

Embracing a sustainable way of life involves changing how we provide ourselves with food and shelter.

Permaculture has been phenomenally successful at providing and disseminating a practical, workable and accessible system of natural food production. By comparison the natural building movement has been much less successful at providing practical information about the creation or modification of buildings to support a sustainable way of life.

Where people traditionally provided for their own needs in regards to food and shelter, the job culture introduced by the industrial revolution induced people to sell the time previously devoted to such tasks. While domestic-scale food production did not entirely cease as a result of this new way of life, the practice of building one's own home did.

In the late 80's I found my construction expertise much in demand by people struggling to create low-cost, mortgage-free buildings very much in the spirit of the pre-industrial era tradition. As an architect, I could see that the problems people were encountering were rooted in a lack of clear design information. This inspired me to begin teaching people how to avoid such problems by assembling clear design information before construction work was undertaken.

This venture into the classroom rapidly uncovered a startling fact - I had absolutely no idea what to teach people and could not even articulate to myself the basic elements of the house design process! This was shocking, but as I quickly understood, there was good reason for my ignorance. I had not been trained how to design houses because this was not part of the architectural profession but belonged to the older vernacular architecture tradition which was controlled by people themselves. Due to the oral nature of this tradition, when people stopped practicing it, vital knowledge concerning house design was lost forever.

In my efforts to teach design to my eager students I consulted many books which detailed aspects of house design, but I could find none which articulated the process itself. So, I set out to develop a practical and modern design methodology that anyone committed to the task could easily follow.

This process began with students listing the spaces they required along with an analysis of the activities they intended to carry out in these spaces. This was augmented with a list of the furniture and equipment needed to support these activities plus information on the qualities they wished these spaces to embody. This analytical approach essentially amounted to the articulation of how people wished to live.

This process of designing 'from the inside out' next led to the consideration of both the internal and external environments, to the selection of appropriate materials and to the investigation of other relevant matters. This in turn led to the formation of a plan, which embodied all of the aspirations expressed in the design process, within a simple to construct building 'package'.

Students brought such vitality to these design exercises it appeared as if some innate knowledge lodged in their genes had suddenly been activated. When some of these designs were constructed and inhabited this vitality became further evident. Just as in permaculture, where a sensitivity to nature is seen to foster growth and development, the same appeared to hold true of sensitively designed and constructed houses. It appeared to be the case that by 'planting' themselves in these carefully considered designs people's lives were growing and bearing fruit! On closer examination of this it became clear that houses were actually very much like people.

People have physical bodies enclosing an interior world made up of their aspirations, dreams and so on. These aspects of people are represented by the physical 'body' of a house which is composed of walls, floor and a roof enclosing the interior spaces which mirror people's invisible interior world, particularly their idea of their 'dream' house. Because interior space cannot be represented on drawings or on a computer screen it remains invisible during the design process. Consequently, the focus of attention is placed on the visible aspects of the building - the 'body' of the house, particularly the outward appearance this. Because the inside of buildings is



where people live out their personal lives, a failure at the design stage to pay attention to the quality of this interior space can severely compromise the quality of the constructed building as a place to grow, develop and live a fulfilling and sustainable life.

The recognition that buildings are like people, composed of conjoined visible and invisible parts, goes a long way towards explaining the complexity normally associated with the building process. Such complexity arises by failing to pay attention to the invisible parts of the building - the inside space which mirrors the lives people live within such space. If this complexity, which is invisible, is not acknowledged, addressed and resolved during the design stage, it becomes intertwined with and muddles the construction process, severely compromising the potential for the growth and development of its occupants, particularly the fulfillment of their deeper aspirations and the 'dream of their lives'. In comparison, if close attention is paid to the nature of the life to be lived within a building it allows the actual body of the building - its walls, floor and roof - to be much simplified and consequently constructed easily and cost effectively.

It became clear, in the houses designed and constructed by my students, that it was the close attention paid to how they wished to live, clearly expressed and refined within the design process, which enlivened their homes and acted as a nutrient for their development and growth. I call this aspect of a building its 'invisible architecture'. This concept allows us to imagine houses as being shaped according to the lives we have to live, as opposed to imagining our lives being shaped by the houses we live in.

Within the vernacular architecture tradition the direct involvement of people in the design and construction of their homes was literally powered by and filled with the vitality of their lives. In comparison, when a house is designed and constructed by a stranger such connectivity is not established, making it more difficult for people to activate the power of invisible architecture to enhance their lives.

In the ancient Indian tradition of Vastu Vidya - which translates as 'the science of dwelling' - the invisible properties of space were considered to carry vitality into the home, facilitating balance and harmony between the dwelling, its inhabitants and the cosmos. Similarly, the Chinese tradition of Feng Shui which concerns itself with a building's siting, proportioning, layout and construction, pays particular attention to the channeling of vitality within buildings to benefit its occupants and the world in general. It is the absence of *vitality* a building feels dead - an all too familiar experience in the modern world.

Disconnection from the invisible but vital aspects of life and building have now become a dominant characteristic of life. Uncovering and reconnecting with house design and construction traditions offers us the potential of reconnecting with the natural world, and perhaps more importantly, with ourselves. When we realise that our lives are the most important ingredient in the house design process an entirely new way of looking at houses and life opens up to us. The success of this hinges on clearly articulating how we wish to live and shaping a simple enclosure to contain the richness of our lives. When the potential to produce food and to operate a home business is incorporated into such a design strategy the possibility of achieving a truly sustainable way of life opens up to people, particularly if borrowings are kept to a minimum.

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. The Sheltermaker's Manual is published by Python Press.