

## ARCHITECTURE+PHILOSOPHY

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Architecture and philosophy are topics which have fascinated me for many years.

My first encounter with philosophy was as a teenager struggling to find meaning in Ireland of the late 1960's.

Having resolved to make a good confession, as a way of reclaiming what I thought of as my lost soul, I was dismayed to experience no inrush of grace, nor uplifting feeling ... not even a vague sense of forgiveness, inner cleanliness or hope.

I felt let down and relieved at the same time, concluding that I was philosophically not in tune with the Catholic faith and must seek comfort elsewhere.

I found this in the arts and in radical philosophies, absorbing an alternative view of things through periodicals and books and such things as newsletters from the Communist Chinese Legation in London.

I was fascinated by the idea of freedom as expressed in the culture of the Hippies and by the radicalism of those opposed to war in Vietnam and to nuclear proliferation.

This was also the era of illegal pirate radio stations, broadcasting from ships moored in the Irish Sea. These helped counteract the propoganda of a church and state colluding to shape the nation to suit their own questionable ends.

It was at this time that Ireland joined the Common Market and embraced the bright consumerist future which was eventually to lead to the Celtic Tiger.

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It was against this backdrop that I began my study of architecture - a field that I strayed into, rather than embraced as my true calling.

I found that I had a natural affinity with the subject and was a reasonable student rather than a remarkable one.

When I went to the United States, after my first year of study, I encountered American peers whose philosophic struggles were far more urgent than my own ... young men avoiding national service in Vietnam by dodging the draft or by conscientious objection, a philosophical stance which I found immediate affinity with.

The speaking the truth fascinated me and I was convinced of the power of this no matter how hard a doctrine it might be to follow.

I graduated from UCD in 1976 and began working in a succession of private practices in Dublin.

I found paid employment dull in comparison to student life.

When I had to design a catholic church, located in one of the many newly-formed Dublin suburbs, I encountered not only a lack of inspiration but also an antipathy towards the client and an indifference towards those, who might in the future, seek comfort within the building which was to be created.

I interpreted this as a failure on my part and concluded that I was not really an architect at all but an imposter. I felt that my true calling was as a writer.

When I came under pressure to take out a mortgage and buy a house it was the final straw. This life, as I saw it mapped out for me, held absolutely no appeal.

So, I chose the honourable route for Irish non-conformists - the emigrant ship.

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I lived the bohemian life in Portugal, where I wrote a largely autobiographical novel which helped me to vaguely understand what my life to date had been all about.

So began what was to become a nomadic existence, living the life of a modern hunter-gatherer, criss-crossing Europe and working at a mixture of jobs, including being a salesman, a painter and decorator, an art gallery curator and a small builder.

I also enjoyed the pleasure of being a hands-on parent to my daughter who was born in 1984.

I relished this free-wheeling life, rooted as it was in creativity and consciousness, focused on the integration of the world of the inner self and the outer physical world.

In 1988, when I was living in rural Ireland, my experience as a small builder were in demand by people struggling to create low-cost, mortgage-free buildings for their everyday living needs.

This inspired the idea of teaching people how to be their own architects.

I advertised this 'Be Your Own Architect Course' which attracted alternative types, keen to avoid a mortgage, as well as people who were already within the system but were seeking better quality dwellings than were available on the speculative market.

This teaching experience allowed me to discover an interesting fact - that 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 this - house design had never been part of the architectural profession but existed in a separate category commonly referred to as 'the vernacular'.

I simply had not been trained in this ancient tradition which was an oral one, and, as a consequence, was never written down.

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Vernacular sheltermaking largely died out with the advent of industrialisation and there were neither schools nor books to be found dedicated to the subject.

While there were plenty of books that dealt with aspects of house design there were none which articulated the design process itself.

So, I set out to write such a book, based on the experience of teaching my students.

This Be Your Own Architect methodology began with a blank page upon which students listed the spaces they required along with an analysis of the activities they intended to carry out in these spaces.

What this amounted to was the articulation of how one lived, or wished to live.

Students became absorbed in such design tasks entering into the process with such gusto that it hinted at the idea of a 'Dream House' - a place where one could imagine being oneself, living in harmony with the world.

As one astute student commented 'You're teaching philosophy, not just architecture'.

This process of designing from the inside out quickly revealed aspects of the architecture which were not visible - for example, the feelings one might wish to experience within a space.

While it was relatively easy to imagine such spaces, how to illustrate them so that they might be constructed true to these design aspirations, remained a mystery.

On examination such qualities were properties of space rather than qualities of the physical fabric of a building - the walls, floors and roofs .

Not only was space invisible but it already existed on-site waiting to be enclosed by the yet-to-be-constructed building fabric.

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In other words space was not being created at all but merely hived off from the vastness of universal space by the placement of boundaries around it.

It rapidly became clear that buildings were a lot like people - they had a physical exterior and an invisible interior existence.

This inner world, or psyche, the cradle of our dreams, was extensively explored and mapped by Karl Jung.

The collective unconscious which he described is the invisible realm where we are connected to each other and to all of life.

Interestingly, Jung created and inhabited his own architecture as a means of exploring his unconscious, believing that, 'only through doing can we become whole.'

This notion of being able to literally live one's architecture was the predominant dynamic as houses were constructed and inhabited by my Course students.

It appeared that what people brought to the design process regarding their own lives allowed the completed buildings to act as nutrients for their self-development.

This realisation of the Dream could best be described as a feeling of 'loving aliveness'.

All of these experiences prompted a closer examination of the nature of space itself.

The first major discovery was that space, and its three dimensions of length, breadth and height, were always accompanied by a fourth dimension - time.

We orient ourselves by means of these 4 dimensions - thereby accurately locating places and events in space and time.

Light also plays a role in this drama, being the arbiter of time itself.

Gravity - that major consideration in structural design - is also a property of space-time.

Such glimpses into the nature of space, particularly the space within buildings, raises interesting questions regarding the interactions of space, time and people.

Within the vernacular tradition attunement to these invisible aspects of space and time served to orient people within the world - by facilitating attunement to solar and lunar trajectories; by providing confirmation of the eternal cycles of life and death; by fostering the development of ritual and myth celebrating the mysteries of life; by nurturing artistic expression through storytelling, poetry, music, dance and art, and, of course, by providing shelter both physical as well as psychological.

This idea of home as a microcosm of the world is evident in all indigenous sheltermaking traditions and it is upon such foundations that human culture is constructed.

The loss of such traditional sheltermaking activities has resulted in a disconnection from the invisible but vital aspects of life.

Such disconnection has now become a dominant characteristic of the modern world.

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the exploitation of fossil fuels traditional sheltermaking activity was replaced by a job culture which required a worker to surrender their time in exchange for a wage.

Because of this, a reliance was placed on third parties to undertake sheltermaking activity.

The loss of cultural identity suffered in this rural to urban shift, was clearly reflected in the lifeless architecture of the 'modern' home

These new dwelling types made no reference whatsoever in their design or construction to a deeper reality.

Emotional nourishment had to be sought elsewhere, done without, or comfort sought through material consumption.

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The deeper implications of the changes wrought by the shift from an agrarian to an industrialised economy are now being felt on a vast scale within all developed countries.

While the loss of emotional connectivity resulting from this can seemingly be endured, the present threats to physical survival are less easy to bear.

This has prompted a search for deeper meaning, a process that stimulates strong emotions and offers the potential to reunite the separated strands of our 'inner' and 'outer' worlds.

This is expressed in the desire for a natural and sustainable life, a state which can only be achieved by repossessing our time and consequently, our space.

Within the formal architectural tradition attunement to the invisible aspects of space and time was more formalised.

The great megalithic mound of Newgrange, in the Boyne Valley north of Dublin, is oriented so as to be penetrated by a beam of light energy at sunrise on the winter solstice which occurs on December 21st in the northern hemisphere.

I was fortunate to witness this as a young man, this lighting of the dark, this separation of the world into distinct but complimentary parts.

The mysteries of agriculture were also evidenced here, symbolised by the copulation of the Sun and the Earth, by the planting of the seed and by acknowledgment of the constancy of the cycles of death and rebirth.

The Pyramids of Egypt, created in accordance with Sacred Geometric principles, precisely oriented and constructed, display energetic and physical effects which defy rational explanation.

These structures illustrate the occult side of architectural practice whereby the secrets of composition were carefully guarded and held mysterious.

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The Pyramids also illustrate the rising influence of mathematics on architectural design - the rendering of the invisible qualities of space into numbers.

These aspects of formal architectural practice were codified by the ancient Greeks and applied to such buildings as the Parthenon of Athens, mathematically proportioned to accord with natural forms.

The theatre at Epidaurus, in the Peloponnese, similarly proportioned, was where architecture and theatre were used to promote 'catharsis', a process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions.

The Gothic cathedrals of Europe, oftentimes located over ancient animist sacred sites, were constructed by the Guilds of Masons renowned for their secrecy.

Elements of Masonic rituals survive in the contemporary practices of Freemasons.

The predominance of science and reason in formal architectural practice can be evidenced in buildings constructed throughout the ages, signalling the ascendancy of the head as the only true arbiter of reality, thereby relegating the heart and its associated emotions to a secondary place.

In the ancient Indian tradition of Vastu Vidya - which translates as 'the science of dwelling' - the invisible properties of space were considered to carry 'prana' or, life energy - into the home, facilitating balance and harmony between the dwelling, its inhabitants and the cosmos.

The Chinese tradition of Feng Shui - which translates as 'wind and water' and is itself derived from Vastu Vidya - concerns itself with a building's siting, proportioning, layout and construction, paying particular attention to the channeling of beneficial life energy, or 'chi' within buildings to benefit their occupants and the world in general.

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The disciplines of augury and geomancy were integral to the practice of Fung Shui, the former involving a study of the soil on a proposed site, while geomancy concerned itself with the study of the subtle energies impacting a chosen location.

The art of pendulum dowsing, another associated practice, is still evoked on the building site of today by the use of the plumbob.

All of these examples draw attention to the potential that architecture offers in respect of us living our lives fully and shaping our future accordingly.

When I was widowed in 2004, I thought that it was time for me to stop moving for long enough to realise some of my own sheltermaking ambitions.

This involved buying a small block of land in the Irish northwest, the obtaining of a building permit and the setting up of a Site Office which also served my day-to-day living needs.

When the construction of the first phase of my self-build, mortgage-free home - an Art Studio - met resistance on-site I decided to carefully heed this.

This resistance was subtle, but insistent, manifesting as a series of obstacles which arose one after the other.

Because the living architecture process encourages sensitivity and can be viewed as an accurate outpicturing of what is happening in a persons life, I called a halt to construction in order to have time to consider what was really happening.

It was not long afterwards that I became reacquainted with a modern-day geomancer who had delivered a course I had attended the previous year on the art of dowsing and the energetic properties of Irish Round Towers.

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It soon became clear that the Art Studio which I was attempting to construct was part of an old life which had run its natural course.

With a little reworking the Art Studio was repositioned on-site and renamed 'Love Shack'.

So began a new phase of my life shared with Alanna Moore, a native Australian with a strong affinity with her Irish ancestry and a wealth of knowledge, experience and insight into the nature of the invisible realms.

It is this relationship which drew me to Australia in 2007, allowing for the dissemination of these living architecture ideas beyond Europe where they had been formulated.

This has resulted in a clarification of these ideas, in no small measure, I believe, because of a belief in this country in the existence of a DreamTime, an invisible but integral part of day-to-daylife.

So, is it always plain sailing in Living Architecture-land?

Certainly not!

However, because the design and construction processes acknowledge the life within, this provides a valuable context in which to review familiar issues, particularly issues raised by the Sustainability agenda.

Peak oil, climate change, environmental degradation, food security, drought - even gender, identity and territorial issues - can find resolution within this methodology by allowing people to directly engage with and take responsibility for their lives thereby tapping the power of their life energy.

It is this empowerment which gives us the strength to face the fear which inevitably erupts when we contemplate changing our way of life.

Change is the real challenge of Sustainability, particularly meaningful change in respect of how we live our lives.

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The role which architecture plays in this is significant.

In the false economy of endless growth buildings have become the repositories of status and wealth, serviced by overworked homeowners lured into debt by false promises, trapped in a cycle of endless consumption from which there can seem to be no escape

Such situations arise because people have sold their time, the very source of their life energy.

To free oneself from such a burdensome life it is necessary to reclaim ownership of one's time and consequently one's space, to learn to balance the head and the heart, to find accord with natural cycles and rhythms, to learn the vocabulary of the invisible in order that we might communicate and give voice to what we feel inside.

Just as we have an invisible world inside us, buildings too have an invisible world inside them. It is the harmonisation of these two worlds which empowers us to live the fullness of our lives

Architecture is not just an object or a thing. It is an experience. We enliven buildings with our presence and our homes facilitate the living of our lives according to who we are, where we are going and how we intend to get there.

Because buildings are composed of the 4 dimensions which make up our world they provide us with the means to see ourselves and the reality of our lives, stimulating our consciousness and clearly indicating where change is needed.

It is the capacity to imagine our homes which inspires children to play house, a natural facility which we distance ourselves from in the serious world of adulthood.

We need to reawaken this natural facility, to embrace our dreams, to live our architecture, to learn to relax and enjoy the bounty of our time, which, with certainty, will forever lead us homewards.

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