

Fear and Loathing in the Office of Architect

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Why is British architecture so lousy?' In the autumn of 1979 a conference was organised under this catchy title.¹ With such a throwaway introduction to issues of real importance, you might have been prepared for both the banal and the trite. When you found that this was the first academic gesture by the new head of a British school of architecture, you could have also expected an element of the bizarre.

Now the anomie of our urban environment is one thing (and one thing which has had wide exposure). The self-hatred of the professionals responsible is, however, another thing, and the one on which I will try to focus here. The 'Psychology of architecture' (if not the psychopathology of the everyday environment) is today a respectable discipline; polytechnics and universities have organised research units in the field, there are master courses on it, and the reading lists lengthen daily. But if the 'Psychology of the architect' is studied far less, its central issue - the architect's problem of failure, his self-alienation - is not really a new one. Today this issue is just as alive as it was a century ago, when it seems the architect's work was hated almost as much by himself as by others.²

Not that I want to suggest an easy parallel across the years. A century ago Charles Garnier was not even invited to the opening of his magnificently bombastic Opéra in Paris: in 1976 Denys Lasdun was an honoured visitor to his National Theatre in London. But if the Opéra was immensely popular as a public monument - lithographs of the building sold briskly in the Paris of the 1870s while Garnier's book *Le Nouvel Opéra* had a cultured readership - the National Theatre is immensely disliked on a popular level, however much its patrons may enjoy it; one London paper declared it the ugliest eyesore of its time. And yet today's architectural establishment consider the NT one of its outstanding monuments while laughingly dismissing the Opéra.

This may provide a clue to the moods which, a century apart, estranged architects from themselves and their public. I shall return to the 19th century later, after focusing on those fifty years that ran, roughly, between 1917 and 1967, when the future was confidently being created with energy and without angst: the Modernist period, born out of Victorian disillusion, which fathered today's lack of nerve.

¹ At the Department of Architecture, North East London Polytechnic. See Proceedings: *Why is*

² Most of my thoughts on the problem of failure in Victorian architecture grew from a reading of John Summerson's seminal essay, 'The Evaluation of Victorian Architecture', one of four lectures in *Victorian Architecture: four studies in evaluation*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970. I am also grateful for comments on the draft of this article by Peter Rich and Justin De Syllas, colleagues on the part-time architecture course at the Polytechnic of North London.

Before studying the reasons for that loss of nerve among the architects - for their self-alienation - let us look at our own perceptions of their work in the middle third of the 20th century.

Instrumental And Emblematic Aspects Of An Alien World

If we accept the useful distinction between the instrumental and emblematic aspects of architecture, we see that the former are concerned with how the environment inhibits or facilitates social action. 'The physical environment unremittingly offers us possibilities of experience or curtails them,' says Laing. 'The fundamental significance of architecture stems from this.'³ This is the basic instrumental reality. The emblematic aspect on the other hand concerns visual or stylistic surface, its comprehensibility, its representational symbols. The two aspects are of course ambiguously and inextricably linked.

Today, on the instrumental plane, we can see how the 'modern' notion of planning has attempted a mechanistic purification of life; how economic pressures and the designers' own ideological preferences (spoonfuls of 'machine analogy' and similar tonics) combined to produce an architecture that destroys the city as we know it. We can see the myth of the unambiguous industrialised society into which the whole world is disciplined in the interests of production. This is the nightmare conclusion of the Victorian social philanthropists' dream: the world as panopticon machine, hygienic, ordered and consistent, ultimately managerial and bureaucratic.

The machine has also been the inspiration for the emblematic, or visual aspect of this world, with its smooth- functioning, faceless mass buildings, its captains of industry in glass towers, all appearing rational and ordered and thus lending scientific credibility to the architects themselves. But it is not this appearance that has profoundly affected social relations. Today's town destroys the pattern of inhabitation with crude 'zoning' even as it destroys the very fabric of old buildings. Not only is the basic pattern - street corners and front doors - abandoned in the new world, but the pre-existing views, hills, vistas are also swept away, disrupting the whole process of gradual renewal, of conservative surgery. In Mark Fried's classic phrase, we grieve for a lost home.⁴ Peter Marris, in *Loss and Change*,⁵ compares the experience with other forms of personal bereavement.

On the direct, perceptual level, we remember that well- worn waistcoat, the environment we use each day and hardly notice around us, until we shiver when it is removed. The walk to the shops, the cobbles and kerbs; the local corners and those who stand on them; the smells; the feeling of security down one street, the slight unease down the other; the children running from behind hedges and between parked cars; the old woman behind her net curtain; the front gardens, the corner pub, and the walk back up the hill from the bus-stop.

³ R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 28.

⁴ Mark Fried, 'Grieving for a lost home', *The Urban Condition*, Leonard Duhal, ed., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963.

⁵ Peter Marris, *Loss and Change*, London: Tavistock, 1974.

We know this environment. Know it in the rather simple sense that, were we to stop and think about it, we probably could imagine just how the brick and timber and slate pub was built, its etched glass engraved: just how the street has slowly changed in that old lady's view, how the Saturday afternoon vigils keep hedges trim and windows clean; we know exactly who has colonised how much of the landscape we see, with its strictly graded degrees of privacy, and none of it left over, unowned.

In a similar sense, we don't know, and are immediately ill at ease with, the room-size precast panels with which 'they' line modern streets, or rather (having destroyed the streets) the edges of their solid geometries - buildings lacking detailed richness and variety of colour, shape or surface, which land like outsize cardboard models with arbitrarily horizontal edges near the (inevitably not horizontal) ground. We don't know who will ever clean the litter from the unowned and unloved corners and upper-level walkways; or when the boarded 'new' shop-front will ever find a tenant, or by what mysterious logic it can profit a man, financier or public authority, for it to remain untenanted.

We are alienated from the objects we have to live with. Alienation of the process of production, which Marx first wrote about nearly 150 years ago, has spread to engulf our lives as users and consumers; we acquire with an abstract money, we are housed by an abstract bureaucracy, we inhabit this designed world without any concrete relatedness to those objects with which we interact, within which we try to be 'at home'.

We are adrift in this hostile world, and yet terribly exposed to its panopticon eye. Exposed even by the layout maps with which our estates of housing are dotted today, standing as signs amidst the random forms, to help our friends chart a path to our hidden doorways, or future archaeologists to wonder at our lack of ability simply to orientate ourselves within our urban places.

And so we yearn for the environment we knew, the scale we understood. The street not the estate; the local park not the 'public open space'; the shop not the shopping centre, market not hypermarket; the pavement not podium and piloti, garden gate and front porch not slab block and access deck; front door not secret hole under a tower. Where the postman is lost the citizen is surely alienated. And alienated not so much by the style of modern architecture as by the underlying spatial organisation, which today is managerial and bureaucratic. 'We think we are alienated by what we see, when in fact we are deluded by it - and we are alienated by what we cannot see though we instinctively are aware of'.⁶ Adding cosy pitched roofs is no escape.

It is not just nostalgia for the emblematic qualities our architecture used to possess, although it is in part a response to what Toffler calls future shock. Despite its great improvement in internal amenity (light, heat, water, sanitation and - occasionally space), the shortcomings of architecture's Modernist legacy are well rehearsed. It is vastly expensive, monstrous in scale and unattractive. It is also clearly defined and unambiguous - its use demands clear purpose, while the traditional street thrived on random encounter and unstructured, mildly inquisitive movement. Today we are

⁶ Justin De Syllas, in a comment on my draft on this text.

zoned, our edges littered with protective rails and 'anti-suicide' window catches, with *No Parking, No Ball Games, No Entry*.

This is vastly traumatic and socially disruptive in the most positive, instrumental ways. I am not exaggerating for effect. We have seen the professionals take their social role so far that the man who today remains the nation's chief planner could write, when talking of traditional social groupings in working-class neighbourhoods: 'The task, surely, is to break up such groupings. Even though the people seem to be satisfied with their miserable environment and seem to enjoy an extrovert social life in their own locality.'⁷

Today, of course, the roots and content of this alienation, of the fear and loathing which such attitudes both encourage and themselves exhibit, are endemic in our society, and far from the control of architects. As architects now become aware of the problems associated with their work in the recent past, and as their own impotence to mitigate these horrors dawns on them, then the real professional self-alienation begins to tighten its grip. It raises deep conflicts within us as the dreams and ideas of our formative years come under attack. Almost all architects find themselves in this position today.

Growing Professional Awareness

For architects, too, are now more aware of the crudity of conceiving their production as if it were abstract model geometry - a crudity which has resulted in gross, immense children's models, their huge simple forms banging onto theoretically rectilinear and flat sites with all the sensitivity of rough cardboard maquettes blown up to grotesque proportions.

We are more aware of the insensitivity and inappropriateness of building 'in Africa as at the North Pole' (as Le Corbusier is said to have suggested), of insulting each *genius loci* with seemingly identical blocks. We are becoming aware that we require of all buildings simple and humane qualities which have nothing to do with 'function'. Instrumentally, we are more aware of the crudity of conceiving of urban people as 'clean slates' on which a new environment could produce totally new and desired behavioural images-clean, tall, straight streets breed a race of clean, tall straight men - as if we carried our cultural memories as a baggage to be abandoned when told, as if memory of place could be lobotomised, as if memory itself were not an essential part of our humanity (without which we have no basis for action). At last we hear when Gaston Bachelard says: 'Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space the sounder they are.'⁸

But of course the new planning, the zoning, the high-rise, did produce new behaviour, if not as 'they' desired or even said they desired. So today 'they' advertise in a medical journal like *The Practitioner*, over a picture of a young mother and pram in front of a block of flats, with the caption: 'She can't change her environment, but you can change

⁷ Wilfred Burns, *New Towns for Old*, London: Hill, 1963, pp. 934

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

her mood with Serenid-D' - intimating the next horrors 'they' might encourage when they once again are unable to face reality. We are now aware enough to see that architecture as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. And so, perhaps, designers are now breaking with 'them' to see themselves more as 'us'. We are more willing to trust ourselves as perceiving, feeling, smelling, hiding-curled-up-in-the-attic, remembering, seeing, sentient beings, designing for others as for ourselves, even as we move through a landscape that is increasingly alien - a landscape where, after the three generations that established Modern architecture and planning, any remaining fragments of the past now take on a haunting and poignant value.

The vast majority of these fragments are Victorian. Inspired by John Betjeman's vivid nostalgia for the shreds of Victoriana embedded in a middle class Edwardian childhood, we now revere, and ache for, those remnants of the good old days when people were 'at home' in a world that was 'whole', comprehensible, secure.

Even at the architectural level, this sentimental view is a fraud. Victorian architecture is characterised more by its undercurrent of *angst* than by almost anything else. The contemporary public (through its critics) despised this architecture, and the Victorian architects themselves hated it. For much of the 19th century they were devoured by calls for 'a new architecture', 'a modern architecture', 'a relevant architecture'. They wore themselves out and never found what it looked like.

The Victorians' Problem of Failure

Just as much 19th-century culture is typified by sudden contrasts of brashness and insecurity, of earnestness and profound anxiety, so in its architecture there is always an essential element of doubt. The architecture of the mid-Victorians was horribly unsuccessful in its own time, and in the eyes of its best informed critics. Among the architects, however, there was poignant agreement on what they admired and could learn from: the tunnels, the ships, the glasshouses. That is why, in 1851, the Crystal Palace brought their crisis of self-confidence to a head. Designed by 'a gentleman and not an architect' (as Paxton had been described), it won the universal acclaim of the profession at a time when the work of its own leading figures was being received with scorn. The same year, fighting back in a lecture at the Architectural Association, Professor Donaldson objected that 'the present tone of criticism is to depreciate all modern works of architecture', while Robert Kerr, who had been one of the young founders of the AA, called architecture 'the most unpopular profession of modern times'.⁹

Nowhere is the crisis more poignantly put than in a book by George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878), the most successful and lauded architect of his day throughout Europe:

Nothing is more striking at the present day than the absence of true creative power in architectural art. I am not speaking of individual artists. We have many men who, under more favourable circumstances, might have produced great and even original works. It is even remarkable how much is produced

⁹ Quoted by Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture*, London: Faber & Faber, 1965, p. 131.

under existing circumstances by individual men of genius. But we have produced no national style, nor do we seem likely at present to do so. We have broken the tradition. Everywhere we meet with attempted revivals of lost traditions, nowhere with any genuine power of creating new forms of beauty... Indeed, it is difficult to see how, when tradition is broken up ... a new and genuine architecture is to be originated. We must look for this among the unknown possibilities of the future.¹⁰

The self-criticism was crippling, especially when the architects' profound anxiety had been hidden beneath an earnest, assured surface. In a lecture which, when read at length, shows the alienation most clearly, Kerr concluded in despair:

If we as architects are guilty of so much that is spurious in artistic principle, there must be for this effect a corresponding and equivalent cause. Is there not here and there, in matters besides architecture, and in perhaps much more important matters, a good deal more or less spurious sentiment. Do we not live in the age of spurious sentiment? History, philosophy, law, politics, poetry - is there not but too much of spuriousness in every one of these? Faith, hope, even charity, are they not conventional to the core? And if we, as custodians of an art whose essential attribute is to reflect the character of the time, reflect this character all too faithfully, what less than this, and what else than this, could we be expected to do.¹¹

Around 1870 the first great revulsion ostensibly 'pitted - against the emblematic qualities of Victorian architecture took hold - just as a parallel antagonism was to appear a neat century later. There were vicious and derisive articles in the press. The government, in sacking Pennethorne in 1869, dismissed the only able architect in its service; in the same year *The Builder* said that Street's proposed Law Courts (and indeed all other competitors' proposals) would have been 'a deformity and an eyesore for all time'. At South Kensington, Henry Cole not only used military engineers like Captain Francis Fowke to design the public buildings, but he also assailed the architectural profession in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts. Attacks on the Law Courts then began to appear in the general press, and a year or two later, Ruskin snubbed both the RIBA and George Gilbert Scott its president by turning down the Royal Gold Medal for architecture.

But the origins of this doubt and sense of failure in the, architectural profession were much older. Over a decade earlier, Scott had been humiliated in what became known as the 'Battle of the Styles' after he had created an extraordinary scandal round the commission for the government offices in Whitehall. It had been an open competition. Scott, the leading proponent of gothic as the only true style, lost it but soon purloined the commission. The skulduggery involved was not unusual nor is it relevant here; what became the central issue was the problem of 'architectural morality'. Prime Minister Palmerston, though allowing him the commission, was adamant in his opposition to the gothic and demanded a renaissance façade. 'It is quite manifest that a man of Scott's ability can put any face he pleases to a given ground plan,' he replied caustically to a

¹⁰ George Gilbert Scott, *An Essay on the History of English Church Architecture*, London: Simpkin Marshall & Co., 1891, p.1.

¹¹ Robert Kerr, professor of the art of construction at Kings College, London; lecture, 1869. *RIBA Sessional Papers*, first series, Vol. 19 (1868-9), p. 104.

shocked pro-gothic deputation. Scott finally acquiesced and took the job - and any remaining faith in the 'one true style' died with it.

'How is it possible that the same architect could have designed such contradictory buildings?' Here was the problem that was undermining a profession which had put its faith in style. The question itself had come from someone whose awareness of the instrumental reality of architecture was more naïve than Palmerston's - it was actually asked by Napoleon III when shown Louis Baltard's two schemes for Les Halles, the Paris central market. The first, a classical masonry structure, had been demolished while under construction on an order from Baron G.E. Haussmann, the new Préfet for Paris: 'All I need is a vast umbrella,' he had said. Abandon all concern with style, and build in iron. Baltard obeyed.

Haussmann answered his emperor's question: 'The architect is the same, but the Préfet is different.' Certainly the architects were weak, caught between the instrument priorities put forth by their clients with such unacceptable clarity, and their traditional /emblematic understanding of their own role. Without such strong (and rarely stated) instructions from their clients, the architects were lost; Baltard never again produced a design with such direct force and quality.

The Heart of the Problem: Stylistic Symbols Become 'Moral' Code

If Baltard so humbly, and gladly, did as he was told; if Scott with rather more distress abandoned his principles design and thereby demeaned himself even more, wherein lay the root of their self abasement and, conversely, the power of their masters' scorn?

The problem is built right into the origins of 'Modernism' in architecture. It began with Abbé Laugier and others in the mid-18th century and was taken a stage further by that other religious zealot, Augustus Welby Pugin, 70 years later. The seeds of Pugin's alienation can perhaps be seen in two events in his life, both of which to place in 1836. The first was the competition for the new Houses of Parliament; the winning entry was Charles Barry's classical design covered with Tudor detailing exquisitely 'ghosted' by the young Pugin. The other was the publication of Pugin's first book, *Contrasts: or a parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and the Corresponding Buildings of the Present day, Showing the Decay of Taste*. Here was a bitterly sarcastic tirade against useless ornament, repetition, symmetry, applied façades and all manner of other things and a call for honest Christian construction which, by implication, vilified Pugin's own 'youthful extravagances' in his designs at the Houses of Parliament and earlier work at Windsor Castle.

With the moralising of Pugin, and then with Ruskin, we enter that tangle of ideas which has had perhaps the most pervasive effect on modern architecture, how we see and interact with it. What was, in time, to become the moral righteousness of 'functionalism' began with Pugin's subtle and insidious identification of honest behaviour with pleasant architecture, and it was compounded by Ruskin's confusion of beauty and morality.

It was Pugin who tried to turn his subject matter from style into religion. As a 'rationalist' emphasis on honesty in an age already tired of shams, this call for truthful expression had an irresistible appeal for those afraid to act in that milieu of doubt. That same year, 1836, Carlyle had said that the age was 'at once destitute of faith and terrified of scepticism'.¹² As one expression of this fear of self-questioning, Pugin's tenets offered an assumed authoritarianism, paralleling the authoritarianism in religion that many, like Newman, were also assuming after having found it so lacking in *laissez-faire* Protestantism.

One of Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* of 1849 was, indeed, the Lamp of Truth. 'We may not be able to command good, or beautiful, or inventive architecture,' he preached, 'but we can command an honest architecture.' They were heaping up quite a load to fuel the guilt of their followers!

The architects were not only unwilling to face the instrumental, social reality of their buildings (which might have forced them to reassess their own role), but were also unhappy with the clearly weakened power of style, their traditional language. The moralists' therefore attempted to load the emblematic, stylistic qualities of architecture with an iconography of social values (the gothic, directly expressed and clearly built, as the only true expression of honest society, etc.). With this seeming demonstration of social concern, they attempted by sleight of hand to retain the social force of architecture within their own stylistic control.

But it was Pugin's personal irony that he had to continue detailing a gothic façade on Barry's classical frame, and moreover one in 'Perpendicular', a 'decadent' style, long after he began preaching both honesty of expression and the correctness only of high gothic style. Without going further, what self-alienation must there have been within Pugin himself? Within the fanatic who one day, while sailing past the Houses of Parliament, the building which took up so much of his short life and whose qualities as an architectural complex so largely derive from his brilliant handling of late gothic detail, turned to a friend and said: "All Grecian, sir. Tudor detailing on a Classic body."

Self-contempt is a deadly force, being the hatred bred by an idealised self-image that operates against the real, acting self. It is truer than the history books normally imply that this building killed Pugin. But the 'moral' force of his architectural principles was stronger than his iconography, which petered out with the Battle of the Styles. The mixed blessing of 'truthfulness' wound its way deeper into the profession's soul. On the most immediate level, honesty to materials and to expression of the constructional process began to take an obvious grip; smoothness of surface, such as concealment of irregularities behind plaster, was to be as suspect as smoothness of character. In 1862 historian James Fergusson called for ceiling timbers to be 'exposed, rudely squared, with the bolts and screws all shown'. (A century later, so-called 'Brutalists' were making the identical virtue of crudely exposed materials and joints; structure and mechanical services. The shield of moralising fervour, symbol of their social conscience, again kept the heart untouched: *nice, friendly, pleasant, soft*, were not adjectives of merit in their book.)

¹² Quoted in Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.

Yet the Victorian architects had no way of *expressing* their modernism. The two major European journals, George Godwin's *The Builder* and César Daly's *Revue Générale de l'Architecture*, kept the bruise sore throughout the middle of the 19th century with a flow of editorials displaying a keen sense of the inadequacy of current architecture. As early as 1844, while explicitly expecting failure, *The Builder* had advocated 'an architecture where whatever should be done in innocence of heart by designers should be accepted and become one method or style of the day'. If so, 'what an end would then be put to the incessant babbling which is at present held... ! But devoutly as this were to be wished, it is at present hopeless'.¹³

But how could the architect, in such a climate, with his own historical awareness of style and society fed by critics like Fergusson, design any forms naturally, 'in innocence', as he self-consciously watched himself create? It was Scott, replying specifically to one damning criticism from Fergusson, who wrote in desperation: "All we at present know is that our opponents have decided that we are wrong, but this discussion will produce only perplexity unless they tell us clearly and specifically what was right. When we ask for the practical working out of what our opponents are so fond of urging, the result is absolutely nil!"¹⁴

The Modernist Confidence

How have we in the 20th Century seen this? The 'Modern' view of 19th Century architecture until quite recently - that is, from about 1870 to about 1970 -was dismissive; it appeared either embarrassed, lightly flippant or angry, if it took much notice at all.

The gothic revival, which the English dragged with such seriousness and industry, such application and energy, through the central half of the century, was seen as 'a kind of architecture which everyone agrees was worthless; it produced so little on which our eyes can rest without pain', as Kenneth Clark wrote.¹⁵ By today, its imagery has been widely and quite adequately despised. Architecture's own critics and historians until yesterday were using words like 'deplorable' or 'monstrous' without second thoughts. Indeed, the conventional wisdom under which most of today's architects were trained, claimed that straightforward architecture died out in the mid- 18th century when energies became dissipated on elaborate silhouette and façade ornament, only to reappear in the 1920s when basic rules again took over. This view implied that there was something inherently disreputable with revivalism, but more interestingly, that in the years between 1750 and 1920, there had been some obvious and morally preferable alternative to the use of Greek, Roman, Gothic or Renaissance styles which somehow the architects of the period had *decided* not to use.

This Modernist position was tenable because instrumentally, although not emblematically, their ideology was already in full swing over a century ago. Being

¹³ Collins, op. cit.

¹⁴ Collins, op. cit.

¹⁵ Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival*. London: Constable, 1929.

themselves able to cloak it with more confidence in the image of the machine, the Modernists could dismiss the earlier stylistic confusion.

Furthermore, a century ago the world had another half of which no architect spoke (apart from the campaigning Godwin in *The Builder*): 'Coketown'. The slum, indeed, had been the key invention of that era: a sump of urban squalor whose very existence and inarticulate presence was a constant alienating factor. Aware of this other half, William Morris (a man much in Ruskin's image) fought a lone battle to change the perception of the problem, defining architecture as much more than the work of architects. In the same year as Scott's cry of despair for contemporary architecture, 1881, Morris suggested a new, challenging definition of the issue:

Architecture embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man; he cannot escape from it if he would, so long as we are part of civilization, for it means the moulding or altering to human needs of the very face of the earth itself, except in the outermost desert.¹⁶

This reintegration seemed the one way out. Modernism took such a definition on board and in one sweep it brought the city - reunited, de-alienated - back within its concern. The city as an *idea* was brought under the control of the architects. The disorder, the dreadful jumble (also called jungle) which so clearly terrified men like Le Corbusier, was now to be planned. The instrumental programme of the ruling class was offered a new language and got underway. Today the widespread repugnance of a public which has experienced this new world is a response to the *instrumental* level of recent architecture. But it is played as an attack on the *emblematic* and so the architects now, at the end of the 1970s, begin to repent of their Modernist images.

Modern Architecture's Self-Loathing

Last month I sat on a review of a student housing project with quite a well-known architect who, with mixed pride and guilt, shyness and brazenness, was atoning for the sins of his high-rise housing of the 1960s. In one form or another I come across such behaviour as a common occurrence today. These men are usually defeated or embarrassed, bitter or cynical; and some fight on: 'Were all these people - the respected professionals, the government, mayors and dignitaries - misguided, corrupt or evil? This is an unlikely thesis!' storms Kenneth Campbell, long time LCC and then GLC chief housing architect at the height of the tower boom. Today he dismisses the notion as not just unlikely but impossible. And yet his trio of adjectives is revealing. Corrupt practice belongs to a separate social/ political argument while the notion of architecture being evil harks back to the Ruskin/Pugin view that it can somehow be morally wrong. But misguided? Yes, there really was no excuse.

We can turn up all the evidence to show that the towers were by no means inevitable. By 1961 there were arguments against them on economic grounds¹⁷; many sensitive

¹⁶ William Morris, 'The prospect of Architecture in Civilization', lecture at the London Institution, 10 March 1981; *On Art and Socialism*, Holbrook Jackson, ed. John Lehmann, London, 1948, p. 245.

¹⁷ For example, P. Stone in *Town Planning Institute Journal*, 1961. The evidence is discussed at length in my *Rise and Fall of the Towers* keynote paper to conference on high rise housing, North East London Polytechnic, 24 May 1979 (unpublished).

sociological and psychological studies were condemning the blitzkrieg of such total redevelopment; and the arguments were widely disseminated. Even a UK government publication a quarter of a century ago argued: 'Very many comments have been made as to the undesirability of bringing up children in flats, and general regrets are expressed that this should occur at all.'¹⁸ One could go on endlessly. Yet at that time the towers were only just starting! The number of high flat blocks continued to increase rapidly to a peak fifteen years after that quotation. By the early 1970s over a million Britons lived in blocks over six storeys; in other words, 3,000 London children between the ages of one and five - that most inquisitive and exploratory of all ages - were in flats off the ground.

Kenneth Campbell told me, when early in 1979 we were discussing Chris Booker's then recent TV blockbuster on the failure of modern architecture, that it took him years to realise that housing managers were putting families with small children in buildings his department had designed for adults. Writing about it in *Building Design* the previous year, he had claimed three reasons for the failure of the high-rise programme: one, the wrong occupation; two, poor caretaking and maintenance; three, 'totally inadequate' lifts. 'The only excuse for our ignorance,' he continued, 'is that right up to the end both the social research people in County Hall and the DoE produced surveys of tenant reaction which can only be described as inexplicably optimistic.'¹⁹

Two of his strongest and most powerful allies on behalf of high-rise housing in England were Cleeve Barr, director of the National Building Agency which promoted high-rise system building, and Edward Hollamby, chief architect and planner of Lambeth in London. Barr lives in charming Hampstead Garden Suburb, London; Hollamby even more salubriously in the famous Red House built by Philip Webb for William Morris.

These are all sensitive people when they walk away from their own products. Something completely blocked their perceptions of the realities they designed. As the tower housing, the slab offices, the system hospitals and schools spread out, did the whole architectural profession (which, thanks to the class system, almost never needed to see the product of its designs in everyday use) have to develop this kind of skin just in order to live from day to day?²⁰

And now the issue can be avoided no longer. The towers fail. Architects, while culpable enough, are quite unfairly blamed for decisions beyond their power. Even the buildings themselves are blamed (as if intrinsically right or wrong, thanks to Pugin) and then blown up. Gross technical incompetence is widely revealed, and usually by the technical press like *Building Design* 'supporting' the architect every bit as powerfully as *The Builder* did a hundred and twenty years earlier.

This phase began with the rise and fall of an award-winning housing scheme by Yamasaki in St. Louis. When the architect left amidst applause in 1954, the 33 eleven-

¹⁸ M. Willis, *Play Areas on Housing Estates*, London: HMSO, 1953.

¹⁹ *Building Design*, 28 July 1978, p. 2.

²⁰ Most of our 'decision makers' are part of the achieving middle class packed into the suburban and subrural areas of south-east England and other affluent non-metropolitan patches. They form a tiny minority which has managed to avoid the problem, usually by pulling down blinds behind the eyes when leaving for the office in the morning. This alienation, more refined and perhaps more ominous, is not my concern here.

storey blocks became the focus of what Lee Rainwater politely called 'one of the most disorganised public housing communities in the United States'²¹. It was filled by the authority with unskilled slum dwellers of unstable work histories; fearful and threatened by society, and living in poverty. They were not 'working' class, as over 50% were female-headed households on public assistance; all were negro.

In many ways what happened was obvious. The authorities, so uptight and strained they could not look their own role in the face, could do nothing but blame the building. They then took the only possible action, and in memorable images dynamited the bad dream, like the end of *Zabriskie Point*, to obliterate the memory.

Meanwhile, architects seem only too willing to carry the can, while their high priest Charles Jencks, with amazing lack of perception, calls this moment of demolition the end of modern architecture. It is certainly today's new solution in Britain; top explosive experts who have been demolishing towers for housing authorities 'predict a flurry of activity from other authorities' (said *Building Design* in 1978), while the architects mutter *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* under their excited breaths.

Only a few months ago, a partner in an architectural practice wrote to *The Architects' Journal* that he was designing a school in a system which makes all the participants, designers as well as clients, one assumes, 'institutional' [sic]. He wasn't opting out of work, or refusing this commission, or even really complaining. His letter to the paper had been about a different point; but it ended on this dejected footnote:

More time could be spent trying to understand and keep up to date with the incredibly tedious and perpetually changing design programmes and, so-called, standard details of SCOLA '(the building system he was using)' than designing an ordinary building, and what do you end up with? An anonymous and predictable physical expression of the construction organisation method which teachers are sick and tired of and which affects the children's awareness of their surroundings by about as much as an uncomfortable plastic stacking chair.²²

Here is an architect describing the building he is designing. What depths of self-hate does the profession still have to go through!

To conclude, let me return to the historical parallel and recall what John Summerson has said: 'I believe that in the architecture of the Victorians we are faced with a unique and huge distortion of social and artistic relationships.'²³ Today we seem to be part of a not dissimilar and equally huge distortion. Both Victorian and post-Modernist times have had to question the ideals of their formative periods - not just in terms of style but in terms of the very purpose of architecture. At such times it is very difficult not to feel a traitor to one's youthful self, and to avoid turning both bitter and cynical.

But this alienation can be a positive spur towards a new understanding. Indeed alienation, far from being necessarily negative, can be the first positive step towards

²¹ Lee Rainwater, 'Fear and the House-as-Haven in the Lower Class', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 32, No. 1 January 1966.

²² R. Adam. *The Architects' Journal*, 30 April 1980.

²³ Summerson, op. cit.

awareness and a new creative commitment. Will we architects perhaps some day stop masochistically beating ourselves? Will we perhaps some day no longer need in desperate insecurity to grab onto our newly refound sentimental images of the past? The fake mansards and the tiled pitches, the formal classical order, or the as-seen-on-TV cornflake village and country butter small town streets: all these are facets of a populist alibi to prove our humanity, just as the mechanistic alibi proved our parents' generation's professional and scientific credibility. Each is used to cover, conceal and legitimise the dominant instrumental policies.

Such attitudes will continue until we face up to the instrumental reality of architecture and rethink our roles as professionals; until architects take a stand for creative commitment and - our awareness increased by our alienation - we personally re-evaluate our performance. Until, perhaps, we actually do work out why our architecture is so lousy.

That conference I mentioned at the start, predictably, hardly began to uncover the issues involved. But the point, of course, is not just to understand them, but to change them.

John McKean

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