

Replies to our last leader on ...

... the needs of sustainability

An Indian perspective

I thought the leader (arq 4/3) was extremely thought provoking. It ties in with my experiences since emigrating to the United Kingdom 10 years ago from India. Architecture and design have become synonymous with consumerism – the more the building consumes or shows to consume, the better it is. So technology is geared to meet this demand. Since my son was born here (he is half English and half Indian), I have realized that, living in the UK, he will consume 350 times more resources than if he was born in India.

Sadly, even green activism is not free from consumerism. The green magazines I buy are full of adverts which exhort one to buy more things so that 'one's home is full of feng shui', or one's loved ones sleep in organic, non-bleached cotton sleeping bags etc. I am sorry for being so cynical but after I saw a designer yoga shoe, I could not help it (yoga is about renunciation, not buying more stuff).

I have lectured about this and I have written an article in *Natural Parent*, warning that we are turning even the next generation into consumers, not sustainers and that the entire earth will be in peril if we continue to do so. I have been accused of being political as I say that people's life styles have to change. What else can you say after watching the reaction and the picketing in the recent European petrol crisis. Did no one in those pickets realize that the rain that they were standing in was of their own making? I am afraid I can go on and on as I am involved with a number of organizations – religious, green issues related,

architectural – and so my views come from a general but holistic standpoint. For my part, I buy only what I really need – mostly second-hand, organic and fair trade at that. I design what I think is consistently not just good design but also contributes to and restores the environment. And I teach my students about sustainability and embracing other cultures and all of humanity. That's all I can do.

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Eliminating demand

The leader (arq 4/3) states that the 'sustainability movement' will not achieve a more sustainable future. This may well be true, but it depends entirely on what is the definition of this 'movement'. The world's motor manufacturers, the oil companies and the large architectural practices are flaunting their new-found commitment to what they call sustainability, but are they the 'movement'? There is no doubt that their purpose is to encourage more consumption of products and services, even if some of these may be environmentally preferable to existing ones. It is not with them that the answer will be found.

There is another face of sustainability, one that seeks not to stretch out the energy and material reserves of the world, but to eliminate the world's demands on them. This side of sustainability looks for local and simple solutions in place of the global and complex ones. It looks beyond the cheapest

solution to the wisest one. The basis of this approach to sustainability is a change in behaviour. The world will never be able to live within its finite means if its actions are founded on the ideas of growth, whether of wealth, consumer goods or population. This runs entirely counter to the current global paradigm of free markets and the over-arching emphasis on money as the sole determinant of value. The new world view looks at value in a much wider context, as an ecological and social concern, rather than one of purely financial interest. Societies need to become cleverer, and to realize that, in the long term, enough is better than more. Architects, as providers of artefacts that may well last more than a hundred years, need to begin to come to terms with these ideas, and start acting in ways that benefit the world rather than threatening it. The Editorial sets out some of these ways of action. Because of this the Editors are to be commended.

Should anyone feel that the necessary change, which amounts to an overthrow of the financial world-view, is a hopeless task, they should remember that accountants do not, in their heart of hearts, believe what they say about cost-effectiveness and least-cost options. If they did, they would all drive Skodas. If accountants do not believe in financial concepts of value, why should the rest of the population?

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Brenda and Robert Vale teach at the University of Auckland where they also direct the Sustainable Design Research Centre

Architects must become involved

I can only strongly endorse your leader (arq 4/3). As well as the need to question what clients fundamentally want, it is my firm belief that we as a profession are failing to temper our own desires. Many clients undoubtedly do not need what they ask for, but equally do most clients really need what most architects, given the opportunity, would like to give them?

Buildings are rarely subject to any objective analysis, the rhetorical claims of architects are rarely tested and how many architects can really say how their buildings perform? The stock complaint is that no one is willing to fund post-occupancy studies, yet it is research that forms our knowledge base – which, ultimately, is what we sell.

But more important than clients' desires or a lack of research or a lack of money, the thing that is most often missing in both practice and criticism is a fundamental humility about what we do. As Dean Hawkes said in his key-note paper at the recent PLEA conference in Cambridge – environmental design is largely about getting the windows the right size and there are currently a lot of architects getting windows the wrong size – both physically and metaphorically.

I think it is absolutely correct to suggest that this is in part about the future of our profession – if we don't convincingly grasp issues facing us then we will deservingly become even more marginalized than we already are.

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A critical reassessment

We did not inherit this planet from our parents – we borrowed it from our children

The major ecological problems that have emerged on a world-wide scale – the greenhouse effect, the depletion of the ozone layer, the climatic change – on the one hand, and over-concentration of the population in cities with all the accompanying problems as to the quality of life on the other, constitute crucial issues which concern the human community as a whole. These negative developments urgently raise the

need for a different attitude towards today's dead-ends.

In contrast to the contemporary model of development, which is based mainly on the over-consumption of goods – not always necessary or useful – and the mindless using-up of natural resources for their production, sustainable development is proposed as an alternative solution. This alternative proposal contains the environmental dimension, that is the sensible treatment of nature, the utilization of renewable energy sources to cover the energy needs of built space, the use of *mild* techniques and materials not harmful to health. The establishment in other words of specifications of an ecological approach in the design and the use of living spaces, the buildings – or as the unforgettable architect Aris Konstandinides used to name them, the 'vessels of life'.

The 'bioclimatic' approach in the design of buildings adopts this attitude for the sustainable organization of cities, attempts to redefine architecture with principles and directions that are based on the harmonious coexistence of the natural and man-made environment, uses renewable energy sources, mainly the cost-free solar energy for heating and natural lighting of the buildings, the cool winds for their natural cooling, with mild techniques, environmentally-friendly, restoring thus the sought-for balance between built and natural space. It thus addresses the issue of energy conservation not through advanced technology, but is based on a critical reassessment of 'needs' and habits, of our manner of being-in-the-world.

The logic of designing in a harmonious relationship with the environment is an approach as old as the art of building. Old settlements prove the admirable talent of the users/inhabitants. Their spatial organization, their adaptation to the landscape and the utilization of climatic advantages of each geographical area prove knowledge and ability that establish the spatial qualities of human scale and harmonious coexistence of the natural and man-made environment as constant values.

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Four elements critical to change

It is good to see a leading article (arq 4/3) advocating step changes for architectural design, rather than a mere tinkering around the edges of the sustainability issue. However I perceive four elements are crucial to the success of such major change.

The first is that as an educator I believe there is a need to promote the techniques and knowledge for design to all students allowing them to develop the necessary skills. It is also important to address the needs of teachers lacking specialist knowledge of the subject area to avoid contradiction in assessment of work.

The second is the support of a raft of other measures such as requirements for 'triple bottom line accounting' for development proposals as well as more complete and wide ranging environmental impact assessment. Appropriate building regulations and planning guidelines are also required.

The third is for the profession to recognize (as happens more readily in some other parts of the world) that so-called environmental restrictions are actually business opportunities to be exploited.

Finally, there is a need for change in public opinion and thus the environment in which architectural design takes place. This may be the most difficult to achieve but without it the changes in design aspired to, will be almost impossible to achieve. The apparent attitudes of the public during the recent fuel blockades in the UK and elsewhere indicate both an assumption that cheap fuel is an ever expanding right, not a luxury, and presumably the belief in the right to pollute whatever the consequences.

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