

# Making Connections

Opening Panel Discussion,  
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**As an international forum we bring with us different cultural experiences of social change. Coming from a variety of age groups, we also bring a diverse historical perspective. Our priorities and concerns may appear to derive from unconnected sources loosely bonded together by a shared examination of the people/environment relationship. Yet global ecology does not recognise national boundaries or personal differences. It joins us together in our humanity and this is its power.**

Never before has the human race been faced with managing its own ecology. Facing up to this unprecedented challenge is forcing a re-evaluation of the human relationship to the natural world, carrying with it implicitly a message about our relationship to each other.

In a world torn apart by conflict, violence and war, injustice, economic insecurity and the disabling poverty which is experienced by the majority of the world's population, environmental concerns appear irrelevant to some. But the ecological crisis and the human crisis have common roots. They are both fuelled by a notion of power that can be analysed as a dominating force, firstly as human dominance over nature and secondly as the dominance of strong or influential people over weak or powerless people. The latter operate at a personal, institutional and international level. Dominance over nature is linked with the control of scarce natural resources which, being strategic in the economic system of the Western world, leads also to the control and exploitation of people and nations. The link between ecology and human justice is direct and indisputable.

## ARCHITECTURE AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

What is the connection of architecture and architectural research with these comments?

We are living at a time of great uncertainty that carries with it enormous responsibility for future generations. How, as individuals can we live up to this challenge and not be overwhelmed by its complexity or by the contemplation of failure? People the world over are coming together to work towards a socially stable and naturally re-generating world. Architecture, as a mediator between man and nature, is an essential part of this debate and action.

The technical connection between architecture and the ecological crisis is well established. The emission of carbon dioxide from buildings contributes extensively to the greenhouse effect and global warming. Technology has responded to this problem with new materials and processes for the conservation production and storage of energy in buildings. Technical research is extensive and includes investigations into the embodied energy of buildings, the relationship of daylight to energy use, the use of photo voltaics and passive energy storage amongst many other topics. The technical capability of buildings to harness and conserve natural renewable resources and to use existing technologies in an environmentally non-destructive manner is well advanced and built examples incorporating this technology are increasing rapidly. Whilst the task of implementing good practice continues to an exacting one, it is agreed amongst scientists that the impediments to progress are political and social rather than technical.

Architecture is, however, more than technology. By establishing the spatial boundaries in which human life is played out, architecture makes manifest, in built form, the social organisation of a culture and gives us strong messages about its priorities and aspirations. Through the discipline of architecture, cultural patterns and technology are inextricably tied together. However, the cultural component of an ecologically aware architecture is less well understood than the technical aspects, and it is this imbalance that IAPS research can help to illuminate.

## SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Some aspects of social change are directly related to the same ecological crisis to which technology

is responding, and which is giving rise to new priorities in social organisation and motivating innovative actions. An ecologically aware society has as much, if not more, potential for the conservation of resources than technical innovation, a potential which is culturally bound. Social innovation can be encouraged through a spatial ordering of architecture which both anticipates and enables it. Without this understanding, architecture becomes technically dominated at the expense of the architectural possibilities of enriched cultural meaning and social purpose. The two main generators of architectural design in an ecological context — culture and technology — have become disconnected from one another and this dilemma requires urgent examination, which the IAPS research community is well placed to carry out.

It goes without saying, that ecologically benign technology is culturally relevant. The problem arises when it is used in isolation from the examination of human issues in the design process. Innovative technical thinking superimposed onto spatial organisation that, for the most part, is not sensitive to changing social behaviour, produces a muddled architecture, imparting a message of future world on the one hand, but clinging unconsciously to outdated and outworn concepts on the other. Architecture carries symbolic meaning and an architecture that celebrates technology above that of human nourishment cannot ever be a symbol of an era where sustainability, a concept which embraces social regeneration as well as the physical dimensions of the built environment, is in ascendance.

Why has this separation of cultural and technical concerns occurred and what needs to be done in order for a reintegration to occur? A possible reason is the imbalance of information about the ecological crisis that is reaching the architectural profession. The information that is stimulating technical change comes from the scientific community in the form of measurable data to which a specific design response, from those who recognise its importance, can be made. The impact of this information is sometimes enough to lead the enquiring mind into further investigation, which can then start to connect energy conservation with wider issues of resource use which leads to a re-evaluation of priorities in conceptual design.

### **CULTURAL CHANGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS**

Insight into cultural change, however, is not so easily accessible. That we are living in a time of a major cultural shift is well documented. Fuelled originally by new departures in scientific thinking, cultural changes that have been developing since the beginning of this century are gathering momentum as we approach the end of the millennium. Amongst the most significant events that have led to this major change would be the information revolution, world travel (leading to an unprecedented cross fertilisation of cultures), the threat of global annihilation through the presence of nuclear weapons, the determination of women to play an equal part in society, and the scientific triumphs of space travel, (giving rise to an altered cosmological perception). All these developments, which have no precedent in history, have had the effect of stimulating a major change of attitude and human behaviour, and have heralded what has been described as the post-modern era.

Last, but not least, is the ecological crisis, a crisis that poses a particular challenge for the architectural profession. The post-modern debate has raged largely without reference to this particular crisis and has an anthropomorphic focus mostly derived from the concerns of urban society which has remained unaware, until very recently, of the part it plays in ecological destruction, the consequences of which have been visible in rural and wilderness areas for decades. Theoretical work done in the last two decades in architecture has, amongst other things been concerned about the relationship of architecture with human meaning. Strange then that ecology has not figured, for it is surely here that we find a new value or belief system emerging without which meaning in architecture has no foundation. Furthermore, the changes in values heralded by post-modern philosophy are congruent with ecological concerns, and have been accompanied by changes in human behaviour which, when carefully analysed, have spatial implications for architecture which remain unexamined. The preoccupation of the expression of architectural form, sometimes using techniques imported from other disciplines, has largely been untouched by human content. This approach to architecture not only misses a major source of design inspiration but, in not meeting people's real needs, is in danger of becoming irrelevant

### **AN ECOLOGICAL CULTURE**

An "ecological" culture is in its infancy and encompasses not only a revised understanding of the human/nature relationship, but also of human inter-relationship. Although much of this change is now embedded in our everyday reality, there are other developments which remain to a large extent, still hidden or marginalised from the mainstream. The "old" culture, although in a process of

decay, has centuries of history in its favour and is based on values to which the majority of the population of the Western world still ascribes and which architecture still, in the main, serves. The “hidden” agenda is about a profound change of values or belief systems and, unlike scientific data, is not easily measurable and still remains inadequately documented in a form that is relevant and accessible to the architectural profession. This change cannot be met by a simple input of information. It requires assimilation of insights from numerous disciplines, it requires reflection and an intellectual “leap” of understanding. It is this understanding, underpinned by the use of environmentally responsible technology, that will lead to a culturally relevant architecture.

IAPS is in a strong position to build a knowledge base for the creation of an anticipative architecture, which, by facilitating existing patterns of social change, acts as a catalyst for social innovation by providing appropriate architectural “cues”. Systematic research, which identifies and documents changing lifestyles, would allow them to become visible enough for their architectural requirements, both in altered spatial organisation and in the development of new building types. Such research would document the growth of the new world view as manifest by people’s environmental actions and give it credibility. Most importantly, it would culturally inform an environmentally aware architecture that tends to be technically biased. Such an architecture would be sensitive to the physical and emotional needs of people who are undertaking a search for ways of dwelling less destructively on the earth and with each other.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should be reminded that architecture has the potential to carry symbolic meaning. By being sensitive to the site specific requirements of both climate and place, an ecologically aware architecture retains cultural diversity. At the same time, by addressing concerns of a planetary dimension, it is an architecture that can resonate with all cultures and creeds, a fitting objective for the creation of an architecture for the 21st century.