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Embracing a sustainable way of life involves changing how we provide ourselves with food and shelter.

Permaculture has been phenomenally successful at providing a practical, workable and accessible system of natural food production. By comparison the natural building movement has been much less successful at disseminating practical information about the creation of buildings to support a sustainable way of life.

In traditional societies people provided for their own needs in regards to food and shelter. The industrial revolution changed this pattern. People abandoned this so-called 'subsistence' way of life in favour of a job culture and an urban existence. Instead of spending time building one's own home and producing one's own food, people converted their time into money by working and used this money to provide for their needs on the open market. The commodification of food and shelter that resulted from this has now led to a situation where the quality of much of what is eaten is suspect and the homes provided by the market are overly expensive and of dubious quality.

These fundamental changes in traditional survival mechanisms not only heralded a change in the quality of the food and shelter available to people, it also marked a departure from the myths, rituals and traditions that were part and parcel of such survival activities and assisted people in orienting themselves within the natural world.

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 such vernacular architecture traditions were oral and perpetuated by practical example when this activity ceased vital sheltermaking knowledge was lost. As a result responsibility for sheltermaking activity passed from people to a new building 'industry'. In other words, vernacular architecture was superseded by profit driven 'development' controlled by self-interested third parties. This led to people having to borrow in order to shelter themselves. The practice of borrowing money to acquire a place to live - mortgaging - plays a vital role in industrialised, or, market economies.

Making Money

In order to function market economies rely on the constant injection of fresh capital. A substantial portion of such funds derive from people making repayments on the mortgages they have committed to in order to acquire a place to live. In addition to such commitments people are also expected to maintain high levels of expenditure in their day-to-day lives in order to sustain growth in the wider economy.

Market economies use the repayment commitments made by mortgagees, the notional values of the properties attached to them and projections of consumer spending as the basis of new loans, securities and other financial 'instruments'. The elaborate paper structure which results is supported by the commitments made by mortgagees and by people spending money to acquire the basics of life on the open market - because they are too busy working to provide these for themselves.

When this system falters - as it has done recently - the vast paper structure that is the world economy begins to collapse. This results in a decline in property values, a loss of consumer confidence, negative growth and the devaluation of the financial instruments constructed on the strength of mortgage debt repayment commitments.

In order to maintain continuous growth economies rely not only on the creation of debt but also on the use of machines to optimise work activity and to maximise productivity. Machines, in order to function, rely on external energy inputs derived from fossil fuels. The environmental degradation consequent to this has inspired moves towards a sustainable way of life - a goal now given added impetus by the instability of the economic system.

Because money is a human construct when it is said to 'grow' such growth is unlike the growth seen in nature. The growth of money is reliant on new money being created all the time. This is unlike natural growth which is fuelled by solar energy. Money growth is derived from people converting their time into money through paid employment and by creating debts to provide themselves with a place to live.

This is why the market system encourages full employment so that as many people as possible are working and producing new money. To ensure that people adhere to this scheme of things access to the shelter necessary to survival is made conditional on a person spending thirty or forty years in the workplace. This practice of 'mortgaging' is the basis of all developed economies and relies on the exploitation of people's need for shelter.

The economic meltdown of 2008, triggered by the sub-prime mortgage crisis, has now proven beyond doubt that mortgage debt plays a vital role in fuelling 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 vernacular architecture traditions. Such a revival has the potential to offer people an alternative way of sheltering themselves by means other than the current mortgage system. If such alternatives include facilities for food production and home working aspirations to live sustainably would have a much greater chance of success.

Sustainable House Design

While there are many books available detailing aspects of sustainable building, instruction on how to utilise this wealth of information is scant. The vernacular tradition was passed down orally and designs evolved over long periods of time. When this tradition ceased so too did the knowledge of how to nurture designs from conception into built reality.

It is important to bear in mind that no dedicated school of house design exists and that there is no body of experts directing this process. Sheltermaking was never a part of the architectural profession but was always something that people themselves controlled.

It is also important to understand that Planning Laws are there to restrict peoples' ability to construct their own homes. Such laws ensure the hegemony of conventional housing and its attendant mortgage finance. It is this system which most securely binds people to the very system they wish to change. This is the roller coaster that never stops, the merry-go-round which carries things forward towards ever more destructiveness.

The advent of planning laws in the mid-twentieth century effectively sealed the fate of the vernacular architecture tradition by requiring that people adhere to new norms that had more to do with the growth of national economies than with the quality of houses themselves.

Sustainable Living

Desires to live sustainably are based on the understanding that we are part of nature - an intricate and finely balanced living system which we must harmonise with on all levels if we are to survive and thrive. Producing healthy and nutritious food and creating secure and nurturing shelter form a vital part of all schemes intended to allow us reach this objective.

How to achieve this on a practical level is a challenge, particularly if the use of fossil fuels are to be reduced and debt levels moderated. None of these goals are consistent with government commitments to sustaining economic growth - placing the true adherent of sustainability in direct conflict with the system.

While shelters' role in providing protection from the elements is well understood, its nurturing role is less obvious. Just as in permaculture, where a sensitivity to nature promotes growth and development, so too does a sensitivity to nature positively impact on the quality of the shelters we construct for our survival. Such sensitivity also nurtures our physical and emotional well-being.

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 the disconnection from the intangible qualities of life that characterises modern housing. The result of this is to consign people to a uni-dimensional world where physical reality is 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.

In permaculture, intangibles are an integral and accepted part of the process of harmonisation with nature. The effects of such sensitivity yield immense benefits at all levels - food that tastes good, systems that acknowledge natural cycles, people who feel deeply connected to life. Modern sheltermaking, by comparison, offers very little opportunity for such deep connection.

The activities associated with permaculture, because they involve living systems, get us in touch with nature and expose us in an active way to its processes, likes, dislikes, preferences and possibilities. As a result it becomes readily apparent that our wellbeing thrives on the harmonies facilitated by such engagement. This is as valuable a gain as the produce itself because it nurtures our aliveness. Where we are open to such engagement we can enjoy the feeling of being connected to life in a deep and meaningful way.

Traditional sheltermaking, through its association with food production, by virtue of the materials it used and the handcrafted nature of their assembly, 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 allowing them to acknowledge the intangible qualities of life. It is these emotional engagements which gives meaning to our lives and allow us discover who we are and our purpose in life - the essence of the sustainability life to which we aspire.

Houses & People

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 inner mysteries of life - the creation of an architecture to support this is essential if we hope to change how we live on the planet.

Architecture

Architecture encompasses all of the dimensions of the world as we know it: the 3 dimensions of space - length, breadth and height - plus that most mysterious of dimensions, time. Such 'spacetime' encompasses the physical world and the invisible realm from which life itself is derived.

Science tells us that space and time are conjoined within an infinite 4 dimensional universe. Speculation as to the nature of space-time has formed the basis of myth, religious belief and philosophic discourse throughout history.

When we create shelter by placing boundaries around space we hive off a portion of this invisible and mysterious space-time which we then inhabit. The potential this offers in regards to connecting to life in a deep and meaningful way is immense.

The modern world devalues the invisible realm of life and along with it the instincts which allow us to interpret it. Because architecture allows us to engage us these 4 dimensions it is an invaluable tool in the quest to engage with life as it really is and to live our lives fully in that consciousness. The appeal of the vernacular architectural tradition is very much derived from such engagement.

Generally, architecture is presented as being complex when, in fact, it can be very simple - literally four walls and a roof. It is life which is complicated and full of hidden meaning. When we accept this fact, and the nature of this invisibility, we can begin to distinguish between the visible and invisible aspects of buildings. This allows us to interpret the abstract nature of inner space as a reflection of our own 'invisible', or, inner selves.

When people re-engage with the vernacular architecture tradition they enter a new world where all of the dimensions of life can be experienced to the full and real and meaningful change can be initiated. By regaining control of the sheltermaking process people can regain control not only of their time and space but also of their lives.

The process of creating vernacular designs appropriate to a sustainable life begins by acknowledging the intangibles that are so critical to the process of harmonisation with nature. These are invisible and mysterious, residing within our deep emotional selves. When we articulate our desires about how we wish to live it stimulates the parts of ourselves that long for a deeper connection to nature. This signals the beginning of a painful but necessary evaluation of our values, beliefs, ideals, aspirations and dreams.

Understanding the puzzle of our selves and of modern life is an integral part of repossessing the sheltermaking process - identifying who we are, where we are going and how we plan to get there. Formerly one simply donned the regalia of tradition but in the here and now, given the destructiveness of the modern world, fresh, imaginative and cost-effective solutions are required.

The house is central to realising one's ambitions to live sustainably and 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.

It is critical that we acknowledge the vital role which shelter plays in meeting our emotional needs if we are to achieve true sustainability. Such a perspective invites us to reclaim our time and our space, to alter our consciousness and our entire way of life.

The dynamics of such a consciousness shift are as much cultural as they are personal allowing us to embark on a process of renewal. This forging of a new cultural paradigm must acknowledge the unknown and intangible qualities of life. Such a re-attunement to nature allows us to connect to the mystery of the universe and the wonder of our individual lives. From here we can begin to recapture the sheltermaking imperative, re-occupying our time and our space, reforming our homes and our selves.

Recapturing the Sheltermaking Imperative

Despite the restrictiveness of Planning Laws opportunities do exist which allow people to re-engage with the vernacular architecture tradition. There exists a category of building activity largely free from legislative control called 'Exempted Development'.

Exempted Development is designed to facilitate small scale works within the boundaries of existing properties - for example the building of a shed or a studio behind an existing house. A building of up to 25sqm can be constructed in the average back garden with a ridge height of 4m - quite a substantial size.

By taking advantage of Exempted Development criteria it is possible to learn the intricacies of sustainable building design and construction in the comfort of one's own backyard. No great upheavals are required in one's life in order to do this. If planned in conjunction with a permaculture garden a person can experience the joys of sheltermaking and food production side-by-side. It is through such positive action that we can reconnect with the essentials of life - food and shelter - and can begin to construct the future according to our best intentions.

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