

Sustainable Dream Home

Peter Cowman BArch.

Embracing a sustainable way of life involves changing how we provide ourselves with food and shelter. In traditional societies people provided for their own needs in this regard. The industrial revolution changed this pattern. People abandoned this so-called 'subsistence' way of life in favor of a job culture and an urban existence. 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.

Because vernacular architecture traditions were oral and perpetuated by practical example when the practice of building one's own home ceased vital sheltermaking knowledge was lost and vernacular architecture was superseded by profit driven 'development' controlled by self-interested third parties.

While there are many modern books available detailing various aspects of sustainable building practice, information on the design process itself is thin on the ground. It is generally assumed that the architectural profession is the repository of such information but this is not the case. Sheltermaking was never a part of the architectural profession but was always something controlled by people themselves.

If we hope to achieve a truly sustainable way of life it is vital that the loss of vital sheltermaking knowledge is recognised and efforts are made to reconnect with the vernacular architecture tradition. This process begins by understanding the vital role which shelter plays in our lives.

Physically, buildings consist of walls, floors and roofs which enclose space. This space is not actually created but merely hived off from the pre-existing space that surrounds us - space that existed before the building was made and space which continues to exist after the building has disappeared. This mysterious quality of architecture is often overlooked - largely because space is invisible and is therefore impossible to see. As a result undue emphasis is normally placed on the parts of buildings that are readily visible - the building body or fabric. This way of looking at buildings is so common that people believe that this is what architecture is.

If undue emphasis is placed on the physical aspects of shelter the invisible qualities of the space enclosed are easily overlooked. This is akin to ignoring peoples emotions when relating to them. Such an approach to people, to buildings or to life in general, denies the reality of any intangible, or hidden, dimensions that exist beyond the physical realm.

Where industrialisation encouraged people to surrender their time in exchange for a wage it also demanded that people surrender their space. This precipitated a disconnection from the intangible qualities of life and nature. The result of this was to consign people to a uni-dimensional world where physical reality was everything - a rational world where the value of property is calculated according to monetary worth rather than in terms of how it nurtures the growth and development of its occupants.

Traditional sheltermaking, by virtue of the materials it used and the handcrafted nature of their assembly, through its association with food production, ritual and myth intimately connected people to natural processes and cycles. As a result, the home acted as a reference point that allowed for the orientation of the individual within the natural world.

Houses are made up of two essential parts. The first of these is the outside or the building fabric comprising walls, floor and roof. The second part is the inside space which is enclosed by this building fabric. This is the most important part of any home because it is where life is lived.

The fact that houses are made up of two essential parts - an outside and an inside - makes buildings very much like people. People have physical bodies and an interior world made up of their imaginations, dreams, unconscious and so on. It is this inside part of people which most closely represents who they really are. The same is true of houses. The life to be lived within them is the most important consideration when embarking



on the design and construction process. It is this focus which brings a building to life. Such 'living' architecture strives to balance inner and outer considerations just as we strive to balance our physical needs with those of our inner selves.

Because sustainable living shares a similar goal - harmonisation with the physical world and with the mysteries of nature - the creation of an architecture to support this is essential if we hope to change how we live on the planet.

Instinctive sheltermaking activity begins when we are quite young. Playing house is common to all cultures and signals the process of individuation and the development of self-awareness. The psychologist Karl Jung devoted much of his life to the exploration of the house as a symbol of self, in dream as well as in reality.

The stimulation of our inner selves is central to the concept of the Dream Home - a place where we can truly be our selves. This allows us to think of architecture as a nutrient for our self-development - a place into which we can literally plant our selves so that we might grow into selfhood. The design process is based on self-enquiry, proceeding from an abstract conception of what it is you want leading to the manifestation of this in physical reality.

The abstract conception of your Dream Home emerges from within you. It is this intention which will enliven the inner space of the building. The role of the building fabric - the walls, the floor and the roof - is to enclose this inner space and to separate it from the outside world.

Because clear intention is what brings a building to life it is essential that intention controls the design process. This requires that a harmony be achieved between the inner and outer aspects of the design. This balancing of abstract and physical, visible and invisible, is characteristic of life itself.

To achieve the necessary harmony between the inner and outer aspects of the design your mind has to be encouraged to share power with your intuition. This allows you to tune in to the harmony of your life and to infuse your design with that life. Bringing your design to life is, in many ways, about bringing yourself to life.

When childhood 'play house' activities are superseded by formal schooling a vital connection into the abstract world of our imaginations is lost. This loss is compounded by pressure to get a foot onto the property ladder and to accept the modern way of acquiring shelter - by taking out a mortgage.

Mortgaging is the basis of all modern economies. The economic meltdown of 2008, triggered by the sub-prime mortgage crisis, has now proven beyond doubt that mortgage debt fuels economic growth and perpetuates the endless cycle of exploitation and destruction that bedevils the world. This clarity has added urgency to the need for people to reconnect with their sheltermaking instincts. When people do this, they enter a new world where the hidden dimensions of life can be experienced to the full and where meaningful change becomes possible.

Infusing one's architecture with one's life makes it abundantly clear that one's life is the secret ingredient of the architecture and not some fancy floorboard, kitchen cabinet or master builder. It will further be realised that a handful of raw earth, embodied with one's life energy, can be brought to life in a way that a manufactured product simply cannot. It is the clear intention within the design which imparts to a building its living character. Quite literally, by bringing our architecture to life we can come more alive ourselves.

It is by such engagement that we can begin to recognise the intangible qualities which characterise life and nature and which permeate the vernacular buildings which still survive. Awakening our instincts in this manner provides us with a firm foundation on which a sustainable and productive future may be constructed.

Peter Cowman is an architect, eco-builder, teacher, writer and the director of the Living Architecture Centre. He began teaching people how to design their own homes in 1989. He has a special interest in on mortgage-free self-building. He teaches and lectures internationally. Further details of Living Architecture is available from livingarchitecturecentre.com