

ARCHITECTURE & IDENTITY

PETER COWMAN BARCH.

Ancient buildings such as the Great Pyramids, the Parthenon, Newgrange and, in more recent times, the Gothic cathedrals, harbour secrets which were incorporated into their designs by their architects. This allowed for the abstract manifestation of these secrets within the buildings themselves. These can be described as the 'feelings' evoked by the architecture. The ancient secrets of design are founded on this ability of architecture to unify physical and emotional experience. This is assisted by the fact that buildings have an inside and an outside which is a reflection of the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds we exist in. Where architecture provided a means of harmonising these physical and spiritual aspects of life, buildings functioned as identifying mechanisms allowing people to orient themselves in a multi-dimensional physical/emotional world. Because the unification of physical and emotional experience is the cornerstones of a sustainable life, an architecture appropriate to this must exist in order to live sustainably. This suggests that somehow the ancient secrets of architecture must be revived.

The elimination of what might be referred to as the 'metaphysical' aspects of building design dates from The Enlightenment which promoted reason as the only verifiable reality worth pursuing. This defined architecture as something physical, to be seen from the outside, not entered into and experienced. Status, grandeur and outward appearance become of paramount importance, effectively purging architecture of its secrets and ushering in the era of 'soullessness' in building design which still prevails. The long term effect of this has been to obscure the potential of architecture to orient people within the multi-dimensional physical/emotional world in which they exist and to compound the feeling of disconnectedness from life which many people feel.

It is generally assumed that professional architects are experts when it comes to house design. This infers that there are 'schools of house design' where architects - the only people formally trained to design buildings - receive initiation into the art. This is simply untrue. House design has always belonged to a separate tradition of architectural practice which is referred to as 'the vernacular'.

Vernacular architecture design traditions encompass many of the dynamics that can be detected in the formal architectural tradition but with the veil of secrecy absent. This occurred because vernacular architecture had no formal body of practitioners but only imitators - those who kept traditional designs alive by continuing their development over long periods of time. The secrets thus perpetuated were open secrets and freely available to all. The application of this common knowledge had a similar effect on the architecture of the home as the application of formal architectural secrets did on ancient buildings - they forged a connection between the outer physical world and the inner emotional world. As such the home acted as an identifying marker, a reference point that allowed for the orientation of the individual within the world. It is the expression of this identity that forms the basis of culture. Where this orienting mechanism is absent the meaning of culture and self become confused and strong attachments to a uni-dimensional physical world becomes inevitable.

In the Irish context, the traditional cottage is the architectural reference point from which we derive a sense of who we are. However, as has been the case with modern architecture, the modern home, mounted on a pedestal of reason and with no emotional dimension whatsoever, can be an empty and soulless place devoid of any of the 'feeling' of the traditional and offering no clear signposting as to who the occupant actually is. Sustainable living demands an emotional bonding with life along with a clear sense of who we are and where we are going. The inability of modern architecture, and, particularly the architecture of the home, to provide such context demands a radical change in how buildings are designed and constructed. In the case of formal architecture this will involve an examination of how architecture is taught and practiced as well making reference to the ancient secrets of the profession. In the case of the architecture of the home it has to be realised that where no formal schools of house design exist and where professional architects do not consider the home to be part of their tradition, no centralising influence exists through which one can initiate change. This is alarming as the buildings we live in will largely determine how well we can manage to survive in a post Oil Peak 'sustainable' world.

ARCHITECTURE & IDENTITY 2

Our genetic make-up is lavishly endowed with survival instinct out of which our ability to create shelter emerges. This 'sheltermaking gene' endows everybody with innate knowledge regarding the creation of shelter, which, along with food production, forms the foundation of our survival mechanism and provides a stimulus for the development of culture and identity. In part it is our distancing ourselves from direct engagement with sheltermaking and food production that has led to the disconnection we feel from life itself and from a sense of who we are. Up until the Industrial Revolution it was the norm for people to create their own homes, utilising common knowledge for guidance. The move away from building one's own home effectively broke this thread of continuity and homes became 'utilitarian' rather than repositories of cultural identity within which people lived and engaged with life.

It is critical to understand how the relinquishment of what I call 'personal sheltermaking' - designing and building one's own home - has affected people. Once the move away from the agrarian life was underway a whole raft of traditions were relinquished - symbolised by the quenching of the fire and the abandonment of the hearth. In other words the living traditions of survival activity were extinguished in favour of the promise of modernity. This fossil-fuelled leap forward used the machine to replace what heretofore people had provided for themselves either by their own energies or assisted by natural or animal power. The dissolution of cultural identity which such modernity engendered has left people adrift, disconnected, scrambling to understand themselves and the world around them.

The design ethos of the industrial-era home was forged out of obeisance to the new gods of power and money. This created houses that were mere boxes in which to partake of food, rest and procreation. These 'homes' incorporated none of the cultural idioms of the vernacular, effectively severing ties to emotional reality and offering no identifying markers to the individual. It is certain that the abandonment of the traditional rural life was wholeheartedly embraced by many at the time and indeed the promises of the Machine Age still remains attractive even in the face of its evident destructiveness. However, it is the élan of the deeper emotional connections that make our hearts soar and it is these deep connections that have been severed through the abandonment of traditional lifestyles. The surrender of control over the sheltermaking process has been a huge contributor to this sense of disconnection and loss. This is because architecture, by virtue of the fact that it brings together multiple dimensions to form itself, creates a natural doorway to our inner reality.

Apart from the disturbance to the continuity of the vernacular house design tradition caused by the Industrial Revolution another pernicious influence imposed itself on the 'housing market' - debt. Acquiring a home suddenly involved engagement with lending institutions and, the repayment from the proceeds of work, the resulting borrowings. With this shift in the nature of survival activity not only was the cultural wealth of the traditional lifestyle lost but also people found themselves locked into a cycle of work and credit in order to 'pay their way' in this new world. As a consequence, culture and identity, which spontaneously emerge from the traditional food/shelter cycles of activity, were replaced by idealisations exclusively available through the new matrix of survival activity - the Market Economy. Modern culture, including our homes, which emerged from this, forms the stage-set against which we represent our sense of who we are - our identity. Where this backdrop is forever changing we must continually strive to be someone else. This is a confusing state of affairs. It is also expensive, energy-hungry and generates voluminous amounts of waste as costume after costume is discarded in a search for true identity.

Understanding the puzzle of modern life is an integral part of repossessing the house design process - identifying who we are, where we are going and how we plan to get there. Formerly one simply donned the regalia of tradition and created a recognisable, familiar and workable habitation that facilitated the traditional survival activity. In the here and now, given the destructiveness of the Machine Age and the sense of loss which we collectively feel, picking up the threads of the vernacular sheltermaking tradition is a challenging but necessary exercise. It is against this backdrop that the drama of sustainable life will be played out. What is critical to appreciate is that no unifying body exists to guide this new sheltermaking activity and it will be up to people themselves to effect the necessary change.

ARCHITECTURE & IDENTITY 3

Nowhere did the lack of authority in the house design sphere become more evident than in 1963 with the introduction of the first Planning Act. Before that time one simply built what one wanted more or less where one wanted. After 1963 Planning Permission was required for even a small house in the countryside. This created a demand for design drawings which had to be submitted with any Planning Application. Whereas in the old tradition one simply reverted to what was available locally in terms of design, imitating it by eye, the requirement for drawings in the new tradition spawned a market for design pattern books of which Bungalow Bliss is the most famous. These pattern book designs were based on the tradition of rural self-build but used new forms, materials and scale, paying no heed to physical, emotional or cultural connectivity.

Pattern books such as Bungalow Bliss sought to replace vernacular housebuilding traditions with modern designs that would usher people into the new age. However, as was painfully discovered, the new bungalow merely provided a cold empty container that had to be filled with consumer durables and meaning. The cultural dynamic of the traditional home was extinguished in a blaze of light. Prosperity had arrived and all were free to partake in its wonders. This, fanned by encouragement from the state and funded by easy credit, could not but consume all that had been left behind. While this was understandable, even necessary, no one realised that the conflagration of the past consumed a sense of who we were before we had quite figured out who we had become.

Bungalow Bliss belongs to the Victorian tradition of pattern book house designs where people are portrayed as an addendum to the perfection offered by the machine age. This approach casts the house as a stage upon which one acts out one's own version of perfection attended by the accoutrements and fashions of the day. The drudgery of the agrarian life is obliterated by machine. The lure of this way of life lies in the apparent comfort it offers from hardship. While this may be appealing in terms of the physical effort required to live off the land, where a discontinuity occurs in terms of a sense of who we are the comfort zone of the warm interior offers no succour whatsoever. The market deals with this dilemma by offering endless identities for sale. Where such avenues prove to be emotionally unsatisfying the lure of a sustainable life becomes compelling.

The very purpose for which Bungalow Bliss was intended - the provision of design drawings to satisfy the requirements of the 1963 Planning Act - has now come to haunt the Planning system. Correcting the horror of this now informs Planning policy throughout Ireland. The bulk of County Council design recommendations currently in place evoke a pre-63 romanticism in terms of the outward appearance of houses, which is really the only 'side' of the house that the Planners seem to care about. The aim of these design recommendations is to evoke a cosy relationship between house and landscape based on the updated forms of the cottage vernacular. This effort to create a new vernacular, where it concerns itself only with the outside of a building, highlights the lack of direction and leadership which exists in the house design sphere and grants to Planning Authorities wide ranging influence on this sector. Where such influence is informed by a reaction to the Bungalow Bliss legacy a veritable straightjacket has been created out of plastered walls and blue-black roofs. Where Planners are not professionally trained house designers and where such guidelines are framed in a reaction to past errors, they inevitably clash with the needs of sustainable house design where it wishes to utilise alternative materials, to gather solar energy, to be affordable and well located and to cater for the myriad other considerations of a sustainable life. Thankfully laws can be changed but for such changes to be effective and meaningful in the context of the sustainable future we are all being urged to embrace, a new code of house design will have to be formulated that allows for the proper integration of the physical and emotional dynamics that constitute life itself. Inevitably such a task will lead to confrontation with the current norms regarding houses, their financing and the way we live. Such a path will be painful and challenging but the power of architecture to support truly sustainable living will make the effort more than worthwhile. In the meantime how the current sorry situation regarding house design - and architecture in general - has arisen needs to be fully understood. This will prove to be an unrivalled stimulant in enticing one to live more sustainably.

ARCHITECTURE & IDENTITY 4

Because a sustainable life is an emotional as well as a physical one, it is vital that buildings designed for sustainable living take this into account from the outset. While such an approach might appear to be overwhelming, this is merely a consequence of including an 'inner' dimension in the design. This tracks right to the heart of our deepest fears concerning our survival. The potential onslaught from such encounters are indeed challenging, however, the strength derived from facing such fears will comfortably carry one through these ordeals. This is due to the response of one's sheltermaking 'gene' which, if its call is honoured, will prove to be a steadfast ally. It is from this vantage that one 'lives one's architecture', in the process reclaiming identity and contributing vitally to a culture of sustainability. It must be understood that the power to initiate such change lies within us - it can never belong to governments nor their agencies despite their claims to be arbiters of 'sustainability'.

Because The House is central to realising one's ambitions to live sustainably, the creation of an appropriate design is vital to the success of this. This will emerge from one's own 'identity' – the life one has to live. It is the process of merging such 'inner' qualities with those of the 'outer' world which forms the 'living' architecture. This contributes to and compliments a 'sustainable' culture founded on the bedrock of a deep commitment to life itself.