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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY



**ALTERNATIVE
TECHNOLOGY
GROUP**

HOUSING IN GROWTH-ORIENTED

INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

A Utopian Critique

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"The great mission of the Utopia is to make room for the possible as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of affairs".

- Cassirer : Essay on Man

When I began to look into the difficulties associated with trying to build an unconventional house based on ecologically-sensitive principles, I was struck by a paradoxical situation. On the one hand we have a growing body of scientific literature urging industrial societies to change their building habits because of their adverse ecological implications for the planet as a whole; while, on the other hand, we have a mass of rules and regulations that housebuilders must follow which ensure that our current practices continue largely unmodified. In this Paper I have tried to draw together what appear to me to be some of the more important macrosociological considerations that are necessary for an understanding of why housing takes the shape it does in highly-industrialised societies.

It is very difficult to build your own house in an industrial society if you want to build anything very far removed from what is generally considered to be an "acceptable" house. By the time you have met the requirements of the various authorities associated with housing, the resulting structure is rarely very much different from the bourgeois middle-class idea of what a house should be like. Whether the design is ecologically-based or just freaky-different, it is unlikely that the authorities will look particularly kindly on the project. If you are lucky you may only have to go through an irritating series of time and money consuming hoops. At worst, the hurdles that confront you will prove too wearing and your original vision will be seriously compromised or abandoned altogether.

Right at square one the regulations assume that you will have a detailed design, specified down to the last detail, which has to be officially approved before you can begin building, (even though most of the world's dwellings are built on a "Topsy" basis, being built and added to according to need). Many innovative ideas are killed at this early stage of planning approval. Authorities have wide powers to stipulate constructions techniques, materials to be used, and even aesthetic considerations ("it does not harmonise with the area").

I should stress at the outset, however, that I appreciate that these restrictions have been devised in most instances to protect people from unscrupulous builders, and to ensure that new houses meet certain minimum standards (though as we shall see, these standards are based on a middle-class worldview). But, as well as achieving this laudable aim, the various regulations (without being intended to) often effectively inhibit creativity and innovation and diversity in building design and construction, because the rules institutionalise a set of parameters beyond which a homebuilder cannot legally operate.¹

In all highly industrialised societies throughout the world, a set of recipes has grown up that dictates how to handle administrative complexities appropriately. Sets of institutionalised norms and procedures dominate the way we do things socially, from the very formal to the highly informal. The assumptions about "the way we should do things" that are of most interest to us here are those that directly affect the homes that people get to live in.

1 The many ways in which formalised housing procedures are barriers to innovation is a topic on its own, and space prevents me from substantiating this assertion here, but my investigations so far suggest that it is very much the case. I hope to include such corroborative material eventually in a book which will deal comprehensively with the subject of owner-building in industrial societies.

All large-scale industrial societies use centralised bureaucracies to cope with the complexities presented by the necessity to organise large numbers (and in recent years centralisation has been given added impetus by the advent of the computer). But most industrial societies have reached a stage where they have become over-dependent upon centralised bureaucratic solutions to social problems. Centralised solutions to almost any social problem have come to be an almost automatic first resort. If we are to avoid the gloomy forecasts of many of the ecological doomsayers, then any sort of move towards the decentralisation of decision-making in matters of social policy should be positively encouraged.

Most would agree that a continued rise in the material standard of living has not brought the rewards in terms of human well-being that many people hoped it would. Yet purely material living standards remain a key index of housing adequacy, second only to economic considerations. Most social observers now agree that the relationship between the individual and his society has somewhere gone awry. Book after book appears detailing the many subtle ways people feel isolated among their fellows, how alienation and anomie are rife, how "homeless minds" are caught up in "the pursuit of loneliness" as they lead their lives of "quiet desperation". Though there are many reasons for this state of affairs, I want to single out for attention the contribution made to it by the fact that the State, in order to manage the increasingly complex array of factors over which it has arrogated authority, has cumulatively centralised all but the most trivial social and political functions. In doing this, the State has taken out of the reach of its citizens just about all responsibility for most of the decisions that intimately affect their lives. Although (as usual) the rich and the privileged are buffered to

some extent from the full impact of this process, for the people on the bottom of the social heap the effects are most debilitating. For them, the very idea that people can participate in decisions which vitally affect them has become some sort of radical aberration, and individual participatory initiative has been all but smothered by the ministrations of paternalistic authority.

This heavy reliance on centralised bureaucratic processes is particularly evident in the way industrialised societies approach the problem of housing their citizens.² In order to provide their citizens with shelter, industrial societies have developed complex bureaucratic apparatuses to oversee the supply, delivery, and distribution of houses. The guiding notion behind all this machinery is that it is cheapest (and therefore most desirable) if things are done on a large scale, because a standardised regularity keeps costs down. Thus, housing has become a commodity, something offered in large and standardised amounts to a "market" made up of "consumers", (rather than a basic human need experienced by real live people). The blandishments of consumer society have made us into passive consumers of goods in many sectors of life - commodities which bear no imprint of ourselves on them. And housing is no exception to this, where the assumption is that this basic human need will be satisfied by a supply-and-demand marketing exercise.

But the way we are going about things at the moment clearly is not working very well if you judge the results from a human perspective rather than just a bureaucratic efficient one. The alienation of the individual and the corrosion of

2 Notice that even in the phrasing of that sentence deeply-rooted social assumptions are hidden in the very terms we used to communicate a shared world-taken-for-granted. Not all societies would share the assumption that its members "are housed". The passive mood of the term reflects the essentially paternalistic "from us up here to you down there" nature of the assumptions we bring to housing matters.

community feeling that comes with the sort of housing produced by centralism are so well known and accepted that we even make jokes about them ("a house is a box tied up with red tape"). The Nanterre students referred to modern housing development as the place "where unhappiness becomes concrete". In fact, hardly anyone seems happy with the houses that result from current procedures, least of all the poor people (in both senses, usually) who have to live in them. I have yet to talk to anyone who is prepared to claim that the fruits of present rules and regulations come even close to being satisfactory built environments - in human, as opposed to merely economic terms. And that includes architects and town planners. Yet still the machinery turns out more of the same dissatisfaction, modified (if at all) only towards more homogenisation in the name of cost effectiveness.

This automatic acceptance of the centralised mode by almost everyone and everything associated with housing in our culture is not surprising, since it is a natural companion to the other major social assumptions that underpin all growth-oriented industrial societies: that more is better; efficiency is good (because it leads to greater productivity and more profits); that quantity takes precedence over quality; that economic considerations are always superordinate to "softer" human considerations, and so on. These largely tacit core values are part of the atmosphere we live in, and most people accept them as "natural" and unquestionable, like the air we breathe. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that our methods are only one way of solving the problems that come about when people live in large aggregations. (Try talking to people about social organisation coming from the people and not from the State, and within a few sentences you will hear about its impossibility because of "human nature"). In fact, people themselves are increasingly treated as commodities

and internalise this definition of themselves. They are "things" to be manipulated by centralised institutions over whom they have no control (no matter what the prevailing democratic orthodoxy would like to have us think). Which is a terrible state of affairs. The social assumptions on which modern industrial society is based have got us to the stage where "we are surrounded by more and more manufactured articles, (but) fewer and fewer people actually make anything. The idea that people can create with their own hands, produce food, shelter and clothing, and can create things of beauty, is becoming more and more remote from ordinary people. The skills which made man human have become rare and freakish."³

There is a broad cleavage in Society today (and I am thinking all the time of industrialised Societies) between those who think things are not tightly enough controlled, and those who think that there are too many controls already. The first lot are not particularly comfortable with human messiness, spontaneity and inconsistency. They like things to be predictable, tend to value and seek security and have a legislative mentality that sees the solution to problems of social order in sets of rules and laws. Although it is not always recognised by proponents of this point of view, the results of such an approach are to keep the polis tractable and behaving in such a way that does not threaten this essentially conservative view of the world. People who are content to lead a regimented life in mass living quarters are likely to have a docile and acquiescent approach to things generally, and are unlikely to constitute any challenge to the continuation of the present system.

3 Stand Windass: "Where Do We Go From Here?" (Energy) Working Paper, Alternative Society, Adderbury, Oxfordshire.

The second lot have an almost diametrically opposed viewpoint. They feel that the social world is already too constricting for the individual. Already there are too many rules, fettering and eventually stifling natural impulse and crippling creative capacities. These people feel more at home with ambiguity and diversity. Order for its own sake is less important to them, and they tend to see life more in terms of an exploration of rich and variously-textured experience, rather than something that gets reduced to the often rather desperate pursuit of tranquility.

In the context of housing, the first "order-oriented" group would see it as important that a collection of houses have some unity of appearance. Their aesthetic judgments of this sort tend to favour visual harmony stemming from the houses looking rather the same. The second group would see it as more important that the houses fulfil their human functions first, and would be more likely to be able to see aesthetic value in a highly diverse-looking built environment. It is generally adherents of the first viewpoint that occupy positions of power in bureaucracies. Consequently, our access to land, materials, professional advice, and the finance to acquire these things is limited by centralised controls, and we become subservient to the decisions (and too often the whims) of bureaucrats. And it all results in the cultural hegemony of a middle-class, "order-oriented" view of the world.

But broad dichotomies such as this one are grossly oversimplified. Each group above has been described in extreme terms, and most people fall somewhere between the two poles, and even then only a small proportion are aware of social processes in these terms. For the majority of people, their social context is simply "the way the World is" and it is accepted unquestioningly. But it is these two basically conflicting world views that shape most political differences, rather than partisan policies or more

conventionally-distinguished political groupings. They account for the radical/conservative factions in all political parties. The directions in which each group would like to see the social world develop pull against one another, which is why a full understanding of the ramifications of this situation requires an appreciation of the distribution of power in Society, and its relationship to vested economic interests. The dialectic of social power relationships, and their ideological genesis and social location heavily permeates any consideration of housing processes viewed from a sociological perspective.

But radical opposition to deep-rooted conservative assumptions is not very strong, since it is hampered by the fact that the cultural hegemony of the middle-class world view extends down through the layers of social stratification. The middle-class world view is something to emulate, if you want to be considered "decent", which you do if you are upwardly socially mobile. Marx called it "false consciousness". Herbert Marcuse, in his description of how modern industrial society reduces most of its populace to a life of "one-dimensionality", drew attention to the inherently ideological nature of industrial culture, especially the way it imposes certain organised patterns of life on a society conditioned by advanced technology. To conceive of a Society not based on assumptions of efficiency, the "goodness" of work, and on the primacy of economic considerations is scarcely thinkable for most people. The crucial role played by the assumptions of "hard" technology explain the lack of public acceptance of the ideas advanced by the proponents of "softer" technologies. As Jacques Ellul pointed out decades ago in his book The Technological Society, discussion must take place within the framework of a hard technology world view, and arguments from outside these assumptions are considered simply inadmissible. Because it is the people in power who define what any problem is in the first place, the articulation of the problem is couched in centralist

assumptions, and only concepts that are in harmony with centralist assumptions are given serious consideration. For this reason, little or no serious consideration is given to the very intimate relationship that should exist between the people and the dwelling they live in. Giancarlo de Carlo's dictum that man's dwelling is his "affirmation in space" would not be one that would trip lightly off the lips of your typical housing bureaucrat. We no longer recognise that organic wholeness between what you live in and how you live your life. We have been deluded by a preoccupation with utilitarianism. Housing which comes anywhere close to satisfying these intrinsic human needs has become the prerogative of privileged and advantaged minorities. I think it was John Turner who pointed out that the system of planning ordinances in the US has ensured that Urban Renewal is synonymous with running the poor out of town. Their system of public housing has meant that the term "housing project" is synonymous with "low-income, high-problem ghetto". Despite its good intentions, authority-provided housing has changed the life-circumstances of the poor hardly at all. As Colin Ward says in his perceptive Housing : An Anarchist Approach, our intractable housing problem is really a poverty problem, made worse by the fact that we seem somehow to have made it impossible for those of the homeless still with any initiative unstifled to improve their own situation.

So, again, we can see how core notions of centralism - that bigger is better and standardised is more efficient - are so entrenched in our thinking that people no longer question their appropriateness (and are suspicious of those - like alternative technology buffs - who do). The way things are now is seen as the only way things can be, rather than as an experiment in social organisation that we may well have to abandon if the results do not start getting better soon.

So far we have looked briefly at some of the ways that centralism inhibits creativity and innovation, but in doing this it also inhibits the creation of a diverse environment. Centralism is an homogenising force. But it is a well-known ecological maxim that homogenous environments are not healthy environments, and vigour demands diversity. What we seem to have done is to deny the diversity of the needs to be met, and oversimplify them to suit the monolithic requirements of the controlling system. Centralised administration operates on a sort of statistical average of people's needs, which means, in the case of housing, that the results are only ever partly satisfactory to those being housed, since the individual's housing needs bear about as much relationship to the statistical average as you do, reader, to the "average person". So, nobody is very happy with the outcome except the people who apparently get their kicks from having all the sums come out right. As Ward says, we cannot afford to go on accepting the assumption that the only factors in the provision of housing worthy of serious consideration are those of the technocrats and the capitalist building industry. We have to find ways of including popular involvement in the equation. He sees this as the real housing problem - to find how "to change the ways housing and planning issues are perceived, and how to shift the initiative in planning from the bureaucrat to the citizen, how to shift that in housing from passive consumption to active involvement". Or, as John Turner put it in Housing by People, the central issue is who decides for whom? The shaping of our environment is determined by the values of industrialism and capitalist economics, and by the aesthetic predilections of the middle-class people who make the decisions. Only a small portion of the spectra of need and taste gets represented.

Our mode of social organisation is, as I have said, excessively paternalistic and authoritarian. The (usually grudging) provision of niggardly welfare benefits to the disadvantaged sectors of Society has provided opportunities for subtle forms

of social control, and welfare benefits are given as though a basic minimum standard of living is a privilege rather than a right. Persons being housed are expected to have an attitude of uncritical acceptance and also (if possible) to appear suitably grateful. This is further evidence that people do not have control over large and important areas of their lives. Except for the very rich and those who are unusually emancipated from cultural assumptions, the range of options has become extraordinarily constricted and individual freedoms eroded - and the situation becomes increasingly worse as you go down the poverty ladder.

Being in control of a situation means having the power to alter that situation. But not only do most people not have that power, they have not been shown how to use what little room to move they do have, or even made aware that there is any room to move at all. Hardly anyone is being formally educated towards active, participating citizenship, despite our educational rhetoric. Obedience and submission are the real foundation stones on which the education system rests. And outside the formal education system attitudes of paternalism, authoritarianism and submissiveness are deeply embedded in our culture, such that to be "a good citizen" is to be one of those middle-aged pillars of bourgeois respectability who are so much a part of the problem. (As David Reisman said in The Lonely Crowd, to be a good democrat these days is to be indistinguishable from one's peers). A genuine citizenship would have to be a much more autonomous notion. Meanwhile, people with upwardly socially-mobile aspirations use the meek, accepting notion of citizenship as their model for acceptable behaviour, and there is little evidence that many recognise the need for a responsible, concerned, participating

sort of citizenship. But education for participating citizenship would require that people be educated about the realities of power in their Society - a course that the presently powerful would be unlikely to prosecute with very much zeal.

So far I have focussed on the way that certain social assumptions have become embalmed in an array of codes, regulations, and other restrictive forms of legislation. But as well, there are conventions and habits of mind which operate on a more covert level, and also affect the form of the final structure we call a house. These are also widely-shared throughout the Society, and are part of the broadly agreed world-taken-for-granted. For instance, we see it as fitting that there should be a bathroom separate from the main living area; sleeping space is usually separated from living space, and there is usually a separate place for food preparation; we automatically assume that farm animals will not share the house with humans, that children do not usually sleep in the same room as adults, and that we use the toilet in private. We also have the idea that a house has to be a fully-furnished, fully-serviced entity right from the start, all cosmeticked up the way the advertisers in the mass media have brought us to expect. But not one of these notions is universally held by all cultures, many of whom have quite different ideas on such matters. It should be remembered that our notions about housing are specific to one period in history (the period since the industrial revolution) and to one mode of social organisation (growth-oriented industrialism). They are man-made, and therefore capable of being transcended, if we want enough. (In theory, at least). Yet designers of dwellings incorporate these ideas into their plans as a matter of course, probably without giving any thought to the matter. There are so many hidden social assumptions of this kind that it could be argued that they influence the final design more than technical and aesthetic considerations do.

Like all professions, those to do with the planning and administration of housing in our society have enduring links with the status quo. If they did not have such links they would not be professions in any socially legitimated sense. In order to be legitimate as a profession - that is, to be recognised and accepted by the socially powerful - their world view must not seriously threaten the construction of reality favoured by those same socially powerful. Viewed from this perspective, the essentially conservative nature of architecture, town planning and kindred professions becomes apparent. (An architect may be able to question the layout of the gaol, and be radically innovative in his design proposals, but he cannot question anything fundamental in our ideas about crime and punishment). So we have yet another set of factors that reinforce the "view from the top".

The important thing to realise about the thrusting of the planners' and administrators' world view on everyone else is that the buildings which result from this literally concretise societal assumptions in a particularly durable form. They become part of the physical environment in which future social life has to take place, thus giving expression to highly abstract and often preconscious social concepts at the level of everyday reality. And because the fruits of professional labour are so omnipresent, the idea that the way things are is the only way they can be, gets further reinforced and even more deeply entrenched. More than just expressing deep-rooted social assumptions, buildings propagate and reinforce prevailing ruling-class assumptions, embedding them in the shared world-taken-for-granted and making any attempts to suggest that they might be otherwise seem outlandish. Thus, many innovative ideas bite the dust because they have been viewed as peccadilloes of the lunatic fringe, and not given serious consideration.

Now, despite this seemingly impenetrable web of sociological factors that combine to shape our Society's housing, in any Society with pretensions to freedom the question needs to be asked: "Why should not responsible adults be free to build their own home the way they want it, provided that in doing so the rights of others are protected?" At the moment, this is not the case - especially, as I have said, if what you want transgresses prevailing assumptions. To pose this question is not to suggest by implication that it may not be necessary to regulate building construction to some degree (especially commercial building construction). But there is no reason that I can see why, given the will, regulations could not be devised that did not discriminate so heavily against people who want control over the decisions that affect the house they are going to live in. The rules we have at the moment, have become a subtle instrument by which the built environment is formed in accordance with middle-class ideas about how the world should be, to the exclusion of other more humanistically based notions. Of course, one way or another, that is the way it has always been, but then that is what they used to say about feudalism.