

## THE CALL OF THE SHELTERMAKING GENE PETER COWMAN BARCH.

TUN Local Agenda 21 declares that we must change our lifestyles in order to protect the choice mechanism of future generations. Such a sustainable life is to be based on a value system which is, in itself, life sustaining.

Initiating the changes required to live a sustainable life does not come easy. These changes will most likely be forced on people by nature itself. Dealing effectively with either voluntary or imposed change will largely hinge on the ability of the home to be adapted to evolving circumstances. In effect, changing how we live requires that we adapt the buildings we live in to suit this sustainable life, or, design new buildings fashioned to the task. This is the quest of sustainable house design - to facilitate the living of sustainable lives. As such, it is a demanding goal for designers.

The models for these new sustainable dwellings are the traditional shelters of the 'vernacular' tradition. In Ireland this is the cottage, and, on a grander scale, the farmhouse with its associated yard and out-buildings. Such traditional shelters were largely created by people themselves based on designs and methods which had developed over centuries. Fashioned out of locally available materials these buildings were part of the land in which they were situated. This not only allowed them blend into their surroundings but provided the foundation of their sustainability - a capability to return harmlessly to the very earth from which they had emerged.

Such buildings, because of their vital role in survival activity, also enshrined the values of their age and were inseparable from the identity of their creators and inhabitants. They also provided a context for cultural and artistic expression thereby achieving an iconic status when viewed from the perspective of the modern era.

We simply cannot go back to the cottage/farmhouse design, nor replicate its associated lifestyle. What we can do however is to borrow from the concept. This begins with an assessment of the contemporary goal of creating sustainable house design. At its core this is the task of living sustainably. Inherent in this goal is the use of materials which in their manufacture, use and eventual dereliction pose no threat to life.

Apart from such physical considerations it must be borne in mind that the creation of sustainable dwellings - sheltermaking - keys us into the survival instinct itself, the most compelling of human emotions. It also brings us face with nature and with the unknown. Religious belief, the enactment of ritual and the free expression through words, music, dance and art were traditional methods for dealing with such enquiry. Facilitating such human responses, in the modern age, is another vital component of sustainable house design.

To understand the nature of the chasm that lies between traditional and modern house designs one has to examine the period of the industrial era and grasp the nature of the changes wrought by this revolution. The period is heralded as the starting point of the modern age with its harnessing of fossil fuel derived energy and the development of new means of production, transport and communication. It is the prevalence of this machine-based system that has now inspired the quest for 'sustainable development' that nurtures all life on the planet.

The ushering in of the machine age signalled a change in sheltermaking activity and a move away from traditional lifestyles in favour of a job and a wage. Essentially people sold their time and with the money received for this could buy everything they previously had had to provide for themselves. This is the foundation the modern market economy.

The new dwellings of the machine age were radically different from their traditional counterparts. No longer was the home a self-built focus of survival activity and cultural expression but rather a mere container, created by self-interested third parties, allowing the weary worker to recoup his or her energies before embarking on another day's toil. With no discernable links to the past, the industrial era shelter signposted the evolving machine-based future as the only worthwhile goal.

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The disconnection from the immediacy of survival activity that a job-based culture creates removes one from the minutiae of day-to-day survival and consequently from the promptings of the survival instinct. This 'better life' is indeed better. However, where the mechanism of this activity, at its current scale, threatens the very life that it is intended to support, something has to change.

Machine production has a totally different 'rhythm' to the rhythm of life. Its products and by-products are also different from the products and by-products of nature. In nature everything is characterised by balance where waste is simply another useful product. In machine production - where some of the products themselves can be considered to be waste - no such empathy with natural cycles is attempted. In addition, the machine's hunger for raw materials, coupled with a staggering productivity rate, spawns a demand for continuous growth quite different to the growth produced by nature. Thus, products cannot be made to endure as long as new ones are waiting on the shelves to be consumed. Established consumers are encouraged to upgrade to the latest energy-efficient models and new consumers are lured by the honey-trap of modernity. The waste consequent to all of this consumption simply cannot be recycled effectively and so must be dumped, burned, re-engineered or subjected to chemical restructuring. At very few junctures do these process accord with the preferences of nature. This eventually leads to environmental breakdown and nature's efforts to protect itself.

Apart from the physical consequences of this, because machines are inanimate, soulless, tireless and without emotion, the prevalence of machines in human life has resulted in a dulling of the natural emotions which we all enjoy as human beings. This distancing from natural rhythms has further removed us from a sense of who we are and where we are going. Combined with the diminution in the quality of available shelter, the total losses for human beings and for life itself resulting from the machine age have resulted in a physical and emotion disconnection from the very essence of life itself.

In order to create sustainable house designs appropriate to the now, we must recognise the scope of this disconnection and strive to rebalance this as we plan a sustainable future. This must be rooted in an understanding of our very nature as human beings.

We are both physical as well as emotional creatures. Our very survival relies on complex chemical and electromagnetic processes which take place outside of our conscious control. Because we possess self-awareness we are conscious of these process. Generally, we let the body get on with the job of keeping us alive while entertaining the illusion that the brain has everything under control.

The brain is like a CPU, dependant on software to feed it data which it then processes logically. In that computer analogy the brain can be considered the hardware and our senses the software. While it is our emotional system that keeps us alive, tuned to natural rhythms, it is the brain and its associated processes that assume it is in control. Instinct is devalued, belief is confounded by logic and science acts as the final arbiter of truth.

Such lopsidedness denies the power of emotion and propels humanity along the joyless path of materialism and logic. The shortcomings of this are now manifest and central to the demand for changes in how we live. These changes are essential to the safeguarding of human life in all its diversity and, by extension, essential to propitiating the natural forces of our host planet which have initiated process of self-protection to counteract our reckless endeavours.

Thus, sustainable house design emerges from an awareness of who we are and the articulation of values which integrate the physical and emotional aspects of our selves. In essence, this is a quest to balance logic & emotion, confronting the prevalence of rationale which has been the European mindset for 2000 years.

How our homes engage us on a physical as well as on an emotional level is a function of the architecture which acts to separate the inside from the outside. This delineation of 'inner' and 'outer' allows us to engage outwardly with the physical outer world and inwardly with our emotional, or, inner world. By

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including both inner and outer worlds in the house design equation, our sheltermaking genes are activated. This stimulates both our rational as well as our intuitive faculties, allowing for the balancing of physical/material considerations with emotional/psychological need, nourishing both aspects of our lives. This offers one the opportunity to live more deeply and harmoniously, the essence of a sustainable life.

The deeper implications of the changes wrought by the shift from an agrarian economy to an industrialised one 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 with the potential to reunite the separated strands of our inner and outer worlds. This is the desire for a natural and sustainable life, nourished within a secure and healthy home territory. The power to create such a 'living' architecture is within us all, rooted in our essence and carried forward by our sheltermaking instincts.

At all times it must be remembered that the changes inherent in a move towards sustainable living run counter to the mechanism of the global economy. This exploits the necessity to be housed in order to satisfy its own greed. Mortgage credit is the primary instrument of this indenture, staining the recipient with the pallid bloom of modernity and shackling them to a life-threatening cycle of consumption and waste from which it can be difficult to escape. With its emphasis entirely focussed on the material, the 'real' world offers no comfort for the anguish inherent in the struggle to transcend this destructive cycle in the search for a sustainable life.

Where 'vernacular' sheltermakers could draw on common knowledge to assist them, their modern counterparts must rely on the compilation of new knowledge and the free circulation of this in order to achieve their objectives. This 'sheltermaking information' must acknowledge the inner connections which make us whole as well as the external connections which tether the modern home to the outside world. These facilitate the inward flow of necessities and allow people to engage outwardly with the world. The fossil fuel derived energy that sustains this activity now threatens its vitality. Contemporary house designs must acknowledge this reality.

This is the challenge of creating sustainable house design. It must begin with an acknowledgement of who we are and a clarity about where we are going. Design emerges from this as an enfolding layer, nurturing the life it shelters while causing no harm elsewhere.

Without such an all-encompassing brief, sustainable house design is in danger of becoming yet another product of the growth obsessed market economy. But sustainability cannot be bought. This is its greatest challenge as well as its greatest safeguard. It must be lived, acknowledging our physical and emotional selves, celebrating the re-emergence of our wholeness in music, poetry, dance, art, ritual and celebration. If sustainable house design does not fulfil these goals it should be returned as 'unfit for the purpose intended.'