

When building a house in Ireland some years ago I encouraged the client to 'dedicate' the timber frame before it was closed in. She proceeded to inscribe on it the words 'Nil aon tintean mar do thintean fein'. This translates as 'there's no fireside like one's own fireside' which neatly captures the feeling of the hearth as a vital centre around which our lives revolve. When we look a little deeper into this we discover that the words 'hearth' and 'heart' spring from the same ancient roots which is probably why we can so easily accept the hearth as the vital centre of life and home, evoking feelings of warmth, companionship, nourishment and security.

The nature of such feelings form the basis of the 'living' architecture I have taught and practiced for over twenty years. The premise of this is quite simple - our homes are an extension of our lives, a large scale representation of who we are. Where our hearts function to maintaining our physical aliveness they are also the centre of our emotional lives. The hearth replicates this within our homes, supplying warmth and vitality as well as facilitating emotional engagement with the world. While the home's role in providing for people's physical needs is well understood, its role in providing emotional sustenance is less obvious but nonetheless instinctively understood.

Houses are very much like people. Where people have physical bodies and an inner world made up of their emotions, imaginations, dreams and instincts (symbolised by the heart), the inner part of houses, (symbolised by the hearth), mirrors this, particularly people's dream world. This is the origin of the notion of the 'dream home'.

In the traditional practice of vernacular architecture people designed and built their homes instinctively incorporating natural vitality into them. These invisible aspects of home fostered a sense of identity as well as nurturing cultural expression through storytelling, poetry, music and dance, much of which was enacted 'around the fire'.

With the advent of the industrial revolution people gave up the practice of creating their own homes. This literally meant extinguishing the fire and abandoning the hearth in favour of a modern way of life. While this was easily enough accomplished on a physical level the emotional mirroring of this resulted in the abandonment of the heart as a tool for engaging with the world, thereby compromising people's ability to engage emotionally with the world.

The discreditation of the heart as an essential and innate survival tool has emphasised material values over emotional satisfaction. 'Home' has now come to be defined mainly as a material phenomenon. This has led to a situation whereby any discussion of houses is limited to their physical aspects - what they are made from, how much floor area they enclose and the address of their location. The invisible aspects of 'home' - how they make people feel and whether or not they foster love, creativity and dream, never play a part in any house-related discussion. All of this is symbolised by the abandonment of the hearth.

Clearly we cannot go back to the past, unconsciously incorporating natural vitality into our homes! However we can rekindle that vital spark by symbolically reigniting the fire and re-establishing the virtual hearth as a focus around which our lives can revolve. This is achieved by consciously examining what the hearth represents inside of us - it is a reflection of the heart which beats within our physical bodies and channels the vital life force which powers our aliveness. This conscious channeling of the life force has been the basis of house design for millennia.

The ancient Indian architectural practice of 'Vastu Shastra' and the Chinese practice of 'Feng Shui' essentially strive to enhance the quality of the life force which flows through a dwelling thereby enhancing the quality of life of the inhabitants. This is done through careful and sensitive exploration of the subtle energies which emanate from the location a dwelling is to occupy. The energies of the clients are also carefully examined to ensure proper and fruitful harmonisation between people and place.

The western architectural tradition, in which I myself was trained, has no comparable procedures to be followed in respect of house design process, it's tradition of Sacred Geometry focussing primarily on the design and construction of sacred buildings.

Back in 1989, when I first imagined teaching people how to design their own homes in a 'Be Your Own Architect' Course of my devising, I quickly discovered that my university education had neglected to teach me the rudiments of house design! Realising that people had always practiced a 'vernacular' architecture I set out to explore and revive this tradition.

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In the western world the knowledge required for the creation of dwelling places was long regarded as common knowledge and freely available to all. However, once people stopped building their own homes this knowledge was forgotten due to its oral nature! While there are many books which detail aspects of house design, instruction on how to utilise this wealth of information to create meaningful, practical and affordable buildings is virtually non-existent. Neither is there a dedicated school of house design or a body of experts conversant with the house design process. Realising this, I set out to write a book on the subject, based on the experience of teaching my eager students.

The results of this experience was quite a revelation! People seemed to instinctively understand the nature of the process, bringing to their design and construction activity an amazing vitality. I dubbed this as 'the awakening of the sheltermaker genes'. When people inhabited these dwellings it became even clearer that some deep connection was being re-established, that some ancient fire was being re-ignited.

In time I began to understand this as a nurturing of the lifeforce within people, their homes acting as a stimulus, encouraging them to live fruitful and productive lives. It was these understandings which leant to my work the title of 'living architecture'.

Most of this work was carried on in Ireland over the last twenty years. When I first came to Australia in 2007 and began teaching these concept I discovered that similar dynamics operated here. People instinctively embraced these ideas and made them their own. Perhaps most importantly, encountering the notion of a 'Dreamtime' in the Aboriginal tradition, I was offered the missing bit of the house design puzzle which I had devoted myself to painstakingly re-assembling.

If we imagine 'our dreaming' as representing the invisible centre around which our lives revolve, its an easy step to equate this with the lifeforce which animates our hearts, minds and bodies. It is this vitality that nurtures our individuality, creativity and, quite literally, it is the power of this which gets us out of bed in the morning!

When we honestly examine the notion of the 'dream house', going beyond its pastiche representation in glossy magazines, we discover what I call 'invisible architecture'. At the heart of this is the idea of a space where one can truly be oneself. This allows us to think of home as a nutrient for our self-development - a place into which we can literally plant our selves so that we might grow into selfhood. From this perspective it's easy to imagine heart, hearth and dream emerging from the same root - the very lifeforce which animates us.

To understanding the puzzle of our selves and of modern life we have to literally re-integrate the heart into the everyday. It is this which allows us to access the dream of our individual lives. This rekindling of the virtual hearth allows us to identify who we are, where we are going and how we plan to get there, an essential process in the quest to harmonise with the natural world and to achieve the goal of living sustainably.

It is interesting that the current trend in house design focusses on the capturing of solar energy, placing the fire at the heart of the home again. This is something we instinctively understand and is even something which our rational minds can readily accept! Without the sun there would be no life and therefore no dream. Perhaps a new saying is required to bring us up to date with reality ... 'nil aon brionglóid mar do brionglóid fein'. ('There's no dream like one's own dream')

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Peter Cowman is an architect, eco-builder, writer and teacher delivering Courses & Workshops internationally on the subject of Living Architecture. He was born and educated in Dublin, Ireland, graduating from the School of Architecture, University College Dublin in 1976. Apart from his work as an architect, at various points of his nomadic life Peter has worked as a salesman, an art gallery director, a handyman and as a full-time parent. He began teaching people how to design their own homes in 1989, a task which he still pursues as director of the Living Architecture Centre [livingarchitecturecentre.com]. Never having had a mortgage himself, Peter has a special interest in the creation of affordable, low-impact, mortgage-free buildings and has developed a unique timber framing system for cost-conscious self-builders. Originator of the 'Sheltermaker' and 'Living Architecture' concepts Peter's work has been widely publicised in both print as well as broadcast media, worldwide. He is the author of 'The Sheltermaker's Manual' published by Australia's Python Press.