

# LIVING ARCHITECTURE:



## THE LOST ART OF SHELTERMAKING

At this time of uncertainty one thing we can rely on is the continuing need for water, food, and shelter. The fulfilment of these three basic needs will continue to fuel future economic activity. We have developed a widespread awareness of the importance of consuming healthy and sustainable food and water. We can see the benefits of avoiding products and practices that are likely to negatively impact our health, and the health of the planet as a whole. This awareness also must spread to our concepts of shelter and our practice of creating it.

Agriculture has been the survival



by Peter Cowman, BArch.

*Peter Cowman is an architect, eco-builder, writer and teacher delivering Courses & Workshops internationally on the subject of Living Architecture. 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.*

*Peter has a special interest in the creation of affordable, low-impact, mortgage-free buildings. Peter will be delivering a comprehensive programme of Workshops, Courses & Talks in Ireland during 2014. Details available at [sheltermaker.com](http://sheltermaker.com)*

paradigm of our civilisation. We rely on harmonies established with the cycles and processes of the natural world to sustain ourselves. The contract with nature upon

which agriculture depends was traditionally celebrated within agricultural mysteries expressed in story, symbol, song, dance, and ritual which acknowledged the physical as

**“House design  
was always  
a community  
based activity  
and was never  
part of the  
architectural  
profession...”**



well as the metaphysical aspects of life manifest through cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth. A natural extension of the agricultural way of life was the creation of buildings to shelter people, an activity which clearly reveals the physical and the metaphysical aspects of the world. This mystery is at the heart of vernacular architecture traditions worldwide which celebrate the act of building as the creation of the world.

That buildings can be experienced as the embodiment of the world arises from the fact that they have physical and metaphysical aspects. These are manifest in the form of the building fabric and the inner space which is enclosed by this. The invisible inner space, accompanied by its constant companion time, gives entry to the metaphysical world which is protected by the physical fabric of a building. Not only is this a reflection of the world at large but it also reflects the nature of people with their physical bodies and invisible inner 'dream' worlds. These aspects of people are often symbolised by the head and the heart, the constant interaction of which offers the opportunity to experience a life of growth, fulfilment and wellbeing.

The balancing of the head and heart is achieved by living a conscious life that acknowledges that we are a part of nature. The mythos of sheltermaking and agriculture mysteries which celebrate this are the foundation upon which modern culture is constructed. The function of this mythos is to connect us to the invisible realms of life whose natural economy offers us nurturance, sustenance, protection, opportunity, direction and wellbeing, within the realm of space and time. Because it is beyond the capability of scientific rationalism to validate such a worldview it is usually denigrated as a viable way to live life.

The mythos of the modern world - that the head must always dominate the heart - derives from Age of Reason and from the rational thought forms which drove the Industrial Revolution. As a result, the human relationship with nature has altered exposing people to a purely physical and rational interpretation of life. The industrialised economy reflects this with its reliance on energy derived from fossil fuels to produce items that generally cannot participate harmlessly in the natural cycles of decay and rebirth. The consequences of this are manifest

as environmental breakdown, climate change and pollution, as this manmade economy devours its resources and strives to sustain itself in the belief that the eternity of space and time can be parlayed into money, growth and abundance without adversely affecting planetary life.

The industry-focused global economy displaces the mythos of agriculture and sheltermaking and in its place offers the promise of a new world order. Where this promise has been found wanting and is also seen as being destructive to life, a new economic model is striving to evolve. Anti-GMO, SloFood and Transition Towns movements, farmer's markets, organic labelling, seed-saving initiatives as well as a wealth of books articles, courses and workshops attest to this in respect of obtaining the healthy food and water we need. The widespread support, action, exchange, and debate consequent to this is focussed on maintaining and strengthening our connection to nature and to the vital aspects of personal and planetary health and wellbeing which make life worth living.

This contemporary evocation of the

mysteries of agriculture has been facilitated by the fact that the art of cultivation was never relinquished by people, and so it has been relatively easy to reconnect with this mythos. However when the activity sheltermaking ceased due to the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the knowledge of how to create traditional natural buildings was lost and the connectivity to the mythos of sheltermaking dissipated. This arose because the new economy relied on people selling their time. Time was what allowed the traditional sheltermaker to build his or her own home, so taking up paid employment closed off this option.

With industrialisation house building became part of a new industry. As a result, the design, construction and marketing of homes became the cornerstone of the market economy. Rigorously controlled through legal, planning, and monetary instruments, homeowners now had to pledge their future time in exchange for the security of a place in which to live and assume a burden of debt to pay for this privilege. This tied people to an economic system which is now clearly self-destructing, prompting serious enquiry into viable alternative economic systems and ways of life.

The essentials of a viable alternative way of life are - access to healthy food, water, and shelter. Healthy food and water are relatively easily accessed and DIY options are also available. Obtaining healthy natural shelter on the other hand is difficult and expensive on the open market and comprehensive information on DIY options are almost impossible to find.

House design was always a community based activity and was never part of the architectural profession. Consequently, there is no professional body overseeing or directing the development of

“

***If we think of personal shelter as the place which provides the context for our lives to unfold we can separate this function from the purely physical aspects of shelter.***

”

affordable contemporary house design solutions which nurture people and accord with natural systems. This has resulted in a lack of useable knowledge, information, initiatives, engagement, actions, choices or debate in respect of creating affordable healthy buildings and of avoiding questionable products and practices that are likely to negatively affect human and planetary health. The lack of empowerment which results from this severely compromises people's ability to disengage from the current self-destructive economic system on which they rely to acquire an affordable and safe place to live.

When people re-engage with the mysteries of sheltermaking they gain access to their inner dream world - by literally getting inside themselves! This happens as a consequence of being able to transfer their protective psychic boundaries to the physical fabric of a building fashioned to suit their needs. People can safely and consciously connect to the realm of space and time enclosed by this building fabric – their dream world.

If we think of personal shelter as the place which provides the context for our lives to unfold we can separate this function from the purely physical aspects of shelter – the building fabric itself. This is similar to how we clothe ourselves. How we look is not really us, just the image of us which we present to the world. The real us is inside ourselves. The same is true of buildings. It is within the inner realm of space and time, inside

our natural shelter, that we can truly be ourselves. This is the very purpose of a shelter - to facilitate us in connecting to and living the dream of our lives.

The design process which leads to such empowerment begins with an idea or intention. When this is expressed in words people can consciously articulate how they wish to spend their time and occupy their space. This designing 'from the inside out' allows people to redefine themselves by clearly and honestly articulating how they wish to live, intoning the dream of their lives free of the false promise of consumerism. This demands adaptability, incorporating into a shelter the ability to live, work and to be creatively engaged, along with the ability grow and store food, to recycle waste, to generate electricity, to harvest rainwater and so on.

By recapturing the sheltermaking imperative we create the possibility of living truly sustainable lives. No other aspect of life incorporates so many issues vital to our survival - food and water; economics; space and time; artistic expression; recycling; energy awareness; connection to nature and to the inner realms, plus, health and wellbeing. These provide us with the basics of a human economy that accords with the natural economy, delivering the potential for us to live healthy and fulfilling lives in harmony with nature. It but awaits our commitment to instigate the unfolding of such an exciting survival paradigm.