

BUILDING AS A HEALING PROCESS

By Christopher Day, arch.

First of all I wish to apologise for speaking English. I feel it is impolite to come to another country but speak only one's own Language. It is similar to imposing buildings upon a site without listening to the language of the environment, its history, its culture, its feeling - everything that has built the present.

Architecturally this attitude is the foundation of cruel abuse - to places - to people. Yet I come to Denmark and speak English, I ask your forgiveness for this.

Before we talk about healing, we have to ask, healing what? Does the normal building process involve sickness?

To my eyes i does!

The work process is predominantly one-sided, involving little more than the intellect for the managerial - and often the architectural-side, and physical strength and manual skills on the building workers' side. Characteristically the buildings that result are sterile.

The whole process is one of materialisation of ideas - often too fast and too far. Too fast - because the idea often becomes concrete and inflexible before it has met, and conversed with the requirements of the surroundings, and people. The buildings that typically result are imposed on and damaging to the environment and social fabric.

Too far - because decisions become dominated by monetary considerations. So do relationships - indeed conventional relationships in the building industry are governed by the principle of gain. There is a tendency therefore to try to get the best bargain out of any situation, to get as much out of it as possible - in other words, relationships are exploitive. Nobody likes being exploited, and it does no one any good.

If we wish to develop a healing building process it must start with a recognition that a healthy human being must be meaningful, whole, and nourished.

To be meaningful means that in some way one gives benefit to others - one gives. Taking cannot make one meaningful!

Yet neither what we give, nor what we experience through our work, can be healthy unless we can effectively involve our whole being.

Healthy work engages mind and heart as well as the hands. For the end users also this has repercussions. It is obvious that to be of any value, buildings should be designed to function appropriately, and should be well-built. As the qualitatively barren projects of the recent past tragically demonstrate with their social consequences, the realm of feelings cannot be ignored.

Volunteer and self-build building provide opportunities more or less denied under the contract system, for work to engage mind and heart as well as hands. Elsewhere, the client can rarely afford

an artistic input, and when he does, this is provided by specialists. The contractor makes his profit by using tradesmen who know what to do so well that they don't need to think. Their feelings have nothing to do with the job.

To be whole means that the polarities of one's being are brought together - that the intellect and physical actions are brought into a harmonious relationship by the feeling realm - aesthetic feelings, moral feelings.

Indeed balance and harmony are vital to health - in the individual as in society or in ecological communities.

Harmony does not occur when polarities clash; when unrelieved planes meet, without meditation, at right-angles - wall and ceiling for instance. It does not occur when fully formed inflexible ideas are imposed onto a living situation - a political system onto a society, a building onto a landscape, a future image onto a townscape which is evolving from the past through the present.

On the other hand if we look for instance at an oak tree, we see that behind the tree stands the image of the archetypical oak - the ideal oak! But centuries of weather, damage, and ageing have made their mark. Each tree is a unique one - each is the result of a conversation between the ideal idea - the archetype - and the specific environment. The ideal tree fits in no environment, the individual tree is exactly attuned to its own individual environment.

In the same way harshly meeting architectural planes can be brought into conversation with each other, architectural ideas into conversation with the environment. Architectural intentions into conversation with the ideas, sensitivities and skills of the building workers. In a conversation, two or more different voices weave together to form a whole greater than the sum of the parts.

By conversation I mean, for example, that the wall shape in a room is not imposed; it responds to the roof shape. Window shape also responds - it both yields to and answers - wall shape, room space, view, light and so on and it has also to converse with other windows and external shapes, forms and spaces.

This conversation can only be inadequately visualised on paper. It needs to be done at full scale - in other words: on site, using the building as its own constantly evolving model. Without this way of working it would be impossible to adequately create an enlivened harmonious environment.

This is where we need the opportunity to experience spacial manipulation at full size. It is in this context that I have been asked to talk about full size models. But what is a model? The word is frequently used to suggest a rehearsal or basic design which can then be repeated. I am not going to talk about this sort of model - models as first steps, to be repeated, but I will talk about buildings. Models that are final and unique.

Every building situation is unique. The building's relationship to its surroundings is unique, its users, its clients, even if we do not personally know them, are individuals. If the designer lives up to his responsibilities, he must listen to the unique requirements of each individual environment, each particular set of users. If he does not - we have seen enough mass housing repetitively imposed upon the land and townscape! Once one listens like this, it is quite clear that no two sites,

no two users are the same. They may share similar characteristics, but they are not the same. No model can fit in different surroundings, only in one can it be appropriate.

While we can look to models (historical examples, our own apartments, for instance) to inform us, to add to our experience, we cannot merely repeat them.

Every building must be its own model. The other characteristics of models is that they can be adapted. We can see how something looks, this way or another way. We use this technique as a design model. It is quicker and easier when it is small, but there is much we cannot experience. It is really a form, not a space - something we experience from outside, not from within - an object, not a volume to live within.

Often we have nothing between the small scale design model and the rigidly controlled design for the finished building. But we can have!

We can use the building as its own model - trying out things, "mocking-up" shapes, seeing the potential at full scale - and developing it.

Only at full scale do the aesthetic implications, the potentials, the inter-relationships, the limitations, become apparent. There is no difficulty in doing this, the problem arise in finding the opportunities to do it!

The historical development of building into the contract process has been a process by which design has become frozen. Everything has to be described by the contract documents, and these are confined to the level of perception that we can achieve from paper or small models. In other words, shape and form - not space.

The problem is that in the conventional building process time costs money. Flexibility takes time and also makes rigid pricing difficult, with financial risks to make matters worse! So everything has to be fixed and put on paper - and as a matter of course, we accept the disadvantages.

But there is another way! If time is not given a monetary cost, it can be used to allow the design to evolve on site, to develop potentials that only became apparent at full size - indeed in every way to improve quality.

Self-build buildings, if inspired by beauty, have this opportunity (I have a client who in his own words was "building sculpture to live in"). If inspired by pecuniary motives, the opportunity no longer exists, for "time is money" in that world!

The Steiner School which, together with other volunteers, I have worked on, was bought as a derelict building. We had some 400 Kr. only to finance the building work, and the building was in an unusable condition. We had only two options: start work on those jobs that were 95% labour or give up the whole project.

We started work, initially two of us - and through working, opened a door to donations and help from people we had never even met! You can imagine how inspiring that was - and it gave us nourishment to keep going in rather bad working conditions!

In this project, two important requirements set the flavour of the brief. Qualitative and economic.

As with the education, the building should provide an environment nourishing to the child.

Children should not be forced into a mould by the architecture, but have possibility to move, live, imagine, in their own child-world, and to receive attention as individuals.

The building should therefor show individual attention throughout, all woven together to create a harmonious, gentle environment for the child. This then requires individual attention from the builder. It is not possible to design for individuals without individual attention. Imposed standard details have no place in such a building!

What does individual mean? If made by a discerning hand, no two door handles will be the same. Similar perhaps, but not the same! No two doors will be the same! Each is the result of the conversation between wall-shape and opening, between one space and another, or perhaps inside and outside, meeting at a portal, a punctuation point to our movement and progressive experiences, an open or closed eye - a door.

The economic requirements were straightforward: build at minimum cost!

This inevitably meant voluntary work. Labour therefore was free. Allowing us to incorporate much labour-intensive handwork, allowing us to give every element its own individual attention, to take time to bring it into conversation, even song, with other elements.

The economic requirements therefor, interpreted in this way, supported the fulfillment of the aesthetic requirements.

Working in this way has profound implications for the people involved in the process, as well as for the building.

It soon became obvious that gift work is sustained by the inspired will. It is vital therefor that this inspiration is nourished or soon there will be no volunteers! So while we outwardly see gift work as a one-way process of giving, it actually requires the work situation to give to the volunteer. The client has the special responsibility to arrange the work to enable this to take place.

All the fragments of work therefor should be presented so that their place in the performance of the whole can be seen, so that the worker is led into understanding why he or she is doing something in a particular way.

For instance: why the floor is acoustically separated from the structure. Why and how damp-proof detailing is so important, why we do jobs in a specific order - and so on. At the end of each day's work, practical achievement should be visible. This often requires organising work on a teamwork basis so that everyone, regardless of skill or strength, can contribute, and at the end of the day, can clearly see what has been achieved. Blocklaying for instance can absorb five people, 3 laying mortar, placing blocks, preparing, levelling and checking and two supplying blocks and mortar (and other odd jobs, such as cutting blocks).

Perhaps most important is the cultivation of aesthetic involvement - and I mean cultivation, because the seeds already lie within each of us. Building essentially is an artistic process, but on a larger scale, with more constraints and more parallel functions than painting a picture or modelling a sculpture. It is out of our aesthetic attunement, that how to do something - plaster a wall for instance - emerges. A plaster surface can be dead, limp, without strength, or living and harmonious. I can describe how to do it in words, but only the experience of actually doing it can make it live inside oneself, can enliven the aesthetic sense.

This perhaps is the greatest gift to the volunteers - that they develop in themselves, in addition to manual skills and meaning in work, a sense that any work can be artistic.

The benefits for the building itself are no less significant. Fundamentally, gift work is the reversal of the normal (contractual) approach. Normally, inspiration - the idea - the client's and the architect's vision - become progressively more and more materially defined - drawings, specifications, bill of quantities, until it is solely a monetary description - the contract. The contractor seeks a profit, the workforce a wage - and why shouldn't they? The project is coloured by the principle of gain, monetary gain. Yet it started as inspiration. Spiritual values have become reduced to material values. Qualities to objects; adjectives to nouns. - In Biblical terms, bread has become stone.

With gift work, it is the other way around! Building materials can, through gift, be raised to a work of art. I don't believe it is possible to create works of art without gift. One gives oneself. It is possible, or even sometimes necessary, to be paid, but this is always secondary!

Raising is the key element. If the building is to be nourishing to the soul, the material elements must be raised, by artistic means, to the spirit. In the same way we can look at food. To be nourishing, mineral elements are raised through the processes of life to become nutrient substances, protein for example - if only half-raised protein is poisonous, like spinach for instance, grown in warmth but inadequate light! They are then further raised in the kitchen to provide a truly nourishing food - half-raised they are unpalatable. Cooked without love and delight they only fill the stomach, they do not nourish us.

Nourishment from the environment is the same.

This approach imbues material substance with spiritual values - art, inspiration. And this has benefits, visible and invisible, for the building, those who work on it, and its future users. The visible benefits are obvious in the qualitative, aesthetic sphere. The intangible, invisible quality of a building is also quite different if it has been built for profit or gift, without or with, love.

To the practical "realist" these benefits are not materially measurable, but there are also economic benefits.

Allowing for the existing building shell, Nant-y-cwm Steiner School was built @ 770 Kr/m² - approximately 17% of the estimated contract price.

The economic benefits are such that this "impractical" approach is sometimes the only practical course.

In this case lack of money has actually reinforced the artistic impulse. Not complete absence of money, but certainly no surplus! Lack of money has had its negative side too - much needless drudgery, mixing cement by hand for instance, inefficient sequences of work, a greatly prolonged time to complete work. I experience this frustrating inefficiency and heavy drudgery on my current project also! - But it has not restricted the real wealth of the project - the extent to which artistic, spiritual values, can raise matter.

- When people say, "there isn't the money to make a building aesthetically satisfying", it is not true! What they mean is, there is not the will, the priority. Money for them is the first priority, aesthetics follow - and we all know what happens!

I don't wish to say that money is unimportant, but that it must always be a secondary, a supportive, not ruling consideration. When the project is not for gift but for gain - for the accumulation of money - the only purpose (because it rapidly becomes the dominant one) is the pecuniary one. Users and environmental responsibilities become secondary - and, insidiously or covertly, the results are inevitably destructive!

The approach to work as gift not gain is of course also possible when one is being paid - though it is not so easy because the concept of measured exchange, of buying, tends to enter in. I do so much for so much pay - you are expected to do this because I am paying you

In every sphere of society, every sort of work, it is the approach that is crucial: art or profit, service or exploitation, need fulfillment or market opportunity, material or spiritual values.

Just as the gift principle can be applicable to all work, so can the ideal of all work as an artistic - a sacramental - act. But most work is not outwardly encouraging to such an attitude. The individual needs to have travelled this inner road himself. Not all of us have.

Whenever projects provide a more supportive framework to this inner growth process, they are making a real contribution to the world we live in. - Indeed a contribution that our world cannot afford to do without!

The opportunity for aesthetic performance and achievement involvement, is a cornerstone of this supportive framework. The problem is only to find, encourage and manage projects in such a way that this way of working can be developed.

In the conversion of an old building, such as this school, the building itself is a full-size model. We can experience how it performs, how one bit affects another - how noise for instance is transmitted, heat distributed. We can chalk out shapes and spaces and mock up window shapes, partitions etc, with cardboard or wood. We can see what needs to be done next!

New building is much more demanding. For here the integration of the design tends to become complete (up to a point) on paper. It is necessary to see the paper design - the plans, sections, elevations - as only the starting point.

Already, on the Steiner Kindergarten I am now building, I have found that the exact plan shapes - the curves of walls, the size of play alcoves, can best be established at the stage of laying the first bricks. Paper design could only set the general direction. Only at full scale do the aesthetic implications, the potentials, the interrelationships, the limitations, become apparent.

Allowed to evolve on the site, the building as full size model now starts to take over. If it didn't, we could build nothing better than a good plan. What work of art of any worth is an exact, larger scale model of smaller sketches - how can it be art if it is merely a fixed idea? The painter's sketch, the sculptor's maquette, the architect's drawings are only a way in. Then the building starts to grow as a real living being, with its own suggestions and demands. The building has become its own full-scale model.

An important effect of letting the design evolve as potentials become apparent and developed, is that the building process and the building itself develop a kind of life. Hands which work with loving feeling imprint a kind of soul into the building. You can go into the empty unfurnished building and already feel 'it has a soul'. Go into an unoccupied machine-made building in which

the workers had no aesthetic involvement. It waits to be given soul by its future occupants - and they will plant their qualities upon no foundation - it will not be a conversation, part of time's continuum.

It will never be as much 'a home' as if the building started out 'ensouled'.

What this means for the building workers is that more even than completing the physical building - the noun, they are building the qualities - the adjectives. As best they can they are building something beautiful, nourishing. For the workers as much as for the users, this is nourishing, and good. Good nourishment is essential for good health.

POSTSCRIPT

Fundamental to designing out of the individuality of the situation is listening.

Listening is the essential first stage of any healing relationship. The physician listens to the patient's symptoms, to his state of being, a state built up out of the past, but carried into the future.

Can the full size pre-model be used to enhance listening? An abstract, underfinished, non-textured, sensorily simplified model stands for something more complete. It, as it were, acts for the real building that will follow.

What happens when one acts in a drama? For a moment the real significance of deep events pour through one. The costume and make up merely make this easier. They are not the character, but they help us to imagine him (her).

When we stand in a full-sized model, imagination is required of us. But we are also free to imagine that it is good, when in fact it may not be at all! What is needed is to imagine how it would be. What are the qualities of warmth, daylight, hardness or softness of visual, tactile, acoustic textures etc, etc. In other words, what will our senses taste? In doing this we identify questions of design and construction that are critical to how we will experience the space qualitatively. When we grapple with the practical implications these questions raise, the design takes an important step forward. A step that all too much architecture does not take. A step which is vital if architecture is to provide nourishment to the human being.

If full-scale laboratories can be used to develop this process, they have a most valuable contribution to make to the human environment.