

Some time ago I was attending a constituency meeting of my local Labour party. In a comradely nod to the campaigning roots of the party, each meeting had a period devoted to 'political education'. The topic this time was community architecture. What I remember most of all was the anger of the speaker as he sustained a half-hour diatribe, eyes glaring, which laid all the sores of society at the feet of the architect. All the normal crimes - tower blocks, housing estates, white walls, balcony access, aesthetics over function - were recounted and then conflated with conservative and repressive political regimes. The story left the audience in no doubt as to the evil of architects and their implied association with political corruption. This was then juxtaposed with the benefits of community architecture in which the users were seen to have control over their environmental destiny in a truly democratic manner. The speaker ended by insisting that architects should be stripped of all their power and simply left with their pens, there to be pushed in directions instructed by the community. In effect, the only attribute left to the architect was to be the ability to draw lines without making splodges.

Everyone clapped. It was a classic story of good guy/ bad guy, and the audience knew which side they were on. Pathetically I sat on my hands, revealing neither my profession nor my profession. There was something so dogmatically oppositional in the structure of the talk that any responder would have been forced to take sides. This I was not prepared to do. Maybe it was the aggression in the air - I still remember those eyes - which meant I could not face further public humiliation. Maybe also I could feel more politically correct in my silent association. Maybe I had nagging doubts about my pens which always splodged. I snuck off guilty at not having defended my vocation and missed the raffle.

This essay is my response. It is a response that suggests that the issues at stake are more complex than suggested by the simple dualism that structures much discussion of community architecture, including that at the Labour party meeting. My argument is that the oppositional genesis of community architecture results in its marginalisation, and with it an associated political disempowerment. Before positing an alternative way out of this dilemma, I wish to examine some the premises for community architecture and the way that these may paradoxically result in an

environment divested of the strength which it is set up to have. I concentrate on a period, the 1980s, and a place, the United Kingdom, because this context gave rise to a view of community architecture which manifested in an exaggerated way some of the traits of the movement set in other times and places; it provides a model against which to test the wider claims of community architecture. My interest is to explore whether this model provides an alternative to normative practice and in particular whether it genuinely redefines the relationship between architect and user. My argument takes to task some of the theoretical claims made for the movement; in this it rides the waves of political incorrectness. This is intentional. Community Architecture has protected itself with a soft layer of liberal rectitude which has preempted a sustained critique; my own behaviour at the Labour Party meeting is indicative of the problem.

THE MYTH OF COMMUNITY

The book on Community Architecture by Nick Wates and Charles Kneivitt (a book which played a central role in promulgating the movement) opens with an apocalyptic description of the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, when 'violence erupted' on a North London housing estate. 'As families and the elderly cowered in their homes, gangs of youth - armed with bricks, knives, bottles and petrol bombs - confronted hundreds of police armed with riot shields and batons. What had been thought of as a model housing estate on its completion only twelve years previously became, for several hours, a battleground.'¹ Against an architectural backdrop, the authors suggest that there was 'a possible link between social unrest and the degree of control that people have over their environment'.² The book then proceeds with a benign introduction to community architecture. The argument is never explicitly made, but the implication of this hysterical opening of social unrest is clear: traditional architecture, because of its remote and irresponsible genesis, is the cause of

1 Nick Wates and Charles Kneivitt, *Community Architecture: How People Are Creating Their Own Environment* (London: Penguin, 1987), 15.

2 Ibid., 16.

social breakdown; community architecture, with its engaged and democratic genesis, will overcome these ills. Central to this argument is the idea that community architecture will ‘lead to more stable and self-sufficient communities, and to more contented and confident citizens and professionals’.³

The word ‘community’ is always suggestive but never fully defined, holding out the promise of containing the values of interaction, mutual support and communality. It is perhaps not surprising that the community architecture movement reached its peak in the 1980s, when the politics of Thatcher and Reagan made an assault on those very values. Whilst both politicians announced the dismantling of the centralised state, their policies achieved quite the opposite. At the same time their ideological stress on the economic right of the individual led to the atomisation of society. Caught between the imperious power of the state and competing demands of individuals, the idea of community becomes a natural and appealing response. However, as Richard Sennet points out the idea of community is often at odds with the reality of the social construction of community. The result is what he calls ‘the myth of the purified community’⁴ in which a group forms a theoretical community but never engages in it. Sennet notes that this is a general condition which:

is bred out of the way that human beings learn at a certain point in their own development to lie to themselves, in order to avoid new experiences that might force them to endure the pain of perceiving the unexpected, the new, the otherness around them. Through this peculiar learning process ‘belonging’ to one another becomes a shared sense of what we think we *ought* to be like, as one social being, in order not to be hurt.⁵

The word ‘community’ thus does all the work on its own, avoiding the need for actual participation in the community. The result is that ‘communally painful experiences, unknown social experiences full of possible surprise and challenge, can be avoided by the common consent of a community to believe they already know the

3 Ibid., 28.

4 Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (Penguin Books, 1973), 32ff.

5 Ibid., 41, my italics.

meaning of these experiences and have drawn the lessons from them together.’⁶ Any real collective intent to resist the domination of the state or the divisive forces of the competing individuals is dissipated because the myth of the community does not take into account its actual political and social construction. The philosopher Gillian Rose notes that this attitude to community ‘separates each person into a private autonomous competitive person and a fantasy life community, a life of unbounded mutuality. A fantasy life which effectively destroys the remnant of political life.’⁷ To some extent the political climate of the eighties made a retreat into the purified idea of community understandable, particularly in the United Kingdom where the disempowering of local government cut off what could have been the only source of funding for the establishment of communities in the real, and not ideal, sense of the word.

In the case of community architecture, the authority of both state and architect is meant to be dissolved by the empowerment of users within a community. However, this dissolution is achieved by recourse to the idea of the purified community which will fictively, but in fact impotently, resist the impositions of both state and individual. The impotence of this condition is disguised under the illusion that community architecture stands for the architecture of community. Because it is designated community architecture and because it ‘looks like’ community architecture, it is meant to bring with it all the aspects of community. Community architecture contains visual and linguistic resonances which are there to persuade a social body of the presence of community, whilst in fact it may ignore the actual construction of that community and thereby allow the forces of both state and individual to reassert themselves unchallenged.

If community architecture genuinely embodied a community one would expect that it would result in a radical spatial reconfiguration, in particular that of the relationship of the public realm to the private. And yet the spatialisation of much community architecture bears an uncanny resemblance to suburban forms, which for Sennet represent the ultimate manifestation of the purified community, individuals

6 Ibid., 40.

7 Gillian Rose, “Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Two Cities,” *Social and Legal Studies* 3 (1994): 337.

claiming their own territory under a mythical feeling of collectivity.⁸ The ‘community’ suggested is one which relies on suburban or anti-urban antecedents and one which effectively turns its back on the city as a container for collective life. It is a community which is defined by groups of a narrow social definition, at worst driven by self-interest, and is therefore exclusive and not inclusive, as a true public social community could be.

In its construction of a myth of purified community, community architecture suffers the same utopian tendencies as the modernist architecture that it was set up to overturn. Even though modernist architecture and community architecture are radically different in their means of production, they both bring with them idealised visions of society so that, as Gillian Rose notes, ‘...(community architecture) elevated ostensibly to assuage the ravages of modernism ensures that the range of argument about architecture remains utopian’, a comment that she precedes with the statement of a ‘general law that one day’s utopia becomes the following day’s dystopia’.⁹ Community architecture ostensibly (and in the worst cases sanctimoniously) set up as it was to address the social aspirations of the user, thus runs the risk of inevitable disappointment when those aspirations are scarred by conditions and events beyond the control of the social or architectural determinist. The result is that the hopes of the user are falsely raised, so that, as Rose notes, ‘the imaginary liberation from “total” domination amounts to legitimisation of a new architectural utopianism ... (which) takes place at the wake of the disenfranchised people.’¹⁰

The utopian problem of both 1980s community architecture and modernist architectural practice results in a will to create pure forms for pure occupation. Both architectural models, however, suffer Rose’s fate that today’s utopia becomes

⁸ The same problem can be seen in the support that community architecture gives to the notion of defensible space. This approach, championed by Oscar Newman in the sixties and seventies relies on the demarcation of the individual’s territory from the public realm as a means of defence from crime and violence. Public space, which in the idealised community stands for the space of collective life and discourse, is thus either completely lost or else effectively taken over by privatised space. Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space; Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (Macmillan, 1972).

⁹ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 300.

¹⁰ Ibid.

tomorrow’s dystopia - accident, dirt, politics, tension, selfishness, social structures - all these and more rush in to besmirch the purified ideal. The very perfection of these models’ genesis makes this scarring inevitable. My response to this problem starts with a dialectical obviousness. Architecture, be it the community version or the ‘traditional’ version (by the end of this essay I yearn for these distinctions to be dissolved) must relinquish its delusion of purity and accept contingency and the reality of social construction. We should not talk of community architecture, but the architecture of the impure community. But where my argument has a dialectical genesis, it does not end up in an oppositional entrenchment - on the one hand celebrating the impure, the chaotic, on the other hand resignedly accepting defeat in the face of more powerful conditions beyond. Rather, with a critical acknowledgement of the forces of state, individual and community it is then able to act intentionally, starting with a critical awareness of actual conditions and moving forward in a productive manner by using the residual strength of spatial reconfiguration.

POLITICAL AMNESIA

There is something obscene about Wates’ and Kneivitt’s use of Broadwater Farm as an architectural nemesis and the subsequent redemptive status of community architecture. Their argument is one of architectural determinism inasmuch as the spatial structure of a housing estate is seen as the prime factor in causing social unrest, and that in response community architecture alone will create stable communities which ‘can create employment...(and) help reduce crime, vandalism, mental stress, ill health and the potential for urban unrest’.

To promote, say, balcony access over chronic unemployment as the cause for social unrest is symptomatic of a determinist approach to architecture in which the built form is argued to have a direct causal effect on social behaviour. Not only is this argument extraordinarily misinformed but is also extraordinarily dangerous. Misinformed because, in its focus on architecture alone, it conveniently overlooks the wider social and political structures that contribute to the production and inhabitation of the built environment; dangerous because of the political amnesia that it thereby

induces. To blame the architect for society's disruption is to forget the political conditions which promote those disruptions, which is why the argument may be so convenient for conservative critics such as Alice Coleman in her book *Utopia on Trial*.¹¹

In the same manner, many of the proponents of community architecture will champion its social benefits on the one hand, whilst underplaying its political intent on the other. This political amnesia is implied by Wates and Knevitt when they state that 'community architecture is not political in the party political sense of the word...it transcends traditional Left/Right politics.'¹² This curious claim for 1980s community architecture is very different from the 1960s radical architecture movement. Activists for the latter, such as Colin Ward, were explicitly political in their intent and saw the users' involvement in the production of their own environment as an overtly political act. Ward states that 'it would be foolish to suggest that it (tenant control) is not a political matter. It is political in the most profound sense: it is about the distribution of power in society.'¹³ Wates and Knevitt are prepared to accept this political content in one breath, but then state in the next that community architecture 'is not rigidly pro- or anti- public or private ownership of land'¹⁴ - a division that must surely be one of the key political issues of the day. Such political ambivalence may be seen as part of a wider drift towards the politics of consensus, but it is in the end a dispiriting and disempowering stance to take. Just as with consensus politics, where a central position is taken so as to offend neither left or right, community architecture ends up confirming a status quo.

Probably the most powerful symbol of the *seemingly* apolitical nature of community architecture is Prince Charles. The future monarch must constitutionally stay within politically neutral territory; his loud and public association with the community architecture supposedly provided that territory. However, his

11 Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1985).

12 Wates and Knevitt, *Community Architecture : How People Are Creating Their Own Environment*, 21.

13 Colin Ward, *Tenants Take Over* (Architectural Press, 1974), 43.

14 Wates and Knevitt, op. cit. 21.

pronouncements on the subject often veered dangerously towards a political position, most famously in the 'Divided Britain' controversy. Following an interview with Rod Hackney, then the President of the RIBA, the Manchester Evening News revealed Prince Charles' fears for the nation. The story ran: 'The biggest fear of Prince Charles is that he will inherit the throne of a divided Britain.' Hackney was then quoted. 'He (Prince Charles) is very worried that when he becomes king there will be "no-go" areas in the inner cities, and that the (racial minorities) will be alienated from the rest of the country.'¹⁵ The story, which cleverly managed to anger both the Queen and Margaret Thatcher, was never fully retracted. A political storm ensued, in which the connections between inner city decay, conservative rule and community architecture formed a heady, and never resolved, mixture. What is interesting is that the story was leaked (whether intentionally or not has never been revealed) through the foremost proponent of community architecture, Rod Hackney. The political implications of the movement managed to vengefully sneak out from behind the neutral mask that community architecture often presented to the world. In this light it might be argued that Prince Charles was using, whether knowingly or not, the political potential latent in community architecture - a potential that is largely suppressed through recourse to the consensual stance set up to quell the doubts of left and right. The political content of the Prince's pronouncements was almost completely ignored by the architectural profession who saved their rage for the responses to what they perceived to be the directly 'architectural' attacks (on style and personalities) that he had made - an outpouring of architectural grief which is indicative of the profession's unwillingness to face up to the political implications of their work.

As in its utopian tendencies, community architecture here again holds up a mirror to normal architecture. The two meld, dispiritingly caught in infinite reflections, cut off from the world beyond. My suggestion is to twist the mirrors, to see these architectures partially reflecting themselves, but to see those visions disturbed and invigorated by the structures outside, and in particular political structures. I use the word political in the widest sense of the word to encompass aspects of class, economics, gender and sustainability as well as more normative

15 As quoted in *Ibid.*, 42.

left/right definitions. It is here that community architecture (or rather my replacement, the architecture of the impure community) could be instructive, because its intentions and potentials are more overtly political than those of ‘normal’ architecture. But to realise the potential it is essential to abandon the consensual stance typified by Wates and Knevtitt - a stance which amounts to little more than a betrayal of the rights of the user. Community architecture must take a stance towards left/right politics and explicitly move to the left away from the tendencies of the dominant social and economic structures, including privatised public space and individualised territories. It cannot afford to be neither ‘rigidly pro- nor anti- public or private space’ because that ownership is one of the central factors in constituting the space of the community. The community is manifested in the production of its space and architecture contributes a part (but not the whole) to the production. It is only by facing up to the political content of that production that the rights of the user can be realised. What an architecture of the impure community demands is a discussion which starts at the political and encompasses, amongst other aspects, the territories of gender, the relationship between domestic and work, the form of sustainability¹⁶ or the spatiality of social demarcation. Only thus can architecture be aware of the tensions within the social construction of the impure community and from this awareness move to acting within and on those tensions with intent. In this way an architecture which stands for, looks like, an architecture of the purified community is replaced by architecture which reconfigures the space of the actual, impure community. This revision to the model of community architecture has a wider relevance because it points to a way of releasing the political content latent in the production of any architecture.

TASTEFUL TECHNIQUE

To a large extent the political content of architecture is suppressed by the discussions of style and technique which dominate so much architectural discourse. The example of community architecture is instructive here too. Wates and Knevtitt’s

16 Some of the most interesting reconfigurations in the community housing movement are now being driven by issues of sustainability - most notably in the Co-Housing movement in the USA.

double negative (a sure sign of partial guilt) that ‘community architecture is not in any sense anti-design’ scarcely disguises the fact that the rhetoric of the movement is elsewhere explicitly anti a certain type of design, namely modernism. To a large extent community architecture avoids a direct discussion of style through its focus on the process of collaborative design as opposed to the architectural product. However, despite or (as we shall see) because of this disavowal of style, it slips into the argument anyway. There is an underlying assumption that a certain vernacular will emerge effortlessly from the process of collaboration because that is what people most naturally relate to. Thus the Prince can conflate an argument about social use with one about style in his speech at Hampton Court which so enraged the architectural profession. ‘What I believe is important about community architecture is that it has shown “ordinary” people that their views are worth having; that they need not be made guilty or ignorant if their natural preference is for the more “traditional” designs.’ The Prince’s later association with a set of architects who propounded highly conservative stylistic values compounded the problem and forever associated community architecture with a certain type of regressive vernacular - a stylistic straight jacketing which has hijacked a more productive discussion of the movement. We are thus caught within exactly the same limits of aesthetic terminology that afflict normal architectural debate - it is just that the labels have been changed. More fundamental and potentially redemptive aspects of the production of space are subsumed under a spurious aesthetic debate. The voice of the community is thereby emasculated, an emasculation which has been institutionalised in both the United States and the United Kingdom through community ‘design’ panels, whose token gestures of democratic involvement disguise their superficiality and eventual impotence.¹⁷

17 See for example, Rob Wellington Quigley, ‘Framing the Fit’, in William S. Saunders, ed., *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties*, 2nd ed. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 172. Quigley notes that with design review boards: ‘Conflict is almost obligatory. Obviously, once a review board is in place, it has a responsibility to reject the architect’s first design, no matter how skilled, since to accept it would be to imply impotence.’

The depoliticisation of architecture, community and other, by recourse to aesthetics is further compounded by the emphasis on technique. Symptomatic of this is the naming of a parallel organisation, the Association of Community Technical Aid Centres (ACTAC). The intention was to challenge the word architecture in Community Architecture, which they saw bringing with it too much of the authority of the architect, and to replace this with the idea of ‘community technical aid’. This title alone subscribes to the myth of political neutrality through recourse to technology; the aid provided to the community is simply of a ‘technical’ nature. This attitude to the architect (and here I have dissolved the distinction between types) as a technical facilitator is inevitable given the separation of architecture from the political sphere. To some extent it mirrors the categorical separation between social and political in the work of the philosopher Hannah Arendt.¹⁸ It is a separation which has implicit dangers because, as Richard Bernstein notes, ‘it lends support to the politically dangerous myth that there is a proper domain of social issues where social knowledge is appropriate (neutral expert knowledge) - a domain that is better left to the experts and social engineers and which is to be excluded from the political sphere.’¹⁹ Architects can thus argue that they are involved in the bettering of society through technique and expertise alone, whereas in fact by the disavowal of the political they are betraying the potential empowerment of the user.

The claim of community architecture to have radically revised the relationship between the architect and user here looks fragile. The involvement of the user in the design process is set in opposition to the system of normative practice in which the architect is assumed to dispense design down from on high against the wishes of the client. The idea of authoritative imposition is a myth that sustains the profession inasmuch as it sets architects apart from the amateur, but it is an idea that bears little resemblance to actual practice. With the possible exception of a small elite of firms, it is an accepted imperative for most architects to listen to and work with clients and

18 Most clearly in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958).

19 Richard Bernstein, ‘Rethinking the Social and Political’, in Richard Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 254.

end users - not to do so would be commercial suicide. One of the defining features of recent practice has been the speed at which the relationship of architect to client has changed,²⁰ particularly in the commercial field. The notion of the architect presenting a *fait accompli* to the client has been replaced by the architect bending to the demands and needs of the client and end users. In this light the difference between the commercial architect and the community architect is perhaps less than the ideologues of community architecture would have us believe, even if the criteria by which the eventual designs are judged ‘better’ are centred around economic criteria in one instance and social criteria in the other. In the commercial field the architect has to a large extent been marginalised into a limited role of producing surface aesthetic and technical efficiency - a fate which community architecture also suffers. It is how to overcome this marginalisation that I wish to address in the final section, with a particular emphasis on examining a new model of the relationship between architect and user.

RECONFIGURING POWER

I have thus far examined some of the claims made for community architecture; what is apparent from these is not that community architecture is radically different from conventional architecture, but in fact shares some of the same symptoms, from utopian illusion through political amnesia to an obsession with style and technique. This conclusion may be surprising given the way that community architecture was set up in opposition to many of the values and operations of conventional architecture. My argument is that community architecture, through its dialectic genesis, suffers from the fate of all binary argument, namely that it never succeeds in reformulating the original points of opposition, but is in fact caught within their ideological structure. The most explicit manifestation of this binary thinking comes in Wates and Knevtitt’s book with a chart entitled ‘*What Makes Community Architecture*

20 See Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View*, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).

*different?*²¹ Two columns are formed, one entitled Conventional Architecture, the other Community Architecture, and an oppositional battle set up against a series of topics. For the 'Status of the User', we are given 'Users are passive recipients of an environment' for conventional architecture versus 'Users are - or are treated as - clients' for community architecture. The list continues in a simple binary way, sometimes using emotive language to make its point. Passive user/Active user. Remote, imperious expert/Enabling, companionable expert. Large scale/Small scale. Totalitarian/Pragmatic. Universal/particular. Hieratic/Demotic. International/Regional. Repetitive/Personal. Top-down/Bottom-up.

I have already suggested that many of the attributes here attributed to conventional architecture bear little resemblance to the actual configuration of practice, but relate to the myth and aura that is attached to the profession - a myth which the profession does little to shrug off because it seemingly sustains its authority. However, for the purpose of the ideologues of community architecture the clichéd myths form a polemical and convenient point for oppositional departure.²² A number of problems arise from this determinedly oppositional stance. Much of the debate is conducted within the framework of conventional architecture, but that framework is never unravelled. In fact quite the opposite happens. Any binary opposition has an underlying hierarchy; in this case the weaker of the pair, community architecture, is marginalised into its own category, caught within its language and the received limits of the words 'architecture' and 'community'. Meanwhile the controlling architectural ideologies go unchallenged, or are even reinforced. Margaret Crawford identifies these trends in the formulation of the 1960s radical architects whose call 'for the apparently total social and professional transformation' in fact

21 Wates and Kneivitt, *Community Architecture : How People Are Creating Their Own Environment*, 24–25.

22 The language used to describe the birth of community architecture raises the stakes still higher - it is the language of battle. Rod Hackney's election as president of the RIBA is the end of 'a civil war' with 'a decisive victory for community architecture', whilst later, despite the successes of community architecture, 'a constant state of guerrilla warfare existed'. Of course Hackney himself encouraged this siege mentality through his directly confrontational politics within the RIBA.

instituted 'an incomplete negation, which simply reversed the already fictional roles of the all powerful architect and the ideal client while accepting the ideological assumptions on which they were based.'²³ The point is that in the 1960s US version, the 1980s UK version and others in between, the movements deflect much of their energy into what they perceive to be the failings of the profession and conventional architecture, and in so doing miss the transformative potential of a different kind of practice.

The main thrust of community architecture's oppositional stance is to overturn the power relationship between architecture and user. The conventional architect is seen as the possessor of irresponsible power; in the community architecture model they must be divested of this power. Within this model there is, as Gillian Rose notes, 'a disqualification of critique and equivocation so that all power is either completely bad or completely good - total domination or holy community.' For the ideologues of community architecture the power of the architect is completely bad, a situation exacerbated by the association of the architect with the powers of the state. The figure of the architect stands for both remote expertise and as a symbol of state coercion, a figure which finds its most potent visual and political form in the guise of modernism. Community architecture is there to resist this figure. Any act of interpretation or intent by the architect is now to be treated with suspicion as an act of imposition. The politically sensitive architect responds by accepting the unchallengeable right of the user to assert their own ends and becomes no more than a stylistic and technical facilitator. The result, as Rose eloquently puts it, is that 'it is the architect who is demoted; the people do not accede to power.'²⁴ What is set up as a productive collaboration may end as a disempowering of both parties. Rose argues that:

23 Margaret Crawford, 'Can Architects be Socially Responsible?' in Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, *Out of Site: a Social Criticism of Architecture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 39. In fact Crawford cannot extricate herself from the dialectic that she has identified and the despairing answer to the question posed by the title of her essay is: probably not except on the margins of youth and individual. This bypassing of the transformative potential of the profession is criticised by Bruce Robbins, see footnote 27 below.

24 Rose, "Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Two Cities," 336.

By renouncing knowledge as power...we have disqualified any possible investigation into the dynamics of the configuration and reconfiguration of power. The presentation of power as plural yet total and all-pervasive, and opposition to power as thus conceived as equally pluralistic . multiform and incessant...unwittingly participates in a restructuring of power which undermines the semi-autonomous institutions such as knowledge or architecture, which alleviate the pressure of the modern state on the individual. The plural but total way of conceiving power leaves the individual more not less exposed to the unmitigated power of the state.²⁵

Within the context of community architecture the user is thus not only potentially disempowered but also exposed.

Within the normal model of community architecture, it is argued that, with the disavowal of knowledge, the act of collaboration alone is enough for the empowerment of the user. The failing of this approach is that it ignores the transformative potential latent within the use of any knowledge. The linking of power to knowledge has too often been identified only with the repressive tendencies of power. Foucault himself, the most insistent reader of the power/knowledge axis, resists this monolithic interpretation. Power, he says, ‘needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.’²⁶ Against the argument that the only responsible architect is the one who bows to the demands of the user, I would posit that it is irresponsible for architects not to use their knowledge - but only if they have critically accepted the potential dominations and repressive structures that spatial formations might produce.

It is Rose’s acknowledgement of architecture as a ‘semi-autonomous’ discipline with the potential to alleviate the pressures of the state that points to a way forward. The notion of the autonomy of architecture is an ideal which the profession has clung to in the desire for self legitimation. The establishment of a definable area of knowledge is seen as a prerequisite for any profession. The mistake is to identify

25 Ibid., 337, emphasis in the original.

26 Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Pantheon Books, 1980).

this abstract knowledge with practical and actual autonomy - and yet the profession persistently defines itself as an enclosed unity. The fact that contradictions may arise (in stylistic battles, different technical approaches and so on) should not be seen as a threat to that unity but rather as a strengthening of it because those contradictions are always defined by and limited to the terms set by professional authority. What follows from this abstracted notion of an architectural world set apart from the outside world is an indoctrinated separation between the architect on the one hand and the public on the other. To a large extent it is this distinction between architect and people which gives rise to the ire of the community architecture movement. However, as I have argued, the dogmatic dissolution of the boundary between the two has hardly served the people very well, resulting in an emasculated version of architecture reduced to the lowest common denominators of style and technique.

The problem lies in the fact that the autonomy of architecture and architects is no more than a fiction convenient for those both inside and outside the hallowed ground. Architects find it so much more cathartic to pick off one another than, say, an external profession such as surveying. Equally, it serves the opponents of architecture to define the profession as an inviolate authority. On both cases, the energy is misplaced. Bruce Robbins, a professor of English, (how often is it that professions have to look to outsiders to point to their weaknesses?) notes: ‘Professions are not as isolated or as self-enclosed as they enjoy accusing themselves of being and better use would be made of their political energies by accusing more deserving, if less conveniently accessible targets.’²⁷ However, the point is not just to chase the easier targets but to use the energy in a more productive reformulation of practice.

All such talk of the autonomy of architecture is not just distracting but also misinformed. Not only is the epistemological definition of architecture much more fragile than its theorists would have us believe, but also every action of the architect is affected by contingent forces beyond their control. In addition it is clear that, as Robbins notes, ‘cross border exchange between the public and the profession is

27 Bruce Robbins, ‘Pathetic Substitutes’ in Saunders, *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties*, 177.

happening all the time.’²⁸ The rigid classifications of architecture and the architect now appear spurious. Architecture is open to a much wider range of influences and possibilities than the monolithic professional view would have us believe; the community of architects is as impure as the community for which they are designing. The importance is to see this not as a sign of weakness, but as an opportunity for a more expansive definition of roles.

Architects are possessors of both specialised knowledge and conditioned, evolving, understanding as they move between the roles of expert and user - because we are all users in the end as well. It is an acknowledgement of this combination of knowledge and understanding that is central to any reformulation of practice which has the potential to empower the user. I have previously suggested the figure of architects as ‘Angels with Dirty Faces’²⁹ - a figure which oscillates between retreat and engagement in the world; in the endless flux these angels dissolve the futile and static oppositions of dialectical thinking. Instead they are androgynous dreamers of worlds full of flaws and contingencies, at times hovering like light doves, at others returning to grounded messy experiences. With feet on the ground, these angels evade the delusions of utopia, but as sceptical optimists they never succumb to Tafurian despair in the face of other forces. The knowledge of such angels is constantly mediated by common experience and this, in its impurity and restlessness, is not seen as a threatening imposition but as a productive force of change.

If the architect is in this permanent state of tension, then so too can the user be. It should not be seen as a sign of weakness for users to identify with the figure of the architect. Both are torn between the separation between particular and universal, and both can be invigorated by the movement between angelic aspirations and dirty realism. It is through this shared movement that the ‘problem’ of users renouncing their rights to the architect is dismissed as no problem at all; instead a true collaborative enterprise opens up. Inevitably in this collaboration matters of aesthetic will be introduced (since that is one method by which the community can find their means of expression and aspirations). Inevitably too there will be matters of technique

28 Ibid.

29 J. Till, “Angels with Dirty Faces,” *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal* 7 (1995): 14–19.

to be addressed, but there will need be an acknowledgement that this is not a neutral act. More importantly, such collaboration will lead to discussions of spatial reconfiguration - because it is in space that the tension between dirty realism and angelic aspirations is manifested. I use the word spatial here not in its formal sense, but in its social sense - as a condition which is both the product of social practice, and the potential container and producer of social activities.³⁰ Such space is a condition that includes matters of taste and technique, but sets them in a broader cultural context. It is a condition which makes explicit issues of boundary, of social relationships, of formal hierarchies, of making visible the unseen powers beyond. In this way it is a condition which necessarily confronts the political nature of architecture and the production of space.

A collaboration between architect and user where they both take on the figure of Angels with Dirty Face not only leads to a politically charged architecture of the community, but also unravels the supposed autonomy of the profession. Both parties in the collaboration need to learn from each other; the potential user brings to the table matters of everyday life which are ignored in traditional architectural discourse. However, the acceptance of the everyday is not seen as a collapse of the lofty ideals of the profession but as the opening up to a productive realm in which both architect and user enact reciprocal transactions between the simple realities and the highest dreams. It is a movement which avoids the middle ground of muddy compromise, but occupies what Gillian Rose calls the Broken Middle - a place where users and architects alike ‘confront themselves and each other as particular and as universal (and which) yields the dynamics always at stake in any comprehension of diremption - the articulation and reconfiguration of activity and passivity, norm and cognition, morality and heteronomy.’³¹ As we have seen, Rose uses community architecture as a key example of a false ‘holy’ middle - a place where the tensions inherent in any community are patched over in an ineffective attempt to create an idealised condition

30 See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 20 and Jeremy Till, “Architecture in Space, Time,” ed. Claire Melhuish (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 9–14. Both arguments follow Henri Lefebvre.

31 Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 303.

between individual and state. By going to the furthest shores of community architecture, I have attempted to illustrate this failed promise which denies the user an empowering and empowered role. My alternative occupies the less defined place of the broken middle in which both architects and users relinquish the impossible purity of their communities and open up to a critical engagement with the forces beyond. Together they create and recreate architectures of the impure community.

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