Socially-responsible and socially-owned architecture

The spiral as motif and method in Le Corbusier's work

On the architecture of boom, slump and crisis

Reading Jonathan Charley's critical historical commentary on the architecture of boom, slump and crisis (**arq** 14.4, pp. 363–372), I was torn between depressive pessimism and hopeful optimism. He displays so clearly that, despite all research to the contrary, nothing seems to change the general belief in capitalism as a cure-all. In depressive pessimist mode, I couldn't see what hope there might be for architecture to become a discipline that is not just one that serves a particular client, but one that goes beyond the simple mode of transaction or exchange to become one that is transformative in a wider social, political and economic sense?

Most of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have been marked by the belief that architecture was only a matter of finding the right spatial form. Charley talks about 'structural gymnastics' and refers to the 'dislocation of form and function'. It is more than that, though. David Harvey comments that 'the difficulty with so-called "high modernism" and the city was not its "totalising" vision, but its persistent habit of privileging things and spatial forms over social processes'.[1] Society was hoaxed into the belief that freedom would not be found in collectivity but in the personal accumulation and subsequent ownership of stuff. On the surface it appears as if nobody is questioning this any longer. Houses have been turned into ideologically connoted 'homes' and, with this, an impenetrable personal aura of that-which-happens-behind-those-four-walls has been created. In the same way, the current restructuring (or rather privatisation) of Higher Education is nothing but an ideologically motivated enterprise that is not about cost – some reports point out that the 'new' system will even be more expensive for the state – but about the implementation of neo-liberal principles.[2]

Despite the feverish attempts to demonstrate that the employability rates of graduating students from schools of architecture are still extremely high, we fail to acknowledge that the next boom in the building industry might simply not be around the next corner. Yet, we do take it for granted and probably in a few years' time, with this useful short-term memory of ours, we will hardly have any recollection of the 2008–2009 economic collapse. GDP might have gone up again, other economic indicators might point to a 'recovery' and, the most important indicator, house prices, will start to rise again. People will be spending again, the building industry will recover and unemployment will go down. Everyone will be happy again. No?

As Charley rightly points out, 'the architectural profession has been fairly amoral about whom it serves' – and it appears to be celebrating those with the least ethics most (Mies van der Rohe being an archetypal example). Along the same lines, there is a long tradition of disputing that architecture has anything to do with politics. For politicians, architects are but wilful servants – known for their almost desperate yearning to build. They are, through indoctrinated architectural mythology, conditioned to believe in the power a building can have. Who would really go out into the world and refuse a job simply because they feel site safety isn't met, that their client isn't adhering to ethical values, that the clearing of a building site might involve the forced displacement of an existing community. All-too-often, architects believe in the redemptive power of form or technology above all else. Yet architecture is immanently political because it is part of spatial production and thus influences social relations and it is part of this complex political beast that Charley tackles: the beast that students (typically) aren't taught about, that architects don't want to see and don't want to know about – but definitely is there.

Strangely enough, this is also where my optimism sets in. Charley, too, recognises attempts to do things differently. He mentions (briefly) architecture's social agenda that seems all but forgotten and the struggles around Canary Wharf in the early years of the 1980s. Yet he ends his article by asking how future economic crises can be prevented. I'm not sure they can. And Charley, too, is rather gloomy about this. At the same time, however, I enthusiastically believe that another world is possible, that there are 'alternatives', that there are 'other' ways of doing architecture – other ways, which don't need to be invented, but which are already all around us. Yes, it would be good to have, as Charley calls it, 'a broad-based anti-capitalist alliance' to push-for this alternative, or to make it possible, but I don't think that its potential success was predicated on the existence of such an alliance. Rather, it is important to point out that there are myriad groups, practices and projects around the globe that demonstrate the possibilities of spatial production outside the capitalist system. What Charley sets up as wishful thinking, as a 'renewed socialist programme for urban

1   Village assembly in Marinaleda

4   Corner Cottage Earthship at Taos, New Mexico

2   Jorge Mario Jáuregui Architects, library in Complexo de Manguinhos

5   Lacaton & Vassal, social housing, Mulhouse, France

3   Display of Atelier-3's work at the Venice Biennale in 1999

6   Walter Segal, contemporary example of the Segal method in use

development' is indeed already happening. No, not on an epic scale, but on a local yet often globally networked level. Marinaleda, a town in the province of Seville, has been run as a farmers' cooperative since 1989 [1]; the work of Ezio Manzini and Jorge Mario Jáuregui Architects considers infrastructural networks as social condenser [2]; Atelier 3 is one of many practices that tests construction technologies in relation to their social usefulness [3]. There are countless approaches that consider the ecological impact of building, ranging from Earthships [4] and the Counter Communities of the 1970s to projects such as Ecosistema Urbano, Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes or practices such as Lacaton & Vassal [5]. Many of the self-build approaches, such as that of Walter Segal [6], are prime examples

of temporal adaptability. Of course, I'm not deluded into believing that any of these examples are remedies for inequality or uneven development. But, taken together, they form a powerful network of alternative spatial visions.

So, despite evidence to the contrary and many reasons to be pessimistic, the part of me that is optimistic has been gaining an advantage over my darker half. Charley's article is a reminder of architecture's inextricable involvement with, and dependency upon, external forces. In most schools of architecture, we continue to teach the separation of function of form from process; the architectural press continues to disguise underlying power relationships behind glossy photographs devoid of social inhabitation; and many architects

continue to produce work that leaves given instructions unscathed. A lot is still to be done, but there is hope that more spatial production will be socially responsible, socially owned and controlled.

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Notes
1. David Harvey, 'Possible Urban Worlds', The Hague, 2000.
2. See here for several comments on the topic: <http://publicuniversity.org.uk> [accessed: 28 February 2011].