The Architecture of the Home

by Colin Davies

In an essay entitled 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', delivered as a lecture in 1951, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger describes an old farmhouse in the Black Forest:

> [The farmhouse] was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and 'the tree of the dead' - for that is what they call a coffin there: the Totenbaum - and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse.

Heidegger thinks of the farmhouse almost as a natural phenomenon. It was not the peasants that built it but their 'dwelling'. It is an example of what is sometimes called 'vernacular' architecture, a way of building not consciously designed but, like language, handed down by tradition and 'ordered' by the inescapable primary conditions of man's being: the 'fourfold' of earth, heaven, divinities and mortals. For Heidegger, building, dwelling and thinking are, or ought to be, inseparable from being itself. But in the modern, technological world, we have lost touch with the true nature of being. We have forgotten how to 'dwell'. Our relationship to the land, the seasons, even our own

mortality, is increasingly distant. Our labour has become a commodity to be bought and sold; we leave our families and childhood homes in search of work at the best price; we may have friends at work and scattered over the city, but we hardly talk to our neighbours; our food comes not from fields but from supermarkets; central heating and air conditioning shield us from the weather; the stars in the night sky are hidden by the glare of electric light; and our faith in modern medicine makes us forgetful even of death itself. All the world is available to us, but we are nowhere at home. Modernity and homelessness go together.

'Only if we are capable of dwelling,' says Heidegger, 'only then can we build.' You might not wholly agree with this austere proposition (are we all to become peasants again?) but if there is any truth in it, then one thing is clear: the people who design and build dwellings are faced with a tough problem. The conditions for the creation of vernacular architecture no longer exist in the 'developed' world. Architects, by definition, can't do vernacular. Architectural design is always a self-conscious activity. Artifice always intervenes. And yet the idea of a 'natural' kind of building has hovered in the background of architectural thinking ever since 18th century theorists sought the origins of classical architecture in the primitive hut. In the twentieth century, among architects called 'modernist', the striving for naturalness took a new form. The new conditions of modernity were to be faced head on and the dictates of tradition replaced by a rational analysis of the activities to be housed, the site and its climate, and the available materials and building technologies. Form would emerge 'naturally' out of function. This idea is summed up in a famous slogan coined by the great modernist architect, Le Corbusier: 'A house,' he said, 'is a machine for living in.' Well, it was only a slogan, a piece of propaganda for the modernist cause, and if we look at the houses designed by Le Corbusier in the 1920s and 30s - the Villa Savoye in Poissy or the Villa Stein-de Monzie in Garches, for example - it is immediately clear that they are much more than just functional structures. The white walls, flowing spaces, roof gardens, internal ramps and ribbon windows are

composed like objects in a painting. These houses are works of art, not machines.

But the functional ideal was influential nevertheless, and has remained so to the present day. While Le Corbusier was designing one-off villas for wealthy clients, Ernst May, the city architect of Frankfurt, was designing the first modernist mass housing schemes. Again, the conditions of modernity, in particular industrial production, were welcomed as the basis of a new architecture. Even the everyday activities that would take place in these houses and flats were treated as if they were industrial processes. 'Existenzminimum' - the efficient provision of the minimum requirements for daily life - was the Frankfurt slogan. A woman architect in May's office, Grete Schütte-Lihotzky, designed a standard kitchen with sink, cooker, worktops, cupboards and shelves all arranged like pieces of laboratory equipment for the preparation of meals with minimum effort and maximum speed. This was the origin of the 'built-in' kitchen that we take for granted today. The typical new Frankfurt Siedlung, or housing estate, consisted of four-storey, flat roofed, box-like blocks of flats, arranged on the site in parallel straight rows, spaced and oriented for optimum daylight and sunshine. There were no concessions either to the existing physical context or to any architectural tradition. It was an abstract design for general application rather than a specific response to a particular place or a particular way of life.

Le Corbusier also designed mass housing schemes in the 1920s, though mostly as theoretical projects rather than actual building proposals. In 1922 he designed a whole city for three million people in the modernist manner. Called the Ville Contemporaine, the project is in a sense a fiction, an unattainable utopian ideal, but it is nevertheless worked out in great detail. Here, functional design takes the form of 'zoning', with different areas of the city designated for different activities and different classes of citizen. A central business district, consisting of 24 sixty storey skyscrapers, is surrounded by luxury apartment blocks for a professional and administrative elite. Further

out are the estates for the workers, and on the edge of town, the industrial zone. The whole city is planned on a strict orthogonal grid.

The Ville Contemporaine is a machine for three million people to live in. It is like a diagram illustrating the fragmentation of experience that is characteristic of modern life, a life separated into different activities - sleeping, eating, playing, socialising, learning, working - each with a zone designed specially for it. It has another curious feature too, one that it shares with all utopian visions: it is timeless. The perfect grid of its plan and the details of its dwellings, down to the last kitchen cupboard, have been designed from scratch to meet quantifiable needs. All is invention; tradition has no role to play. And being perfect, the city is unalterable. It is therefore cut off from both past and future. It is a city without memory and without hope. The natural rhythms of human life, far from being embodied in building, are cancelled out and silenced. As a place in which to 'dwell', the Ville Contemporaine stands at the furthest extreme from Heidegger's Black Forest farmhouse.

The world in which we dwell is not timeless. One of the special things about buildings and cities is that they endure, sometimes for generations. They are all, to some extent, 'monumental', not in the sense of grand or imposing, like a temple or a town hall, but in the sense that they gather around them memories and associations that become part of our private and collective mental life. The word 'monumental' comes from the Latin monere, to remind. Buildings remind us of the past, our own personal history and the history of the society we live in. We live with them through time and we become attached to them. Sometimes we choose to preserve buildings even though the original function for which they were designed has become obsolete. Bedford Square in London was built in the 18th century to house wealthy families and their servants. No-one lives in Bedford Square now. The tall terraced houses are occupied by offices, professional institutions and even a school of architecture. But the square looks much the same as it always has.

We are willing to live with it and accommodate our lives to it. It seems almost to have a life of its own. The city can be seen as a quasi-natural environment, its streets, squares and landmarks like rivers, forests and hills. We can dam the rivers, raze the forests and level the hills, but not without a sense of loss because we are destroying our own past, a past that restricts, but also nourishes our lives.

The idea of monumentality in this sense is alien to the idea of functional design. Functional design assumes that we have certain needs that can be ascertained, described and quantified, and then satisfied by specialised artefacts. It ignores the fact that those artefacts - the houses we live in, for example - are part of our lives and have their own social, psychological and spiritual value. Heidegger, in another essay from the 1950s entitled 'The Thing', distinguishes between artefacts that are merely 'objects' and those to which the more ancient word 'thing' can be applied. A thing is an artefact that embodies or 'gathers' the 'fourfold' - the fundamental conditions of dwelling. Things are not designed but handed down by tradition. They are so much a part of our lives that we never think of changing them. For example, the Frankfurt kitchen is a designed artefact, but inside its neat cupboards are things like plates, bowls, jugs, teapots, bottles, knives, forks and spoons. Of course the individual plates, bowls and jugs may well have been designed, perhaps by famous designers, but as types of object they are things. They are part of a tradition of food preparation, serving and eating that is built into the culture. Though man-made, they seem almost natural. They are what connect us to the world we live in. A house, as a type of object, is a thing.

It may seem that this distinction between things and objects, farmhouses and blocks of flats, is the key to the problem of the house and the home. Perhaps it explains why, for example, tower block estates in Liverpool, Glasgow or London degenerated into wastelands. The design of these estates in the 1950s and '60s, was profoundly influenced by Le Corbusier's visionary projects of thirty years earlier. They were the Ville Contemporaine made real,

and they didn't work. According to anti-modernists, they didn't work because they were designed objects which took no account of dwelling in the full sense. The language their designers used to describe them betrayed their abstract, inhuman nature. Traditional things like houses, gardens and streets were abolished. Instead we had 'residential units', 'activity areas' and 'access decks'. Walls became 'cladding', windows became 'fenestration' and stairs became 'vertical circulation'. It was the language of the technocrat, not the builder of homes.

When, in 1968, a gas explosion caused the partial collapse of a tower block called Ronan Point in east London, all the doubts about high rise housing were focused and public opinion, even in the architectural profession, turned against the modernist vision. There followed a period in which the providers of mass housing tried to have it both ways - the (largely theoretical) economies of high living densities without the perceived disadvantages of the tower block form. 'High density, low rise' was the new slogan, and council housing estates like Marquess Road in Islington were designed with ingenious complexity to satisfy a revised set of functional requirements for urban living. But they didn't work either, and before long the cry went up for a return to traditional English housing forms: ordinary two storey houses with ordinary gardens laid out along ordinary streets. The sociologist Alice Coleman wrote an influential book entitled Utopia on Trial in which she laid the blame for the failure of mass housing squarely on the shoulders of the architects. All that was necessary, she implied, was to re-introduce traditional forms and all the social problems of rising crime rates, disintegrating families and a degraded physical environment would begin to recede.

The example of the private sector seemed to support this argument. People who can afford to buy their own homes usually choose the traditional form. The so-called 'volume' house-builders provide cottage-like dwellings, brick-built (or at least brick-faced) with pitched roofs, small private gardens and traditional decorative features - a Georgian-style front door, a bow window,

an imitation chimney. With their hidden timber frames, plastic windows, steel lintols, concrete tiles and glass fibre insulation, they are far from traditional in their construction, and inside, the little cluster of boxy rooms is essentially no different from a supposedly 'functional' council flat. But the traditional image is an important marketing feature. It is not just space and shelter that is being sold, but the image of a home. In London suburbs buyers are willing to pay more for a flat in a converted Victorian or Edwardian family house than one in a modern purpose-built block, even though the latter may be more spacious, more conveniently planned and have better sound insulation. 'Period features' figure prominently in estate agents' descriptions and add thousands to the price.

But is image alone enough to guarantee homeliness? Is the image of domesticity an essential precondition for 'dwelling'? So called 'post-modernist' architects of the 1980s seemed to think it was. Drawing an analogy between architecture and language, they insisted that buildings should not be abstract, but figurative, conveying meaning through traditional signs that everyone could recognise. A classical portico said 'front door', a stone wall said 'permanence and security', a sloping roof with dormer windows said 'home'. But we don't necessarily read the signs in the way the architects intended. We can see that the portico is made of plastic, that the stone wall is just a false facade, and this knowledge alters our perception. This is not an authentic building tradition, deeply embedded in a particular place and a particular way of life, it is only a stage set. In the same period of disillusionment with modernism, architects like Quinlan Terry and Leon Krier, advisor to the Prince of Wales and planner of his Poundbury housing estate in Dorchester, thought that authenticity could be recovered by reviving traditional building crafts. Where the volume builders were willing to take advantage of cheap, mass produced components and fake the traditional features, Terry and Krier insisted that the stone walls should be stone through and through, the window frames should be wood, not plastic, the tiles clay, not concrete. But this seems at best a quixotic attempt to

overthrow modernity. The mostly well-off residents of Poundbury dispel the pre-industrial illusion every time they emerge from their oak-framed porches into the picturesque streets to get into their well designed cars and drive to the local supermarket.

Meanwhile, in the tougher world of public housing, now that hostility to the modernist housing estates has somewhat abated and the noise of dynamited tower blocks has died down, it has become clear that Alice Coleman was wrong. Some of the most socially stressed and dangerous estates in the country are superficially indistinguishable from peaceful, well maintained housing, both owner-occupied and rented, in better-off suburbs. We are forced to conclude that it is poverty and unemployment that cause communities to deteriorate, not architecture. And a curious thing is happening to those hated tower blocks. They are becoming fashionable places in which to live. Trellick Tower in Notting Hill, designed by the émigré Hungarian architect Erno Goldfinger (the inspiration, it is said, for James Bond's famous adversary) was until recently almost universally condemned as the epitome of brutal sixties architecture. But since the government of Margaret Thatcher encouraged the privatisation of council housing under the guise of 'the tenant's right to buy', Trellick Tower has been infiltrated by young professional couples and their children, not all of them with architectural connections. And the trendy tower block phenomenon is growing, encouraged by 'lifestyle' features in Sunday supplements and on television.

The presumed causal connection between housing form and social problems has turned out to be a fallacy. This shouldn't surprise us. We have already seen how houses in Bedford Square were adapted without much difficulty to very different functions, and the process also works in reverse. It is possible to live comfortably in all sorts of buildings originally designed for other purposes. Barns, windmills, water towers, pill boxes, office buildings, even railway carriages - all can be converted into satisfactory dwellings. Those progressive professional couples who have not managed to find a flat in a

sixties tower block are probably living happily in 'lofts' carved out of old factories.

If we accept the conclusion that the link between dwelling and architecture is not deterministic but loose and changeable then we must re-examine the crude 'traditional good, modernist bad' dichotomy. Looking again at the history and ideology of modernism we find that its original intentions were not really as cold and calculating as we thought. Once again, Le Corbusier is a good example. He was painter as well as an architect. In the 1920s he painted in the morning, and designed buildings in the afternoon. His paintings are called Purist. They are modern, but not abstract. Most are still lives depicting humble everyday objects - a wine bottle, a pile of plates, a smoking pipe, a guitar - that Le Corbusier called objêts types. In Heiddegger's terms they are 'things', not designed, but handed down by tradition, the things that connect our minds and bodies to the world, the things with which we dwell. When Le Corbusier designed villas for wealthy clients, he composed them in the same way that he composed his paintings. He was trying to make houses as things. He wanted to reconcile tradition and modernity, not set them in opposition.

Despite the uncompromising functionalism of the Ville Contemporaine, for Le Corbusier dwelling remained a spiritual concept, and in his later, post-war architecture, the spiritual dimension became even stronger. His famous Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles of 1951 is a gigantic block of flats but is very far from being merely a machine for living in. It was designed according to a complicated proportional system that related every part to the scale of the human body. Most of its apartments have double-height living rooms with generous balconies. There is an internal shopping 'street' half way up, and a running track and paddling pool on the roof. The Unité, as its name suggests, aims to unify daily life, not fragment it. It is an attempt to re-invent 'dwelling' for the new conditions of the industrial city.

Even the Ville Contemporaine is seen in a different light if we place it in the long tradition of 'new towns'. We tend to associate grid-iron plans with modern cities like New York or Chicago. Most Europeans prefer medieval cities whose narrow, winding streets are the result of a gradual adaptation over centuries to the comings and goings of daily life and the scale of the human figure. But in fact the grid iron plan is as old as architecture itself. The medieval bastides towns of southern France, like Aigues Mortes in the Camargue; the Roman military settlements which lie just under the surface of cities like Florence or London; the Mediterranean Greek colonies of the fifth century BC; the camps that housed the workmen that built the pyramids of Egypt: all had grid-iron street plans. There is nothing exclusively modernist about this abstract method of dividing up space for dwelling.

So it seems that modernism bears no more blame for the problem of house and home than any other kind of architecture. And, for all its arrogance and dreamy idealism, it at least it had the virtue of sincerity. It refused either to reject the modern world and retreat into a fantasy, or to buy into it cynically and abandon the city to the dictates of the market. But in the end, the attempt to found a new tradition and a new vernacular, failed. Like every other material aspect of modern life, housing has become a commodity, not just in the sense that a house can be a sound financial investment, but in the sense that different housing forms and different images of dwelling are like currencies, the values of which fluctuate as they go in and out of fashion. If authentic dwelling, in the Heideggerian sense, has disappeared from the modern world, then it is not the fault of architects and planners. By the same token, neither is it possible for architects and planners to restore dwelling to the world. That would be a project of a quite different kind.