

Strathprints Institutional Repository

Murray, Gordon (2012) *Road back to Damascus*. Architectural Review, may 2012. p. 27.

Strathprints is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/>) and the content of this paper for research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to Strathprints administrator:
<mailto:strathprints@strath.ac.uk>

Your views

Replies to Big Rethink the Future Frontiers series

While The Big Rethink essays and *Future Frontiers* lectures at the RCA are undoubtedly helping to push forward architectural theory, a greater emphasis on practical application of the theory is required.

The key to achieving large scale change in architectural practice must surely lie in incentivising clients to adopt designs based on the AQAL diagram's 'four-quadrant thinking', by demonstrating the functional, aesthetic, moral, and most importantly financial benefits of doing so. This is more difficult than it sounds as generally it is financially disadvantageous to design things better. If architects can be the promoters of four-quadrant thinking as well as being adopters, then it will go a long way to bringing such core changes in attitude to the public.

The public view is a point worth emphasising – no matter how enlightened the architectural world is to the ways of four-quadrant thinking or its equivalents, the public is the group whose perspective on how to live must be altered if a significant social and cultural shift is to be achieved.

I include in the definition of 'public' the property developers, who are the largest single contact between architectural influence and the public conscience, even if neither side realises it. It seems to me though that the importance of property developers has been drastically overlooked by the architectural profession. Mass produced houses have just as much, if not more architectural influence on people as starchitecture does. Without much greater influence of the architectural world on mass market property development, the ideals and principles put forward by Peter Buchanan and other forward thinkers will never enter the public mind.

At the *Future Frontiers* lecture Charles Jencks and Patrik Schumacher exchanged heated views about the necessity and

direction of style. Style should be a visual representation of the values and principles of any given building – a view Mr Schumacher also seems to hold. He is correct in searching for a new style that is relevant in the 21st century; however, I do not believe that Parametricism is quite the best suited style to do this. What the new style should certainly do is instil and encourage the values of four-quadrant thinking. As the face of architecture, style is a vital player in instigating social change, so developing a forward thinking and 'four-quadrant' style must be at the forefront of architectural theory.

Bruce Buckland
Director at Buckland Architecture

I have hugely enjoyed the initial essays in The Big Rethink. The glorious permission these frank articles have been given to nip at the hands that typically feed contemporary architectural journalism suggests that the editors believe a nominally hypothetical tone and green paper stock forgive much. These infectious articles delight in all of their prominent zealous idealism and a rigorous philosophical depth which Generation Y are said to have forgotten. The expectations you raise by your critique place a possibly unattainable demand on your subsequent articles to provide means for a promised alternative. I have desired the integrated architecture you espouse; and the following are some of the challenges I find.

'Pathological polarisation of wealth' (Jan, p75): I am a rich young man, I am the one per cent, even without car or pension, I have clean running water, a tertiary education, a personal computer; I need your future articles to tell me how to live up to, and what to give up to enter, your integral architecture – perhaps illustrated by fewer Oxbridge college projects, and no inordinately expensive private houses or vehicles of corporate and state power. According to the

footprint which you and Michael Sorkin described at the *Future Frontiers* lecture, please illustrate your *Rethink* with the Ghanaian Guatemalan standard of delightful but achievable architecture such as the meeker 99 per cent will inherit.

'Integrating externalities' (Feb, p87): the externalities that I can discount are my competitive edge. As 10p for sustainable carrier bags fails to convince the unwilling and even threatens to fatigue the willing by such a bombardment of religious bullying, your future articles need to cover the cost and demonstrate workable incentives on issues of capital outlay (eg, Rifkin's hydrogen cells, Feb, p97; Mar, p24), rootedness (Feb, p87) and obligation to descendants (Feb, p87). Architects cannot predicate an Integral theory on the limitless charitable beneficence of their client, and, as Kevin Rhowbotham (*Your Views*, March) warns, you risk a tyranny of sentimentality to achieve the 'all joined up' vision (Mar, p25). And yet ... I have seen architects working for the joy alone. I have worked for the joy and it was joyful, but these are too few and far between, the theory you propose needs to quantify a time-scale of urgent adoption commensurate with the doom mongering you are motivated by.

To this end, I also need help with the problem of the selfish human heart, which I remain to be convinced is evolving in any 'huge evolutionary leap' (Feb, p88). As the Villa Savoye is 'self-contained and selfish' (Feb, p83), I too am selfish, I am incorrigible, I do not do the good I want to do, and ultimately I should like to be self-contained, I would like just a little more space, as a buffer between me and the world. The paranoia of the Smithsons (Feb, p86) is a valid reaction to violence and so this selfishness is self-defence against a dangerous world.

By contrast, a world in which 'lonely' (Apr, p78) people could lower their defences and drop their distractions is a beautiful

design, especially given the environmental cost of these wallings-off. You propose that 'We defended ourselves against a meaningless, dead universe ... but once we understand ... the cosmos is alive we will want ... to better embrace ... this ever-evolving being' (Feb, p91). However, not all spirituality is good spirituality, as 'transmoderns' we need to discriminate; if you are suggesting that we could open ourselves to a spiritual reality, you must argue that the living cosmos or Gaia is benign (my own experience of such communities has been marked by fear).

Furthermore, anxiety related to 'rain and harvest' (Mar, p73) persists in drought today and is not really assuaged by the development of a higher spiritual consciousness that would distinguish a 'Pre-Trans Fallacy' (Mar, p71), we are still finite knowers in a volatile world. To coax your readership out of their defences, future essays need a convincing risk assessment.

Such a cost-benefit analysis seeks an inspiring vision of 'what the good life would be' (Feb, p89) which I think you offer an answer to within the essay. The good life comes by right knowing (as Corb knew the classics – Mar, p78), right thinking (as Einstein, on a higher level – Mar, p68), right doing (in accord with one's values – Feb, p92) and ultimately right being (as in a 'City of Being' – Mar, p77). A 'City of Being' is assuredly preferable to a 'City of Doing' but it did not attain a quality of 'being' retrospectively, the builders had learnt to dwell before they built, and so must we first learn how to Be. But how? Surely Being is a given into which we are thrown? At its most active, Being is a posture, perhaps future essays could assist our posture. And if, as I would agree, the posture is to be one of 'gratitude and reverence' (Apr, p66), future essays need to direct us to whom we are to give our thanks.

Concluding, I would like to be helped in the application of the decompartmentalisation you

propose. The appeal of an integrated future is universal, however, the intermediate steps need to be translated for diversity of participants in a building's genesis. For example, the promised happiness of integral architecture's 'ceiling heights' (Apr, p82) needs to offer builders a tangible value such as would eventually offset the sacrifice now. Likewise, the 'broad external stairs' (Apr, p82) need to exceed 'access'-related tokenism to more than satisfy legitimate litigation anxiety. Otherwise such utopian writing serves to fan the flames of miserablism among architects who seem to relish the futility of their disempowerment. In this way, the question of 'who we want to be' (Apr, p79) needs to be offered to each member of the design team, actively freeing them from the 'who' in which they are presently imprisoned and giving them the means to change.

Finally, TBR's gospel of quadrants needs a cosmology, that is, it needs to be shown to have independently and actively existed before knowledgeable New Age authors voted for its wisdom. Somewhat in the manner of St John's Prologue, which could be rendered in quadrants thus: 'In the beginning was the UL, and the UL was with the Holon, and the UL was the Holon. The UL was in the beginning with the Holon. And the UR, LR and LL were made through that. In the UL was Life and that Life was the Sustainability of humanity. This Life shines through The Big Rethink, though the readership may not recognise it.' (John 1:1-4) And in this vein, I would argue that TBR then needs to become incarnate in our 'living room or piazza' (Apr, p78). As Alain de Botton needs to build his Living Architecture (and his temple of humanism), and as Christopher Alexander has needed to realise his Nature of Order, and as Christ, the decompartmentaliser par excellence, demonstrated the sacred and abstract in among the sweat and dirt of the here and now: 'And the UL became flesh

and dwelt among the LR's.' (John 1:14). So TBR must step off the pages of AR over the next few months and build.

Phil Jackson, London, by email

As a non-architect and new subscriber to AR, Peter Buchanan's essays (and the *Future Frontiers* video online) have been a revelation. By day I work in a cubicle shuffling bits of paper around and have the job title 'Systems Engineer' (LR quadrant). In the evening I re-fuel my addiction for flickr and ebay here in the provinces. So Peter's explanation of Integral theory has left me with an even deeper feeling of entrapment and a suspicion that there really is a better life out there somewhere – indeed the perfect complement to any mid-life crisis!

Fraser Donachie, comment on AR website

Road back to Damascus

I enjoyed Georgina Ward and Niall McLaughlin's essay *Damascene Dereliction* (*Exploring Eye*, April). Damascus is essential for anyone attempting an analysis of the human urban condition. As the longest occupied city in history it exhibits the scars, few of the areas of destruction satisfactorily restored with any eye to historical accuracy. Yet that is not its purpose. Damascus is a city of history, not in history. It functions. It is messy, often ignored, occasionally restored with little regard to accuracy of materials or history. If you look at it with a UNESCO heritage eye, it is a problem of overwhelming proportion.

When I visited the 'new' School of Architecture at the University of Damascus, the Professor I talked to trained in France and had inspected Corb's Unité on many occasions as it rose out of the ground. While noting my version of the case made by Ward and McLaughlin, his concern was reserved for the undocumented and thus unknown

number of ancient structures reclaimed by the eastern desert.

Yet underlying all of the apparent deterioration I glimpsed sight of something almost intangible yet ineluctable – perhaps in among it all was a paradigm for future sustainable living. The layering of the city is legible. Its ages exposed like rings of a tree trunk simply because nothing is removed. The past an asset for the future. The longevity of every single piece stretched in form across time. A city based on the utility of necessity, not of desire. As a life support system where a fragile ecosystem acts as a thin membrane giving a minimum of support to the maximum amount of people. Threadbare. As the Dickensian world of Nicodemus Boffin in *Our Mutual Friend* who made his fortune from dust – everything is useful. Everyone clinging on, like the houses on Jebel Qassioun. A persistence that was overwhelmingly positive and life affirming.

There is a sense of a working city here but one on a fragile edge of functionality where anything might tip the balance into chaos. This is a city whose essence is not its relationship to historical perfection nor an architectural aspic but its functionality as a living breathing organism. The closest to the idea of a city that understands the secrets of old age, of survival. Damascus has of necessity developed and adapted its own Darwinian Urban Genetic Code – its future is assured just not a future that an old Europe would grasp, yet. Maybe one day we will, of necessity, require to unravel such genetics.

Gordon Murray,
University of Strathclyde

Honcho Pancho

What a relief from so much portentous stodge to be reunited with the delights of Pancho Guedes!

Brian Knox, Edinburgh