An Ethical Production of Place

An Ethical Production of Place
A Case for Economy in Architectural Design

John McLaughlin Architect

Abstract

Architects typically interpret Heidegger to mean that dwelling in the Black Forest, was more authentic than living in an industrialised society however we cannot turn back the clock so we are confronted with the reality of modernisation. Since the Second World War production has shifted from material to immaterial assets. Increasingly place is believed to offer resistance to this fluidity, but this belief can conversely be viewed as expressing a sublimated anxiety about our role in the world – the need to create buildings that are self-consciously contextual suggests that we may no longer be rooted in material places, but in immaterial relations.

This issue has been pondered by David Harvey in his paper From Place to Space and Back Again where he argues that the role of place in legitimising identity is ultimately a political process, as the interpretation of its meaning is dependent on whose interpretation it is. Doreen Massey has found that different classes of people are more or less mobile and that mobility is related to class and education rather than to nationality or geography. These thinkers point to a different set of questions than the usual space/place divide – how can we begin to address the economic mediation of spatial production to develop an ethical production of place? Part of the answer is provided by the French architectural practice Lacaton Vassal in their book Plus. They ask themselves how to produce more space for the same cost so that people can enjoy a better quality of life. Another French practitioner, Patrick Bouchain, has argued that architect’s fees should be inversely proportional to the amount of material resources that they consume. These approaches use economics as a starting point for generating architectural form and point to more ethical possibilities for architectural practice.

Man’s Place in the Modern World

The critique of modernity that began in the nineteen-sixties, and gathered pace during the financial crises after nineteen seventy-two, focused on the homelessness of modern man and the loss of his place in the modern world. Typical of that time is the argument put forward in The Homeless Mind, that:

The pluralistic structures of modern society have made the lives of more and more individuals migratory, ever-changing, mobile. In everyday life the modern individual continuously alternates between highly discrepant and often contradictory social contexts. Not only are an increasing number of individuals in a modern society uprooted from their original social milieu but, in addition, no succeeding milieu succeeds in becoming truly home either.


This book, among others, questioned modernity’s positivist aspects and argued that much had been lost in the race to construct a new industrialised world after the second-world-war.
There were a wide range of critical responses to this condition in architectural theory, and a number of them focused on Martin Heidegger’s essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* which had been published in English in 1971. Heidegger’s concept of dwelling is to allow things to exist in their essence. What has to be nurtured is the dweller’s relationship to the fourfold of heaven and earth, divinities and mortals. Heaven stands for the cosmos, the course of the seasons while the earth is the life-giver that supports. The divinities are the godhead and people are called mortals because they are capable of death. The person who dwells has these fundamental dimensions of being. Heidegger illustrates this concept with a description of an eighteenth century farmhouse in the black forest that bears witness to an earlier and more authentic mode of dwelling than is possible in modern industrialised society.

The translation of these ideas into architectural theory began in the nineteen seventies with the work of Christien Norberg-Schultz, and was subsequently taken up by Kenneth Frampton, whose essay *On Reading Heidegger* sets out the position clearly –

*At the more specific level of built form, production considered solely as an economy of method has the unfortunate tendency of inhibiting rather than facilitating the creation of receptive places. A case in point is the universal tendency towards stereometric high-rise flat-slab construction, where economy in erection is granted absolute priority over any other morphological consideration. By a similar token, the industrialisation or rationalisation of building, as an unavoidable consequence of the inviability of high-craft production in a mass society, should not be regarded as beneficial in itself, particularly where such methods lead, through an abstract optimisation, to a manifest impoverishment of the environment. And here, in this hypothetical confrontation between the macro-scaled environmental desirability of urban containment, and the micro-scaled undesirability of high-rise construction, we have perhaps a convenient if highly schematic example of what one might regard as an environmental dialectic of production, that is, a state of affairs wherein the quantitative and qualitative gains at one level should be evaluated against the quantitative and qualitative losses at another.*

Frampton (1974); *On Reading Heidegger From Oppositions 4.*

Frampton went on to critically aligning himself with a body of essentialist built work emerging from Switzerland that frequently consisted of wooden houses built in mountain forests, and which bore more than a passing resemblance to the farmhouse described by Heidegger. The salient feature of this school, exemplified by the work of Peter Zumthor is an over-insistence on the material presence and detailing of the architectural artefact. This materiality is equated with the Heideggerian concept of being, so that the more solid and permanent the construction material, the more real the piece of architecture is thought to be. This kind of work is supposed to manifest the construction of place as a material artefact. Mari Hvattum described this work as being characterising by –

*…an abstract architecture that refers to nothing outside itself. This character of self-containment was indeed a striking feature of the period, as the notorious ‘Swiss box’ testified to…It has, perhaps, been a way of making architecture less dangerous: a way of declaring that the mess of El Ejido has nothing to do with us, that we simply build beautiful, self-contained buildings, buildings that talk about nothing but their own tectonic and material processes. Buildings, that is, that don’t have to draw on a messy, political world for their meaning, but carry their significance in their own precious corporeality.*

Hvattum, Mari; *Veiled Works and Blurred Contexts - Journal of Architecture* vol. 13, no 2/2008

By focusing on the material construct, and ignoring the chains of social and economic production, the Swiss managed to avoid many of the social and economic problems that modernity, in its positive aspects tried to address. Switzerland is an ideal country from which to do this, as it radically excludes many challenging aspects of the modern world such as immigration, while simultaneously producing and exporting arms to fuel the conflicts that cause people to migrate in the first place. The hypocrisy of this situation is that the apparent security that this work offers is bought indirectly through oppression and no amount of careful design can take this away.
The Tide of Globalisation

It is interesting that the emphasis on the material aspects of place and architectural production coincided with the abandoning of the gold standard, and the adoption of floating currencies which accelerated the processes of globalisation. One of the salient aspects of these is the increased mobility of capital, and the way that in the decades since the nineteen seventies, industrial production has shifted from the developed world to the developing world where it can benefit from looser environmental regulation and weaker organisation of labour. The profusion of the materially crafted in recent European architecture coincides with the global growth of immaterial wealth and the associated digital means of production and communication. The fetishising of solidity, suggests an anxiety about the increasing fluidity of the world. The material solidity of the resultant architecture appears as the sublimation of this anxiety, but also serves as a material repository for the immaterial wealth created. Zumthor’s baths in Vals embody this perfectly – immaculately crafted to serve the leisure of a global elite, they are presented as being carved out of the place itself.

Living in the World

The geographer Doreen Massey looked at the issue of globalisation found that different classes of people across all societies are more or less mobile, and that mobility is related to class, gender and education, rather than to nationality or geography. In her essay A Global Sense of Place (1991) she points to a different set of questions than the usual space/place divide – how can we begin to address the economic mediation of spatial production to develop an ethical production of place? Of the three billion people who live in cities today, it is estimated that one billion of them live below the poverty line in slums. It is also estimated that by 2030 there will be five billion urban dwellers of which two billion will live in slums below the poverty line. Dharavi in Mumbai has one million people living in 215 hectares with one toilet for every 1,500 people. Kibera in Nairobi has a population of one million living
in 250 Hectares. These are two examples of the differential mobilities caused by globalisation, and they point clearly to a different set of oppositions: How will we provide adequate housing for the global working class? What sort of housing will sustain urban growth at realistic construction costs?

Figure 2: Kibera, Nairobi – Brunswick Mission Blogspot, accessed 2nd November 2012: http://bpckenya2011.blogspot.ie/2011/05/more-pictures-of-kibera-where-well-be.html

To concern oneself with such questions is sometimes criticised as being utopian, with all the negative connotations of the failed modernist utopias of the nineteen fifties and sixties. Yet to what extent did they fail? While modernist housing may not have produced a morally correct society, as some hoped it would, it nevertheless provided many basic comforts for poorer people in the developed industrial world. In a description of the background to the Byker development in Newcastle, Peter Rowe (1995) notes that - the 1951 census showed that 33 percent of all Newcastle households were without a bath, and only 59 percent of all households had exclusive use of all five basic facilities (i.e. fixed bath, piped water, W.C., kitchen sink and cooking stove). Rowe goes on to argue that these conditions were not unique to Newcastle but were in fact typical of the United Kingdom, and by extension representative of the industrialised world in general.

There is much more credit due to utopian thinking in architecture than is usually accepted, One very important element is the critical capacity that is inherent in utopian thinking. Hilde Heynen cites David Harvey’s remarks in Spaces of Hope, that –

..it is only by revitalizing the utopian tradition that we will be able to fuel a critical reflection that will help us to act as conscious architects of our fates rather than as helpless puppets of the institutions and imaginative worlds that we inhabit. There are vested interests that want us to believe that ‘there is no alternative’ to the world as it is organized today, with a globalizing capitalist system that has far reaching and seemingly inevitable effects, ranging from the necessity of child labour in upcoming economies in the East to the spread of unemployment and urban decay in the West, not to forget the continuing misery in the poorest countries in the South. Therefore, if we are not willing to support the status quo, we should recognize the need for a revitalization of utopianism, because it is the only strategy that enables us to sound the depths of our imagination in order to explore the possibilities of the ‘not yet’.
These questions reopen the argument that Frampton tried to close by setting economic considerations to one side to focus on making qualitative places. It is clear today that there is an urgent case for making socio-economic concerns central to any critical practice of architecture, and for treating the socio-economic production of space with active concern. This will involve returning to the roots of the modern movement in architecture and considering some of the questions that were raised about the role of the architect.

In his 1910 essay *Program for the Founding of a General Housing-Construction Company Following Artistically Uniform Principles*, Walter Gropius argued that the architect has an interest in increasing the costs of construction because his own fees rise proportionally, unless he is an artist, and is prepared to suffer for his art and suffer a financial loss. Gropius proposes to remedy this situation by uniting the creative work of the architect with the economic talent of the contractor to produce typological solutions like the English terraced house which - through economy - achieved an artistic unity. While this would lead to standardisation of dwellings, Gropius thought that each house would maintain an individual personality through variations in form, material and colour.

A compelling demonstration of how this can be done today is provided by the French architectural practice Lacaton and Vassal in their book *Plus*. With the apt subtitle, *Reclaiming Modernism*, they take the stereometric high-rise flat-slab construction rejected by Frampton and analyse it compassionately, asking themselves how to produce more living space for the same cost per unit so that the ordinary people who live there can enjoy a better quality of life? Typically these housing projects are located in the *Villes Nouvelles* around Paris and other major centres. They are generally populated by people from lower-income groups, a large proportion of whom are North-African immigrants. The social problems caused by unemployment, as capital relocates to the developing world, has given these neighborhoods a bad image that politicians want to be seen to improve. For the politicians, the medium of this negative image is the architecture of social housing, which they propose to demolish. If these proposals are implemented, it will involve fragmenting existing communities with a major loss of social capital. Through eight case study projects Lacaton and Vassal demonstrate with forensic precision that the housing associations could actually increase the size and quality of the apartments that they have already for considerably less than the cost of replacing them. Eventually they succeeded in persuading one client to let them do it.

The housing association had planned to demolish the sixteen storey *Tour Bois le Prêtre* which contained 96 apartments, but instead were persuaded to keep the building and allow it be refurbished and extended by almost 50%. All apartments gained glazed external facades, winter-gardens and balconies. The new construction was prefabricated and erected on site with minimum disruption so that none of the inhabitants had to move out. The project cost €11.25 million euros instead of the projected €20 million that it would have cost to demolish and rehouse, and the costs will be recovered by the reduction in energy bills over a twenty year period. The preservation of an existing community and the improved environmental efficiency in this project indicate how this approach to practice can engage with wider issues of social and environmental sustainability. It offers a refreshing contrast to the intensely resource consuming buildings that are usually produced under the sustainable flag.
Another French practitioner, Patrick Bouchain, has taken this theoretical argument further by suggesting that architect's fees should be inversely proportional to the amount of material resources that they consume. He proposes revising the economic base that architecture is deployed from, to incentivise the profession to make thrift an active concern.

These questions become more pressing and important when applied to housing in the developing world. The Chilean collective Elemental, which grew out of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile have argued (2012) that the wave of urbanisation (and therefore the urban poor) will mostly occur in the poorer countries in the world. Their analysis shows that we will need to build one city of one million inhabitants per week to keep pace with this rate of urbanisation, and that at current prices the best budgets available will be $10,000 per unit of housing, including infrastructural and drainage costs. The question that they have posed is how to make good housing with almost no money?

Working with informal settlement communities, they have developed adaptive housing typologies that can be constructed for the modest grants available from the government. Arguing that half a good house is more valuable socially than a bad house, the units are explicitly designed to be adapted and extended by their owners. Their Quinta Monroy project in the city of Iquique built ninety-three 30m² units at an average cost of $7,500 each. These are designed to be extended up to about twice their initial size. In the process Elemental’s own architecture fades into the distance and the identity of the units evolves through the agency of the owners:
Elemental’s practice demonstrates the potential for architecture to play an ethical role in the shaping of the built environment. Their approach makes a compelling case for economics as a starting point for generating architectural form and for an appreciation of cost as a consideration in design. For the architectural profession to remain relevant, it is essential for it to engage with the ethical potential of architectural practice in the production of dwelling places. Far from reinforcing the homelessness decried by Heidegger and his architectural followers, their example presents us with the practical but daunting challenge of designing housing that is economically and socially sustainable. They also imply, as Gaston Bachelard (1958) once argued that - *All really inhabited space bears the notion of home.*
Both Lacaton and Vassal, and Elemental’s projects grew out of contexts where design, with a specific purpose, was accepted as an important form of research in architecture. In each case the practices developed their ideas initially through a series of design studies as reasoned critical alternatives to the production of dwelling space that was current in their economies. Today in the United Kingdom and Ireland, there is some design research into architecture as a critical language, but comparatively little research into architecture as a critically engaged social practice. I would like to conclude by suggesting that this be addressed at the levels of the universities and of the professional institutes, who could fund opportunities for critically rethinking current housing solutions. Otherwise if we as a profession neglect these subjects, it will be left to the market to deliver whatever it considers profitable.

Author Biography

John McLaughlin is a practicing architect who also lectures in architecture and urban cultures in University College Cork where he teaches the M.Arch design studio. On graduating from UCD he worked in Paris and London for over a decade before returning to settle in Ireland where he was director of architecture with Dublin Docklands Authority from 2004 to 2009. He then commenced private practice focusing on the integration of architecture with urbanism, landscape design and art. He has served on many juries including Europan 10, the RIAI Silver Medal 2011, and the RIAI Gold Medal 2012. He was a member of the advisory panel on the Irish Government Policy on Architecture 2009-2015. He is the curator of the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2012 which explores the theme of architecture and globalisation under the title Shifting Ground (http://shiftingground.ie) and is author of an accompanying book.

References


