# To Hell with Architecture: An Architecture of Anarchism

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# ABSTRACT:

The commodification of art is just as in evidence in the 'art' of architecture. Architecture is perhaps the most obviously commodified and the most essential to western capitalism of all the arts. Is architecture an art? Can it ever be de-commodified? I will argue that mass housing is a key example of the commodification of culture in architecture, also however that the self-build form of housing is a potential example of architecture breaking away from this commodification. A return to what N. John Habraken¹ called, in an echo of Read, the natural relationship. This form of architecture and the historic example of The Architects' Revolutionary Council, as a rebellion from within the profession, will form the basis of my argument.

Keywords: architecture, radicalism, mass-housing, self-build, housing, commodification, cooperatives, anarcho-syndicalism

Famously referred to by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright as the 'mother art', it can be argued that architecture is the basis of our civilisations, or as Wright continued its soul: 'Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization'. Architecture stands alongside the production of artists as a key element of a society's culture. Like valued art, valued architecture is preserved, glorified and held up as an example of the cultural achievement of a civilisation. Architecture is also a manifestation of society's politics and, as Bill Risebero explores, the hegemony of a culture:

'Architecture, like all other elements of the social superstructure, rests on our society's economic base, that is the capitalist mode of production, which determines its essential nature. [...]

Conversely, politics depend on culture. What Antonio Gramsci calls 'hegemony', that is, the ability of a bourgeois-democratic state like that of Britain to obtain and exercise power, depends not only on the coercive machinery of state itself but also on the participation of the people.'2

This participation is the same as that which Foucault describes, the apparatus of the State has taken on a new identity in the modern era it has moved from

being visible to invisible. As Gordana Fontana-Giusti explains in her précis of Foucault:

'This model was now reversed: new disciplinary power imposes compulsory visibility upon those whom it subjects to discipline, while those in power remain invisible.'3

Art and architecture are then both tools of hegemony the latter perhaps more so than the former, as whilst art may attempt to be revolutionary and to ask questions of the *status quo*, architecture is, due to the very nature of its realisation, bound to the hegemony of the social and economic structures in which it is realised. As Risebero goes on to say:

"The ruling ideas of any age", as Marx and Engels have said, "have ever been the ideas of the ruling class". – and these ideas include architectural ones."

It is argued here that the commodification of art, is just as evident, if not more so, in the "art" of architecture. Architecture is perhaps the most obviously commodified and most essential to western capitalism of all the arts. Specifically, I will look at architecture through the lens of housing as a form of architecture to which Herbert Read refers in his essay 'To Hell With Culture' (1941) and a key area in which the rampant monetisation of the art of architecture is made visible. In reference to Read's essay, key questions to be addressed here include: is architecture as we experience it today an art? And can it ever be de-commodified? In the course of this article I will therefore set up for the reader the relationship between art and architecture as I see it in relation to Read argument re: the commodification of culture. Beginning with short introduction to the context and history architecture's relationship to capitalism. I will then go on to present self-build and co-operative housing practices as alternatives to the commodity-driven production of buildings and take a look at a few key historical examples of these practices.

### Art and Architecture

But is architecture art? And if so has it been commodified in the same way as Read argues in this essay art has? I would answer that depends in both cases. It depends in part on what kind of architecture we are referring to. To illustrate the first point in relation to Modernist or functionalist I invoke Read himself:

'If an object is made of appropriate materials to an appropriate design and perfectly fulfils its function, then we need not worry any more about its aesthetic value: it is automatically a work of art. Fitness for function is the modern definition of the eternal quality we call beauty, and this fitness for function is the inevitable result of an economy directed to use not to profit.'5

Whilst Frank Lloyd Wright defined the artist architect thus:

'This is what it means to be an artist – to seize this essence brooding everywhere in everything, just behind aspect.'6

Read gives the example of a chair in his essay but the analogy can be extended to buildings or entire towns in that all are conceived, design and manufactured under capitalism. The same concerns about quality and use of materials pertain, as do the experiences of consumers/homeowners and their relationship to these products. As N. John Habraken explored in his 1972 book *Supports: An alternative to mass housing*:.

"...[Mass Housing] reduces the dwelling to a consumer article and the dweller to a consumer. For only in this way can it be expected that the consumer waits until he is offered a complete product. It need not surprise us if this approach proves wrong because individual human action forms part of the housing brief."

Therefore, by Read's definition the work of Modernist architects such as the famed Le Corbusier, or Alison & Peter Smithson, or Chamberlin, Powell & Bon can be classed as art. This architecture is often decried as ugly or cold and perhaps betrays Read's call for us not to '...worry any more about its aesthetic value' perhaps because pure Modernist architecture in particular is considered by many to have no such value. As a purely functional, yet I would argue beautiful, way of building buildings it is perhaps the closest architecture that comes to Read's conception of a work of art.

The fate, however, of the Modernist project in architecture was that it failed due to the fact that the civilisation needed for its success was not ushered in by the revolutions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Instead capitalism took root. Bill Risebero places this in an architectural context for us when he says:

'Under capitalism - eastern or western - modernism is incapable of living up to its promise. A movement which comes to express only alienation, or actively oppose the society in which it exists, or to express social alternatives, cannot fully develop until that society is superseded. Any form of modernism that exists under capitalism is

inevitably flawed: constrained by the logic of the capitalist mode of production and compromised by bourgeois ideology.'8

The modernist project in architecture floundered on these rocks and, as a result, was reinvented as a key part of post-modern project. Culture, and specifically architecture for experience, has therefore become an essential part of the contemporary forms of architecture. Art and architecture have become intertwined in the contemporary period and we often experience them together. This coupling is sold to us as part of the experience of the museum or gallery visits. One only has to consider Herzog and De Meuron's Tate Modern / Bankside, or Rogers and Piano's Pompidou Centre to see the virtually symbiotic relationship between art and architecture. As Hans Ibelings explains, this happens not just when we are on holiday, or just at tourist attractions:

"...tourism has spawned a mind-set whereby buildings, cities and landscapes are consumed in a touristic manner even when people are not on holiday, and the environment, consciously or unconsciously, is increasingly regarded as a décor for the consumption of experiences."

The value placed on buildings may, in some cases, be more tangible but can also be just as conceptual as with art. Frank Lloyd Wright had the following paraphrasing of a pronouncement from Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu carved above the fireplace of his *Taliesin West* home and studio in Scottsdale, Arizona:

'The reality of the building does not consist in four walls and the roof but in the space within to be lived in.'  $^{\rm 10}$ 

Thus if a building is not valued for its physical properties, its materiality or its use value, it can only be valued for the experience it enables, as Lao Tzu suggests, or for the opportunity to consume within its confines.

Architecture, more generally, has become so much a part of the capitalist establishment that the arrival of the neo-liberal agenda had little notable impact on architecture. I make this claim in spite of, or perhaps because of, recent semi-delusional claims from within the architecture profession that this is a recent advent. In his article 'Architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its social mission' Reinier De Graaf (of architect practice OMA) seems astonished that the development of a capitalist

architecture is linked so inextricably to economic and social development over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Architecture (with a capital 'A') had already 'sold its soul to the devil' and Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, New York (1958) could be taken to mark the point that European Modernism became the "Architecture of capitalism" 12. The glass curtain-walled architecture of the Seagram Building became the modus operandi for capitalist architecture by the 1970s with the completion of the New York World Trade Center [sic] "twin towers" by Minoru Yamasaki in 1973. Their targeting and destruction in 2001 as symbols of US power demonstrates on an architectural level the degree to which this form of architecture has become symbolic of US cultural imperialism and Western capitalism more generally.

# The Mass Housing Project

It was in housing that something of a seachange occurred after 1980 in the UK. The post-war social project of providing decent publically-owned housing for all, not just the working classes, that had begun to be eroded by the Labour administrations of Wilson and Callaghan, was dealt a crippling blow by the 1977 Housing Act and the knock-out punch by the 1980 Act that introduced 'Right to Buy'. Housing then began its inexorable slide into a commodity to be traded and to be used to create wealth for the group of people who owned it or would come to own in the 1980s. This is not to say that houses had not been a commodity before the 1970s, they clearly had, but the 'Right to Buy' generation made the failure of the project of *social housing* all the more acute due to the fetishism thereby associated with the ownership of property.

I will argue that housing has become a key example of the commoditisation of the 'art of architecture'. Housing, as opposed to just houses, has since Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' (Housing Act 1980<sup>13</sup>) become an integral part of the UK - and indeed Western - economies in general. The "sub-prime mortgage" collapse in the US precipitated the global financial crisis of 2007. A similar such collapse occurred in Ireland and Spain prompting economic calamity in these countries. The UK is believed to be only one interest rate hike away from a property market "re-set".

It is possible to argue that contemporary housing does not represent a form of cultural production, or not in the way that Read uses the term. Read's definition of "cultural production" as the subjective market value of property has become realised to such a degree that houses are now valued above and beyond their functionality, their reliability or sustainability. However, I see the current condition of housing architecture to be a consequence of the development of housing from a social project into an element of commodity fetishism. The subjective market value of property has become realised to such a degree that houses are now valued above and beyond their functionality, or their reliability or sustainability. Their value is now determined by the price it is possible to sell them for and the market determines this, as do the locations and the people involved in their sale. It is, therefore, the case that whilst architecture awards were doled out to public housing by the sackful in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, now the architecture profession and the architectural press roundly ignores the vast majority of private housing (unless we are speaking of expensive villas constructed by architects of note for private individuals).

However, in *Housing: An anarchist approach* (1983), Colin Ward highlights that during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century most architects were uninterested in housing. Citing the Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) Leverhulme sponsored survey of April 1962; *The Architect and his Office: a survey of organisation, staffing, quality of service and productivity, presented to the Council of the Royal Institute*<sup>14</sup>, Ward sets out the problems with architects rejection of the home as an article of architectural worth:

'What about the ordinary small private house, the field of building where standards are lowest and the architects' influence felt least? "Small jobs don't pay" and consequently few large or successful architectural firms will undertake them. The survey team regret, since the design of individual homes is frequently the only form of direct contact between the public and the profession.'

The issue, as identified by the survey team in 1962, is still of merit today. The one point that the survey team do not highlight is, of course, the issue of wealth. It is now and was then only the notably wealthy who can afford to act as a client and employ an architect to build their individual home; therefore, regardless of the involvement of architects in housing architecture this was still an element of their service restricted to wealthy elite. The majority of those

"being housed" in 1962 would have been housed by the State in one form or another. Today it is via the volume house builder, the TaylorWimpy or Barratt Homes of this world; nevertheless, the outcome is the same, namely a product devoid of the artistic expression spoken of by Frank Lloyd Wright. When housing is produced by volume house-builders it may be considered as nothing more than an object, and badly produced one at that. The chair analogy that Read uses in *To Hell with Culture* will suffice here for the description of the volume house builder's product:

"...the capitalist must progressively lower the quality of the materials he is using: he must use cheap wood and little of it, cheap springs, cheap upholstery. He must evolve a design that is cheap to produce and easy to sell, which means that he must disguise his cheap materials with veneer and varnish and other shams... Such is production for profit."

So, has architecture in this field stopped being an art? Yes and no. Where housing architecture is actually produced for specific clients and sites or in similar circumstances by co-operative groups or self-builders then yes, much housing architecture may qualify as an art as defined by Read quoted above:

'If an object is made of appropriate materials to an appropriate design and perfectly fulfils its function, then we need not worry any more about its aesthetic value: it is automatically a work of art.'17

# Self-Build and Co-operatives

Alternatives to the conventional master-planned mass housing estates and speculator built homes have always been available. Co-ops, along with the long established shanty towns that surround many third world cities, demonstrate that if they have the wherewithal, people are more than capable of housing themselves with no assistance from the state. Shantytowns are considered by much of society as a blot on the landscape and many governments resolved to clear them. They quickly realised that these towns, independent of the state, could maintain themselves to a degree without the services and State structures that maintain the central city. They also provided cheap readily available labour for the cities, which they surrounded. But with outside funding (from the UK amongst others) these unplanned settlements, as the UN calls them, have flourished.

This seems to demonstrate that people are capable of housing themselves as well if not better than the state can house them. So is our belief in mass housing completely misplaced? Should we leave it up to the individual? But there are those whose ideals come somewhere close to this. In 1972 Dutch architect N. John Habraken wrote a stinging criticism of mass housing, *Supports: An alternative to Mass Housing* (1972) in which he remarked,

'Mass Housing reduces the dwelling to a consumer article and the dweller to a consumer. For only in this way can it be expected that the consumer waits until he is offered a completed product. It need not surprise us if this approach proves wrong because individual human action forms part of the housing brief.' 18

This proved to be an accurate assessment of what was to happen to Britain's housing landscape. The exclusion and total disregard for the occupiers of housing has been the downfall of many a mass housing scheme.

As Habraken says, too timidly for my liking, 'human action forms part of the housing brief'. This 'human action' is a major and fundamental part of the housing brief, how on earth we can have built housing without considering this is almost incomprehensible.

Mass housing was, at the time, the only solution to the enormous programme of housing and re-housing that was required in the post-war years. Self-help, self-builds and co-ops were not considered a feasible solution. Also, certain housing legislation it made extremely difficult to construct them anyway. Local authorities had the monopoly on housing and wanted to keep it that way. The early housing pioneers had suggested co-operatives as a method of housing people in 1885. Housing pioneers such as Raymond Unwin, whose famous Tudor Walters report laid the foundations for the local authority landlordism system, were a strong advocate of housing co-ops. Unwin only saw local authority landlordism as a short term emergency solution at the turn of the last century not the all encompassing monolith of local government it was to become.

Further, the who felt they were discriminated against by society, or came from societies where the governments could not be relied upon, began what could

be termed 'self-help' groups. It was found by the 1965 Milner Holland Report<sup>19</sup> that British Asian communities set up housing funds; members would pay to join, then take a loan from the fund and pay back in instalments, with no interest, until the entire amount of their loan was paid off. West African communities also set up similar funds but on a smaller scale. So one can see even in a climate with local authority land lordship in the ascendancy, people bucked the trend and went it alone, either through choice or necessity.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of individuals working alone or in small self-build co-ops has become a viable form of tenure because of the failure of the free market and the state by the early 1980s as explored by Michael Fleetwood in 1982.

"...the failure of the free market has made the growth of the State inevitable. But where do we go now the state has failed?" <sup>21</sup>

'The argument for housing co-operatives is that it is a mode of tenure which changes the situation from one of dependence to one of independence, that it is one which, as the veteran co-operative advocate Harold Campbell put it years ago, "combines private enterprise and mutual aid in a unique form of social ownership which puts at a premium personal responsibility and individual initiative".' <sup>22</sup>

The change in 'the situation from one of dependence to independence' is a fundamental step toward Habraken's philosophy against mass housing. The occupant has changed from consumer back to dweller, and has an active part in their home's construction. The public's distrust of social housing and dislike of speculative housing has the potential to make self-build a popular alternative.

## The art of architecture, not by architects

The self-builder serves, historically, as an example of "other ways of doing architecture"<sup>23</sup> that has thrived despite the lack of co-operation on the part of the architectural professionals to hand over their knowledge to aid these renegades. As Ward sets out:

'(...we will never develop a new vernacular of decent building if we insist that every last structure has got to be blessed by the magic of the architect. Shouldn't they share whatever wisdom they have, to enable people to house themselves?)' <sup>24</sup>

This form of housing architecture is one example of where the architect - and, more importantly, the architectural profession and establishment - has been excluded from building for the first time since the industrial age.

Prior to the industrial age, architects as we conceive of them today did not, in fact, exist. As Read explains: '...the Middle Ages, is rivalled only by the Greek Age; but, oddly enough, it too was not conscious of its culture. Its architects were foremen builders, its sculptors were masons...' <sup>25</sup> As such, architects were skilled craftsmen not a rarefied stratum of society, an over-educated and culturally-elevated professional. The skill of the craftsman still exists in architecture but often now as an element of a lengthy and anonymised process. This is sometimes at an extreme, as in the example of the volume housebuilder, where the skilled craftsman is utterly divorced from the totality of the work of art (gesamtkunstwerk) and the end user as to make their presence meaningless.

The master craftsman role does manifest in the example of the self-builders building their own homes. Be that as a group of autonomous individuals in a co-operative or a single individual employing craftsmen to build for them. The self-builder has returned to what N. John Habraken called, in an echo of Read, the 'natural relationship'. The natural relationship is at its most pure in the expression of individuality: 'It [the natural relationship] all started at a primitive stage when this relationship expressed itself directly in the action of man who by himself, without any help, built his protective environment'<sup>26</sup>. Clearly, many degrees of separation now exist between the occupant and this direct expression of the 'natural relationship' in mass housing. It was the mass housing process that Habraken was railing against in 1967. The self-build thesis, therefore, presents an opportunity for the natural balance to be restored.

### Nature or nurture?

It is necessary here to deal with this term 'natural' or 'nature' as Read and Habraken use it. Read states:

'If we follow this natural order in all the ways of our life, we shall not need to talk about culture. We shall have it without being conscious of it. But how are we to attain this natural order of things, which is my particular concern in this essay?

Obviously, we can't make things naturally in unnatural surroundings. We can't do things properly unless we are properly fed and properly housed. [...]

In other words, before we can make things naturally, we must establish the natural order in society, which for my present purposes I assume is what we will mean by democracy.'27

By democracy Read evidently means anarcho-syndicalism, as Rudolph Rocker states.

'Anarcho-syndicalists are convinced that a Socialist economic order cannot be created by the decrees and statutes of a government, but only by the solidaric collaboration of the workers with hand and brain...' 28

Therefore in such a society the model of the self-builder as individual, or more likely autonomous individuals in a co-operative, '...solidaric collaboration of the workers...' serves as a typeset for the future of housing and house building.

The professionalisation of architecture, the commoditisation of it as a form of cultural expression, as Read defines it, has created such a gulf between itself, its products and the rest of society that said gulf seems almost unbridgeable. Read argues this is, in fact, two-way and this is a problem Habraken identifies too. It is not just the artists/architect that is withholding all power but the unwillingness of the populous to engage with 'culture'. As Read writes:

'The more I consider people, the more clearly I begin to perceive that though there may be a minority who have been hopelessly brutalized by their environment and upbringing, the great majority are not insensitive, but indifferent. They have sensibility, but the thing we call culture does not stir them. Architecture and sculpture, painting and poetry, are not immediate concerns of their lives.'<sup>29</sup>

In order to break the stranglehold of the volume housebuilder and the housing market, and thereby the commoditisation of the "art of architecture" we (by which I refer to those of us outside of the professions of architecture) must entirely reinvent the architecture of housing. This does not necessarily constitute a reversion to hand building techniques, however, but the process must be made again an immediate concern to the lives of all. Machinery and modern building techniques can be and would need to be employed in order to build for the rapidly increasing human population. As Read states:

'...there is no need to become primitive in order to secure the essentials of democratic liberty. We want to retain all our scientific and industrial triumphs – [...] We do not propose to revert to the economy of the handloom and the plough...'30

It does, however, necessitate the deconstruction of the architectural professions and the social stratum that they occupy.

# 'Alternative dwelling practices'

Thus, I advocate radical architecture processes, methods and motivations to provide an overall methodology for creating alternative dwelling practices in English urban areas. The concept of 'alternative dwelling practices' only gains meaning when we think of it in relation to the mass housing archetype. It is difficult to conceive of the multifarious ways in which the English peoples have built and housed themselves as 'alternative' unless we have a predominant model from which to dissent. That predominant model, i.e. mass housing is all-pervasive and has consequently all but come to mean 'housing' without the need of the word 'mass'. In this context, 'mass housing' is, as defined by Habraken, the industrial method of housing that arose with the mass expansion of the cities of modern England, and continues in our post-industrial age.<sup>31</sup>

That is not to say that we do not have a rich history of people, by-and-large working people, housing themselves by various non-massed methods. The oft-repeated legend of the right of a man to ownership of a dwelling if he could construct said dwelling on common land in a night gives us some suggestion of this. <sup>32</sup> The methods by which peoples housed themselves before industrialisation are, I will argue in the following, key to developing a means of re-engaging the dweller or occupant in the process of 'doing architecture'.

The consequences of industrialisation and the development of mass housing methodology, and more significantly housing market, have overridden all other forms of building. <sup>33</sup> Supported by the tangled web of regulation, legislation, planning committees, local representative democracy and economic imperatives; mass housing and the mass housing market have become firmly entrenched in the housing landscape as the 'normal' way of creating and possessing a home.

# The architect as revolutionary

The existent narrative of housing design and architecture is based on this dominant model, this way of doing architecture. Therefore, the history of architecture is similarly based on buildings and architects arriving as solutions based on this dominant model.

For this, we also have a model from history at our disposal: *The Architects' Revolutionary Council* (ARC). The ARC formed in 1974 at the Architectural Association, London, and, led by former Greater London Council planner

Brian Anson, set out to destroy the architectural establishment, most pointedly the RIBA. Their disruption of the RIBA 1976 Hull conference and posters asking: "If crime doesn't pay... Where do architects get all their money?" gives us a good sense of the level of animosity held by this group towards the architectural establishment.

The manifesto produced by the ARC in 1975 made a number of key claims for the future of the ARC and, by extension the architectural profession itself. Key amongst these were the calls for members of professions both qualified and students to '...join the new international movement and through solidarity help to bring about the architectural revolution.' The call to solidarity is significant as the ARC was targeting the power structures of architecture - primarily the RIBA, this is evident from earlier sections of the manifesto - rather than individual practitioners of architecture.

Their aim was to destroy the pedestal upon which the RIBA sat, supported by the capitalist mode of production and the moneyed classes. The first paragraph of the manifesto deals with this most explicitly:

'ARC calls on all those architects and others involved in the built environment who believe that we should cease working only for a rich powerful minority or the bureaucratic dictatorship of Central and Local Governments and offer our skills and services to the local communities who have little chance to work directly with architects and architecture.'35

This places the ARC politically less in the revolutionary Marxist or Socialist camps and more in the anarcho-syndicalist camp of temporary syndicates formed for the purposes of solving specific problems or meeting specific needs. Its ultimate aim however always remained the destruction of Architecture as embodied by the RIBA.

The momentum to establish the ARC in 1974 came principally from Brian Anson<sup>36</sup> and the evident frustration he felt from his involvement in the failed campaign to save the working class community of Covent Garden.<sup>37</sup> Covent Garden served, for some involved, as the springboard for the establishment of the ARC.

# I'll Fight You For It, Brian Anson!

Brian Anson's architectural radicalisation was part of the development of a community resistance to the master planned redevelopment in the Covent Garden area of central London between 1971 and 1977. This campaign to prevent the Greater London Council's (GLC) planned scorched earth policy of demolition and rebuild allied the last truly working class community in central London with the middle-class theatre crowd of the area. Needless to say, the two groups had differing aims but an overlapping purpose, to stop the GLC plan. As Anson would put it in his 1981 retelling, *l'Il Fight You For It: Behind the struggle for Covent Garden*, they were; '...united in only one thing – hatred of the brutal redevelopment scheme the Greater London Council was threatening in the area.'<sup>38</sup>

Anson became involved with Covent Garden when he joined the planning team at the GLC in August 1966 and was set to work with five others planning the redevelopment of Covent Garden for the departure of the market. Anson recounts how he: '...began formulating ideas of a concept which I called 'Immediate Environment Improvement' and that... 'The consortium should have fired me there and then because, banal though my own words appear to me now, they contained within them the full spirit of my revolt four years later.'<sup>39</sup>

Anson's revolt was catastrophic for the GLC; he took vast quantities of copied documents and knowledge of the intricacies of the plan with him to the people of Covent Garden. His knowledge was then put to use in the working-class community's campaign to save their area, with the founding of the Covent Garden Community Association (CGCA) in 1971.

Anson's overall conclusion of the working-class campaign to save Covent Garden was that it was a failure. In the post mortem carried out towards the end of his book he states:

'Whether we would have got support for the Community struggle had the theatre fraternity no vested interests in Covent Garden is a debatable point.' 40

However, I would argue that the vested interests here referred to by Anson are the reason people are moved to act, as Tom Clay explored with reference to housing co-operatives in Liverpool. It was vested interests that mobilised the working class community of Covent Garden, as with the residents of Yates Street and Corn Street, Liverpool. What Anson is, in fact, referring to is the ultimate outcome of the campaign. Anson concludes here with further evidence if it were needed that the working-class community was excluded, or had excluded itself due to inaction, from the process.

"...masterly though the Community pamphlet [CGCA publication "Covent Garden - The World is Watching"] was it really gave little comfort to the old working-class community. Instead it showed dramatically what the Community movement had become - a liberal, middle-class, conservation society." <sup>42</sup>

Anson repeatedly infers at the end of his book that he failed to mobilise the working-class of Covent Garden and there is a sense of his guilt over the outcome. Thus, it could be that this went some way to motivating Anson to found the ARC in 1974, the year after the Secretary of State intervened and the GLC scheme was finally destroyed. The physical fabric of Covent Garden had been retained but its working-class community was to be thoroughly killed off by the following ten years of gentrification.

# The post-Covent Garden years

The ARC involved itself in many projects and schemes to frustrate the progress of mainstream corporate architecture in the 1970s in the UK. Brian Anson considered the ARC's involvement with residents of Brigtown (a former mining village, now part of Cannock, Staffordshire) in its successful campaign to defy planners' attempts to demolish the whole area for industrial uses, to be more significant than its 'RIBA-baiting' activities. Quoted by Anne Karpf in 1977 Anson said: "In Bridgetown [sic], we've got closer to the people and it's logical that we spend more time at the grass roots"."

The Bridgtown project was successful in that the Bridgtown Residents Action Group (BRAG) with the assistance of the ARC was able to resist the local authorities' plans for the area. However, this campaign was not without its difficulties in terms of the ARC's relationship with BRAG. Anson in a letter to BRAG expressed his frustration with the apparent success of the divide and rule tactics of the powers that be. Anson also appears to express concern about the lack of radicalism on the part of the residents' group.

The ARC's attempts to reveal to the residents of Bridgtown the inevitable inequality of the planning process biased then, as now, towards money and expertise, was ultimately unsuccessful. As with other projects, the ARC engaged in the local community who had initially called on their help but were not interested in the revolutionary ideals that came with them.

As Read writes: 'Architecture [is] not [an] immediate concerns of their lives.'<sup>44</sup> Yet, when we speak of housing architecture it is the most immediate of concerns. The professions of architecture have become so divorced from our daily experience, as non-architects, that they are seen as divorced from houses. Indeed, this is often a very real separation as much as perceived one. "New build" properties are, in most cases, like the speculative building of Georgian London<sup>45</sup> built by developers and giants of volume house building with next to no involvement from the artist of the architect. Built from "pattern books" and repeated endlessly these mean little houses (the Parker Morris standards<sup>46</sup> were designed to eliminate) appear with minor variations across the country without an architect in sight. As Ward quotes the 1961 Parker Morris report, *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*<sup>47</sup>, as stating:

"The belief that the design of houses is a job that anyone can tackle with success is entirely without foundation – it is one of the most difficult tasks in the whole field of architecture" $^{48}$ 

Whilst the Parker Morris quote seems to deal quite ably with the process of mass house building, which of course was its focus, it is a precarious position to try to maintain when speaking about people building their own homes. As cited earlier, Ward stated immediately after the above quotation from the Parker Morris Report: '(...we will never develop a new vernacular of decent building if we insist that every last structure has got to be blessed by the magic of the architect.' <sup>49</sup>

### The architect as enabler

In some instances, the architect can act as an ally to the 'ordinary people' in subverting the architectural process. Whilst the ARC was constituted of planners, and architecture students, SOLON is an example of the participatory and enabler architect. Standing for SO-uth LO-ndon Housing Association, SOLON operated during the 1970s. In the *Architects' Journal* in 1978, Joanna Clelland details four of the most significant projects carried out by SOLON. Three involved the rehabilitation of existing housing stock for the more commodious use by the existing residents. These were Atherfold Road, Clapham (1975); the Brockley Co-op, Halesworth Road, Lewisham (1977); and the Tally-Ho Co-op of 33 Holden Road, Finchley (1975), confusingly, in

north London. The fourth was the reuse of a disused church on St John's Hill, Battersea; St Paul's Church was redeveloped as a community space. <sup>50</sup>

SOLON emerged in the 1970s and began much of its work after the 'Housing Act (1974)' was passed by Parliament, which provided a greater availability of funding for self-help or cooperative housing groups. SOLON, therefore, seems to be an important development at this point in time and, as such, bears some detailed exploration.

'Solon was set up by a mixed group of professionals, including architects, as a charitable housing association in 1970. For the first three years it was run on worker co-operative collectivist principles. The intention was to bring the various stages of a housing programme into one office, to co-ordinate the purchase of property and land, house conversion and design, the selection of tenants and the management and maintenance of tenanted properties.' <sup>51</sup>

Here, Clelland is describing a remarkable organisation run along anarcho-syndicalist co-operative principles, Rocker's, '...solidaric collaboration of the workers...' again, set up by unspecified 'professionals' for the rehabilitation rather than building of housing. This focus on rehabilitation is more unusual as the essential principle of local authority rehousing in the 1970s was slum clearance and new build.

Additionally, SOLON's approach embraces the process of participation as two-way. Not only are the tenants shareholders in the association - and thus have a say on the running of the association - the architects and other professionals are participating themselves in the process of rebuilding homes. SOLON is significant, however, because of the openly stated desire that the architects - as well as the residents - find the process fulfilling and have greater sense of ownership:

'One of the main motives of architects who work in Solon is that they are able to put their skills directly to the benefit of tenants. As opposed to the normal situation, where the only known client is the funding body, Solon architects are attempting to work according to the direct demands and needs of the users themselves...'<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, it is telling that phrases such as 'greater public accountability' are being used to describe the profession of Architecture. This consideration that Architecture as a professional spectrum has responsibilities and duties to

the recipients of its output is whilst not new part of the professional snobbery around the work of SOLON and other such practitioners.

'It is sad that many architects may discount Solon's attempts. Maybe some of the end products could have been better, but there is no simple correlation between process and end product. The real gains are of a different and maybe more valuable nature in the long struggle to ensure that the profession's skills and the nation's resources are applied to the satisfaction of the essential needs of the community as a whole.' 53

Clelland points out that many of these critical Architects may have fallen into the trap of critiquing the Architecture. This is the judgement of the architectural journalist/critic on what may not in that context even qualify as "Architecture". 54 55 It is not iconic, it is not grandiose; it is domestic, it is simple and it is "honest". It does its job without pretensions to architectural tricks and metaphor; it is housing for people, not the housing of people. Indeed, as Clelland says above: 'The real gains are of a different and maybe more valuable nature...' 56

Here, SOLON are serving as an example of being Architects (with a capital A) involved in the enabling of 'others' to partake in the process of doing Architecture (with a capital A). However, they are distinct in a number of ways: firstly, these individuals are working as housing association rehabilitating existing housing stock in concert with residents. They are enabling 'others' to be involved in the design process to some degree; however, Clelland does not expand on this point so we cannot be certain to what degree. <sup>57</sup> Nevertheless it can be seen that SOLON's modus operandi was to work with communities to develop solutions to spatial and social problems with these communities. As architects the skilled 'professionals' in SOLON would have been trained and educated to take decisions for the people as opposed to surrendering power to the people them and working for them. The architects of SOLON are therefore providing non-architects with their skills and expertise for little of no financial reward and thereby enabling the people to engage in the production of their architectural environments.

Nevertheless, despite SOLON's anarcho-syndicalist organisation and their engagement with residents, they were still in the rarefied position of Architect within this process. It seems that the residents in many cases were required

to communicate with the Architects as a group, as opposed to working with the Architects as equals and individuals. As Clelland lays out in her conclusion, referring to three of SOLON's projects she writes:

'The strength and confidence of tenant/user groups appears to depend on how well organised they are and on the focus of their interest. ...it was the groups whose interest was focused on one common building (LARA, the church; Tally-ho, the house) that managed to co-ordinate best their instructions to the architect. Tenants of Atherfold Road did not have to co-operate with each other in order for their houses to be improved.'  $^{58}$ 

Clelland notes the risks that could befall an Architect-centric process but are avoided with SOLON:

'There is less danger perhaps that architects in Solon will design for themselves, rather than for those people who use their buildings, if there is consistently close contact with local people.' 59

In this process there is a degree of the Architect surrendering some elements of their power to the residents/users of these projects. Yet this is still the Architect in the position of power, determining to whom and to what degree they will give up this power. Clelland appears to allude to this attitude when she makes comments such as:

'Tenants can also be confused by their own choices. If making the right choice depends upon knowledge of what choices are, then architects are inevitably in a better position the users'  $^{60}$ 

This very much depends on the types of choices that are being made and in what context. If the context created is one of the Architectural status quo, as I see to be the case by-and-large with SOLON, then it is unsurprising that Architects can be the only ones to make the 'right choices'. Architecture has created this context and does not involve 'others' in its required decisions. Thus the 'rightness' (or otherwise) of said choices is dependent on the cultural logic of the structures that have been created by Architecture, hence this judgement on the 'rightness' or otherwise of these choices is flawed.

As part of the establishment of Architecture, Clelland is critiquing this process from that vantage point; she is not, therefore, able to break from the cultural logic of the architectural process and the rightness or wrongness of decisions are seen through this lens.

In these projects, the 'other' is clearly characterised as the tenants/users of the buildings, all of which were still occupied or in use at the time of SOLON's involvement. The 'other' in all cases was both client and intended tenant/user. SOLON's work is thus demonstrably more socially engaged than mainstream architecture where the client and tenant/user are distinctly different groups. However, the relationship cultivated by SOLON appears to still be more of an architect/client relationship. To enable a greater degree of involvement of the 'other' in the process, the architect/client relationship would need to be discarded. The Architect would need to work directly with the user as user, not a client dealing with an Architect. I would argue that this approach would better integrate the Architect with the process of how their constructions would be used, as highlighted by Clelland above, and enable the user to become conversant with the decision making process of the Architect. This approach, of course, would constitute a significant transfer of power, in that the Architect would, in effect, be giving up some of the 'secrets of the trade', the ultimate diminution of power for any profession.

In the SOLON example, the 'other' has gained some greater control over the process of Architecture as enabled by the Architects in this scenario. The 'other' has attained the status of client in the Architectural process, but we are still discussing the Architectural process. This is not a true alternative or a radical response to the need to house. The Architect still has control over the process and the 'other' has in effect been co-opted into that process. The truly radical alternative to this outcome would be the dismantling of the Architectural process as conceived by Architecture itself. This would require the dissipating or outright destruction of its power relationships, and a new process created in its place.

## Conclusion

The disassembling and reconstitution of the relationship between the architect or architectural professional and the residents or occupants was the key to the transgressive work of the ARC, SOLON and a number of other movements that emerged at this time and afterwards<sup>61</sup>. These groups also

(by-and large) fit the definitions of 'Radicalism in architecture' as developed by Peter Woolley's and appeared in special edition of the *Architects' Journal* in October 1977.

Woolley claims that a radical architecture will ensure:

- '1. Changed relationship between architectural worker; breaking down employer/employee alienation.
- 2. New sectors of work in which services are available to sections of the population, the actual building users as opposed to corporate clients.
- 3. New participatory techniques to demystify the status of expertise and to help lay people understand architectural problems more fully.
- 4. Commitment to greater public accountability of the profession as a whole.' 62

This is a 38-year-old set of principles that would not go a-miss today in architecture education, theory and practice. The motivation here is not, however, the grandiose ideas of a wholesale Socialist revolution, the overthrow of the Bourgeois State and it's replacement with a Socialist Centralised State. The motivation of 'ordinary' people doing their own architecture without architects, developers or property speculators, and without trying to destroy Architecture. The questions, which are being asked in many circles about architecture's role in society now, about its lack of user focus, its insular professionalism, have been asked before.

So, as Read proclaimed regarding the artist, I say to hell with the architect!

'I have said: To hell with culture; and to this consignment we might add another: To hell with the artists. Art as a separate profession is merely a consequence of culture as a separate entity, in a natural society there will be no precious or privileged being called artists: there will be only workers. [...]

"The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is special kind of artist". '63

That precise argument is the one I would make for Architecture and Architects, as a mode of cultural production, as a form of elitist and privilege. I concede, however, some of these questions and challenges do come from inside the professions, as the architect and theorist Michael Sorkin said in 2013 in New York:

'[We architects] should not renounce our expertise, but use our expertise in order to build socialism.'64

But the drive for these changes must come now from the people, as it did in the 1970s in the UK. Whether we today have an opportunity truly subvert the nature of architecture, to turn it into genuine tool for democratisation of development, of design and of land ownership remains to be seen. But the examples of the ARC give us further evidence that this tradition of alternative building, which is building without architectural professions, is a lot older than Architecture and representative of an entirely different way of building a world.

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