a living on the design of yet another new and unwanted speculative office block.