

Architecture: the past fights back

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To see a thoughtful discussion of architecture in *Marxism Today* (November 1980) is unreservedly welcome. The whole topic of creative production, the arts, or whatever we call it, has been too much neglected on the Left. (It is symptomatic of this neglect that it is difficult to find a term to describe this area that has not already been 'captured' by the Centre and Right and impregnated with their own ideological overtones.) While I would utterly reject imperialist claims that architecture is in some sense 'the Queen of the Arts' (appalling overtones again), it does deserve special attention and consideration just because, as Richard Hill points out, it is

pervasive and inescapable in a way the other arts are not.

Richard Hill is right to demand that architectural debates, problems and struggles should become public property. However, he does not discuss the barriers to participation. There are barriers of class, gender, professionalism and work situation. Space prevents discussion of the first three, but the work situation can be briefly analysed.

The work situation

Those working in private practice, whether principals or salaried assistants, depend on fees from those in a position to commission buildings. In fact a significant proportion of their workload comes directly or indirectly from the public sector, but architects, like all workers, live by selling their labour. The difference is that their work, like that of other 'professionals', carries ideological messages which almost invariably reflect, and in turn strengthen, the dominant value system. Yet there are dangers in too direct a reading of the form of buildings as expressions of this value system, if this leads socialist architects to attempt instead to express some dimly-perceived oppositional subculture. I will return to this point later.

There are other forms of practice: in public offices, currently demoralised by redundancies, threatened or actual; or in cooperatives or other 'alternative' forms, which are attempting to break down the barriers of professional status and to work for those with few resources as facilitators rather than know-best experts. Incidentally, architects in this situation are particularly vulnerable to disciplinary action for infringing the RIBA code of professional conduct, for example by accepting a reduced fee. The very attempt to earn a living working for, and paid by, those with least power and resources involves massive contradictions. The RIBA in recent years has belatedly recognised and enthusiastically embraced a new trend called 'community architecture'; the committee that prepared a report on the topic was full of fat cats with fast cars.

In theory, public offices provide a setting where architects' skills can be put to the service of the public, leaving aside current threats to the existence of such offices. This sector is seen as inferior in status in a profession where positions of power in the professional institute go overwhelmingly to principals in private practice despite the fact that these constitute a small minority of architects. Architects who choose to work in the public sector may be motivated by a desire to work for a wider public, or by the pension rights and the unparalleled oppor-

tunities to get along by doing a small quantity of uninspired work. (The same can be said of direct labour departments; stoutly defended in theory, but a problem in practice, for many Left architects.) In any case, architects in local government are at least as remote from the users of buildings as their counterparts in traditional private practice, as the public's need for buildings is filtered, distorted and mediated through a series of committees and departmental hierarchies. Although there are a few fragmentary examples of public participation in architecture (Byker, which Richard Hill cites, is one) such participation has always been at the invitation of the architects and on their terms. There remains the suspicion, even at Byker, that the 'special relationship' that has been built up has in such cases been used to secure the public's consent for provisions which they would otherwise oppose. Certainly this has been one outcome of public participation in planning. Another danger is the rise of the 'participation look', identifiable by a controlled anarchy of facade, bright colours and timber details.

Public involvement

But even if all these institutional barriers to public involvement in discussions about architecture could be overcome, how would architects and public converse? The public are not 'noble savages' in their responses to buildings; they create their own system of meanings, derived from the dominant value system in interaction with their own particular situation in society. Capitalism alienates 'the aesthetic' from other aspects of buildings, and alienates people from their own responses and evaluations. Thus, people are keen to buy their own homes and then to decorate them with coach lamps, stick-on shutters or Spanish-style front doors, symbols of an alternative dream. To read such messages and reproduce them without further analysis would risk the architect descending into populism. Yet, as mentioned above, the architect cannot unilaterally devise alternative expressive possibilities. The attempt to do so led to such idealistically-motivated abominations as Parkhill flats in Sheffield or Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar, both based on ideas current in the early 1950s when working class culture became the subject of vicarious nostalgia by the middle class. Incidentally, both schemes are firmly within the 'Modern Movement', admired too uncritically by Richard Hill. Corbusier's advice to young architects is seductive, but beware: he also wrote 'Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided.'

Those of us who praise the spacious suburban council houses built under the

postwar Labour government should likewise beware of nostalgia. These represented the well-designed workplace for the housewife pushed back into a domestic role by the return of male combatants into civilian jobs. To be sure, much more analysis of the postwar period is required to disentangle the contradictory tendencies: how far were these houses (and indeed all public sector housing) a means of social control, and how far a victory for the labour movement? Fortunately, issues around the political economy of the welfare state are now being debated, and a start has been made in placing such debates

within a feminist perspective.

There is a potentially major task in decoding the messages carried by and read into built forms; such work has hardly begun, and must be a joint project between architects and the public. Perhaps then other forms of architectural practice and expression could emerge: the prospect is exciting but remote. As Hill is aware, the trend within the architectural profession is the other way, towards an esoteric formalism, replete with passing allusions to other architectural trends happening elsewhere, understood only by a small circle of architects and critics; or

towards a populist jokey escapism. This trend is accentuated by the effects of the economic crisis: when so many designs are destined to remain as unbuilt projects, the practicalities of convenience and technical feasibility can be ignored, and architects' drawings may be treated as artworks in their own right, incomprehensible and irrelevant to the layman. Certainly, architects disturbed by these trends should fight back, but not through an uncritical adherence to the Modern Movement, in which public debate had a negligible role, but through a genuine and humble dialogue.