

ADAPTABILITY

PETER COWMAN BARCH.

By changing the way in which we look at the subject of human shelter we gain the potential to change our lives. It is this key factor - the incorporation within a home of the natural ability to change and adapt - that offers the power to change not only ourselves but, in consequence, the world. It is the need for such change that characterises all proposed solutions to the problems of global warming, pollution, toxic waste, food contamination, and so on. The reason that house design wields such power is simple. Settled life is the basis of civilisation as we know it. Houses are the cornerstone of settled life, and, in consequence, underpin all the civilised values we revere.

This vital role that housing plays in civilised life is clearly reflected in the economic structure of the world where special status is ascribed to houses. Where virtually all other commodities fall in value after purchase, the opposite is true of houses which normally increase in value over the course of their lifetimes. This trick of accounting is a key component of the market led economic system that now shrouds the globe.

The special status that houses and property enjoy is forged by linking the work we do to the shelter we need to survive. By treating our working time as a commodity the economic value of our labour over a specified period - say, over 20 years - can be quantified. By allowing one to borrow against the projected value of this work and to use these borrowings to invest in a place to live, the 'worker' is tied to his or her job because he or she must repay from it the cost of the shelter that is essential to their survival.

The work/shelter cycle, as long as it satisfies people and their desire to live, is a miracle of progress. However when this cycle grows to depend on factors that are beyond the needs of people they become hostages to economic forces that have nothing to do with them or the life of the planet. This is the situation in the developed world at the present time. Economic growth is everything. This favours increased consumption and the application of market-driven solutions to the resultant woes. Because business is normally bottom-line driven and head-centred, the consequences of unbridled economic growth is often threatening to life on the planet. Solving these problems in a market led economy will, it is imagined, further assist economic growth!

Because houses form a vital part of economic systems, which are normally wholly focussed on commercial values, any change in the established work/shelter cycle is strongly resisted. This has never been more true than at the present time. Because property has been invested with a notional worth in the context of the market economy any major change that devalues this - for example, not being able to afford oil to heat an apartment - renders that property worthless in terms of actually using it for living in. As long as this is not an issue the bottom-line thinking can still rack up a paper rise in notional worth. However, as soon as a building needs to be lived in, particularly in the face of even a minor crisis, its adaptability will render it either 'liveable' or 'uninhabitable.' If such a crisis were to be a fossil fuel drought, not even money could solve the problem!

In many ways what is needed is a move to re-establish people's 'sheltermaking rights' and to facilitate personal sheltermaking/homesteading. Also, ways will have to be found of financing such natural building without recourse to mortgaging. How a building can facilitate the earning of a living will also become more critical. Size, local materials and elements of self-building will all be part of the mix, including clustering initiatives. Land on which to build is obviously a nut to crack. Clearly, organic food production is part of the equation too. The gathering and storage of solar energy will be vital also. More than anything, viable and practical designs need to be developed that could be pre-approved by Planning Authorities with consultation only required on issues such as siting and access. Essentially, anyone thinking of building for the unknown future should ensure that adaptability is designed-in.