Alterity: architecture and crisis

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Introduction

Starchitecture is an element in the symbolic economies of cities. Examples of such iconic buildings designed by star architects include the Shard by Renzo Piano in London; Norman Foster's re-design of the Reichstag, Berlin; the London Olympics aquatics building by Zaha Hadid; or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank Gehry. Behind the glitz, however, most contemporary architecture offers little imaginative scope in everyday projects such as corporate offices, student accommodation, warehouses and light industrial sheds, shopping malls, supermarkets and volume housing. But this is the architecture of the affluent world, or global North. In the global South, in contrast, although imports of inappropriate materials and unsustainable technologies abound, often tied to foreign aid, alternative, sustainable ways of working have evolved in development architecture. Architect Nabeel Hamdi states, for instance, that the model of top-down planning, political expediency and de-politicised professional expertise is refused in much of the majority world (or global South) in favour of an, 'endogenous development' of, 'non-hierarchical human and institutional relationships for people-driven processes.'[1] This recasts architects as enablers, using their status as much as their design knowledge to influence decision-makers while the practicalities are handed over to local people, who often have building skills and awareness of appropriate materials. Their knowledge is largely tacit, gained by experience and communicated through work, in contrast to the Northern architect's separation of design as a more or less abstract activity from construction, the latter carried out by un-named others.

Development architecture has a precedent in Hassan Fathy's use of traditional forms and materials within an emergent national culture in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s (and through the Revolution of 1952);[2] and can be contextualised now by the academic field of political ecology.[3] Recently, some architects have adapted development architecture for the global North. This, too, has precedents, including Walter Segal's designs for self-build housing in London in the 1970s.[4] My argument is that such practices take on a new importance today in a period of global austerity resulting from the failure of the global financial system.

In the North, alternatives to conventional architecture and a growing rejection of star status has produced the term 'spatial agency' to denote an architecture of collaboration designed not to produce iconic objects but to help those involved become empowered.[5] Looking to the South, Hamdi differentiates architecture as a dominant practice from the realities of urban development, and, 'end states (projects)' from 'open-ended programmes.'[6] That is, if I can paraphrase, a differentiation of means justified by an end, and means which *are* the end. The implication of end-justification is that the process is instrumental, an act of power-

over (as suggested by the conventional god's-eye city plan), while means as ends tend to be empowering, processes of power-to. I want to ask if this difference emanates from the split between design and building, and whether this follows from René Descartes' metaphor of an engineer drawing regular places on a blank ground in the *Discourse* (1635). And if design separates invention from materiality, this may replicate the certainties of a self-contained system – Descartes trusts in geometry and mathematics – in place of the real (natural and human-made) uncertainties of life. Seeking safety from such vicissitudes, a modern city form reproduces abstract certainty in rational spatial forms such as the orthogonal street plan, or grid. This then becomes a reassertion of absent certainty in. the effect is pronounced after moments of crisis such as the rebuilding of Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake, and of English cities such as Plymouth after bombing in the 1940s.

Drawing a line

An abstract equilibrium occurs in Descartes' metaphor in the *Discourse*: an engineer draws regular places according to his imagination on a blank ground. The metaphor is theoretical, although Descartes knew of early planned cities such as Nancy (1611). But the connection to catastrophe should be noted: the *Discourse* was written during the Thirty Years War when, historian Stephen Toulmin explains, 'rival militias and military forces consisting largely of mercenaries fought to and fro, again and again, over the same disputed territories … in the name of theological doctrines that no one could give any conclusive reasons for accepting.'[7] Against this, abstract thought offered the advantage that a system of numbers required no interpretation, giving the same answers to the same problems regardless of conditions:

> If uncertainty, ambiguity, and the acceptance of pluralism led, in practice, only to an intensification of the religious war, the time had come to discover some rational method for demonstrating the essential correctness or incorrectness of philosophical, scientific, or theological doctrines.[8]

Toulmin identifies economic crisis as a further context for Descartes' philosophy. If writing is produced, then, according to its times, Descartes sediments layers of risk and uncertainty in his thinking – which ultimately is his only proof of being.

The purpose of Descartes' *Discourse on the method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences, and in addition the Optics, the Meteorology and the Geometry, which are essays in this method*[9] was to allay the doubts which undermined his knowledge of the world and of himself in it. The *Discourse* follows Montaigne's essays as a series of personal observations, trying out thoughts; but if Montaigne speculated – taking the observed world as a book which can be read in different, always inadequate ways – it appears that Descartes went further in seeking, Hassan Melehy writes, 'a philosophical narrative whose strategies refuse any kind of inadequacy.'[10]

Certainty is reached via doubt of the self's existence – *cogito ergo sum* – but there is also the issue of certainty in the world. Descartes writes,

> I was at one time in Germany, attracted hither by the wars which were not yet ended, and was on my way from the coronation of the Emperor to join the army, when winter

brought me to a halt in quarters where, with no society to distract me, and no cares or passions to disturb me, I spent the day in a stove-heated room, with all the leisure in the world to occupy myself with my own thoughts. Among these, one of the first that came to my mind was that there is often less perfection in what has been put together bit by bit, and by different masters, than in the work of a single hand.[11]

Descartes sits alone without the disturbance of social life or passion, seeing a unity of design as more ordered than an accumulation of forms. He contrasts a village which has grown into a town over time with a city, 'which an engineer can design at will in an orderly fashion.'[12] A few lines later, he adds a colonial analogy:

In the same way I fancied half-savage nations, who had gradually become civilised, but who had made their laws by degrees as the need arose to counter the harm done by crimes and disputes, could never be as well regulated as those who, from the beginning of their associations, had observed the decrees of some pungent lawgiver …[13]

This is likened to the law of God as, 'better ordered than any other'[14] because it was given in one act. These are like the layers of an onion, from the outer skin of the city through to the laws which govern it and then the essential deity (except it is unknown whether Descartes retained his religious faith, in a period when atheism was dangerous heresy). Each metaphor revolves around a kind of purity, or an abstract utopianism. The idea of a single design for a city is likened to drawing a line on a white ground, making a regular space, and inscribing an order which did not exist before.

Through this privileging of invention, modern rationality replaces medieval superstition and the scholastic method of reinterpreting text in search of a true meaning. In modernity, the meaning is there as invention, in self-contained terms. It denies chaos. But, again, the desire to deny chaos implies the presence of chaos. Toulimin writes,

Descartes was convinced that we can build a secure body of human knowledge, if we scrap our inherited systems of concepts and start again from scratch – with a clean slate – using "rationally validated" methods. That meant, on the one hand, framing one's basic theories around ideas whose merits are clear, distinct and certain; on the other, using only demonstrable arguments, having the necessity of geometrical proofs.[15]

For philosopher Andrew Benjamin, one concern is the attitude to knowledge which requires what is taken as known to be tested by proof, beyond perception and belief, to construct a truth which is, 'consequent upon an action that establishes it.'[16] Benjamin summarises from Descartes' *Meditations* of 1641, 'What are at stake … are two related projected movements. The first is formulating a new set of criteria … [and] the second is that this formulation must take place anew.'[17]

With making new, mind becomes the location of scrutiny, leading to Cartesian dualism:

The formulation of Cartesian dualism not only demands a radical separation between mind and body, it is also the case that the centrality and supremacy of the mind and the subsequent reintroduction of the body are themselves premised upon this founding separation. The body is at first to be denied and the reintroduced afterwards.[18]

I want to link Benjamin's emphasis on making new to the architectural metaphor in the *Discourse*. Descartes writes, 'My design has never stretched further than the attempted reform of my own thoughts … on foundations that belong only to me.'[19] He avoids reference to affairs of state or religion, and establishes instead the universality of a system of thinking which is free of social distraction and human passion. There, the mind *imagines* the gesture of drawing a line.

This is not a prescription for the state but a model for thought. Wolfgang Welsch notes, alluding to Descartes' development of abstract representations of spatial relations in analytic geometry, that he saw all spheres of reality as being, 'apprehended and structured with this one mathematical method.'[20] Peter Wagner, similarly, reads the introduction of a unifying method as, 'inaugurating modernist rationalism on the basis of a radical positing of subjectivity.'[21] Wagner argues that Descartes' ideas should be contextualised by his social status, privileged thought over labour because he has the gentleman's leisure; but, Wagner argues, if Descartes is accused of, 'the unachievable and ultimately damaging project of grounding certainty beyond the specificity of experience' this ignores the project's core, which is to addresses insecurity in ordinary life when, 'the consequences of the Reformation and the religious wars signalled one major step in the destruction of the foundations of certainty.'[22] The condition in which Descartes sought to draw a line, then, was crisis. In a self-contained system, the system itself determines the outcomes of problems. Analytic geometry fused, 'geometrical analysis and algebra' to arrive at an 'exact observance' from a few simple rules.[23] Against crisis and destruction, Descartes offers imagined perpetuity.

There are nuances: Claudia Brodsky Lacour uses a different translation from the Penguin edition I cite; in place of, 'which an engineer can design at will in an orderly fashion'[24] she puts, 'that an engineer traces on a vacant plain according to his free imaginings [or fancy].'[25] Lacour, crucially, differentiates two meanings of design: as *plan* and *intention*. Descartes intends to order his thinking (*dessein*); and imagines an engineer making a plan (*dessin*):

> While Descartes commonly uses *dessein* … when stating his speculative plan or intention, he first uses *dessin*, an architect's plan, when, after presenting the four rules of procedure, he describes what one must do "to rebuild a house" in addition to having carefully traced its ground plan (*dessin*). … Descartes develops and significantly alters the image of the act of architectural drawing he had "thought" of in his stove-heated room.[26]

Rebuilding the house, of course, is also metaphorical: rebuilding consciousness. Descartes imagines the act of freely drawing a line as 'non-figural delineation, this image without particular mimetic characteristics' as discursive, not reliant on an object.[27] Lacour continues,

> The act of architectural drawing that Descartes describes is the outlining of a form that was not one before. That form would combine reason … with imaginative freedom … It is not only new to the world, but intervenes … on a surface … where nothing else is. The order of its "places regulières" is the image of imagination engineering a method that is free of historical and intellectual as well as physical constraints.[28]

The line is fanciful and purposeful at the same time. If Descartes saw this as paradox, not a split, the nuance has been lost on architecture as abstract design since then.

Out of disaster 1

On All Saints Day 1755, much of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake which killed up to a quarter of the population. In fear, the royal family refused to return to the site of the Ribeira palace, the empty space which is now Praça do Comercio, a large square with arcades on three sides and open river frontage on the fourth. The King's chief minister, the Marquess of Pombal, ordered the burial of the dead, the hanging of looters, and the building of a new city for which a plan was drawn by three military engineers, Manuel de Maia, Eugénio dos Santos and Carlos Mardel. De Maia drew up a paper outlining the issues and how to address them, and Pombal introduced a law preventing rebuilding or land transfer outside the plan. In the aftermath of crisis, certainty becomes imperative. De Maia proposed a grid, its streets for commercial use (especially the gold and silver trades from the Indies), citing the models of Turin (urban extension) and London (rebuilt by Wren after the 1666 fire). New buildings incorporated timber armatures designed to prevent their future collapse, and standard proportions were prescribed for façades. Although the plan was a work of civil engineering, an architecture school was established to design the most important new buildings.

Kenneth Maxwell argues that Lisbon's rebuilding after 1755 required, 'an undemocratic and ruthless power' because only, 'the use of state power' could induce a 'radically transformed city' from the ashes.'[29] Lisbon became an Enlightenment city of spatial ordering produced, of reason on the site of chaos. Today, the central district of Baixa is much as it was planned by De Maia, dos Santos and Mardel, the streets paved with black and white marble cobbles. Meanwhile it is the narrow alleys and steep stairways of the Alfama district on the hill above Baixa, which survived the earthquake, which engage tourists looking for excitement.

I agree with Maxwell that the plan of Baixa states a power-relation, and would add that its normalisation since the eighteenth century reflects that power-relation and the scientific rationalism which another outcome of the philosophical revolution of which Descartes' *Discourse* was (is) a foundational element. The grid is also useful as a practical mechanism for dividing land in manageable parcels; and in assisting urban mobility and navigation., But it expresses, too, the abstract quest for certainty which Descartes saw as a defence against the abyss of doubt, in a historical period of mass slaughter. That ambivalence is the point.

Out of disaster 2

In March, 1941, bombing in Plymouth destroyed 1,500 houses and much of the city centre. About a thousand civilians were killed, and about three thousand injured. Jeremy Gould writes, 'Plymouth was the most devastated city in England.'[30] To keep up spirits after the bombing, a band played on the Hoe and the King and Queen made a visit; but people whose homes had been destroyed huddled in cellars at night. The Navy cleared the rubble and the city council decided to demolish some remaining structures to produce a blank site of 114 hectares. The rebuilding of Plymouth was organised by officers of an elected council, not an autocracy as in Lisbon. The project was seen by the progressive Liberal Party establishment as an opportunity to build a *better* city for the better world for which the war was fought (although that particular reading strengthens retrospectively, at the time being as much an extension of already extant, modernist planning principles). Gould notes that the Astors, the

most prominent Liberal family nationally as well as locally, 'were keenly interested in social reform and public health' and that they knew that in appointing Patrick Abercrombie – a well-known planner also working on a plan for London – to oversee the scheme, 'they were buying both a radical new plan and valuable political connections.'[31] Despite the progressive intention professed, however, the process of delivery was entirely top-down and reliant on professional expertise, if in collaboration with local professionals.

Abercrombie collaborated with Plymouth's City Engineer James Paton Watson and the City Architect, Edgar Catchpole. The *Plan for Plymouth* was published in 1943, proposing suburbs on the periphery (which were built to high specifications) and a wide avenue from the main railway station to the Hoe, overlooking the sea, to create, 'a "vista" for public enjoyment "to be enriched by the landscape architect's and gardener's art."'[32] This became the 61-metre wide Armada Way, with 53-metre cross streets, designed as the city's main shopping centre, and remained that until the opening of a new mall, Drake Circus, in the 1990s.

Alan Powers writes that social improvement was an 'unofficial war aim' and that planning for reconstruction, 'was a way of improving morale' while realising the aims of people he calls 'left-wing campaigners.'[33] I doubt the Astors saw themselves that way; still, the post-war consensus of which the Abercrombie plan was part did also inform the creation of the Welfare State by the post-1945 Labour government. But the scheme remained a process of expertise, and of abstraced readings of the local context. Abercrombie speaks in Jill Craigie's film on Plymouth's rebuilding, *The Way We Live*: 'Plymouth needs pale colours to respond to the sunlight. Buildings in limestone and concrete. Flat and vertical masses to give balance to an interesting skyline. What is needed is a city to cheer people up.'[34] This benign-patriarchal social ordering generated façades in high-specification materials, in a mix of Portland stone and cement, with much sculptural detailing. The visual impact is democratic: a high-quality city centre for use by all social classes. But it was imposed, any architectural individuality being subsumed in the overall rules of the scheme. Charles Hussey described the scheme as, 'autocratic regimentation.'[35] In a coded negativity, *The Architects' Journal* saw the scheme as, 'a monument to the town planning ideals of the thirties and forties.'[36] That was the era of international modernism, which was progressive and internationalist; but also of the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe. This ambivalence of modern design's sweeping vision of a new society engineered by design informed by humane principles, and the top-down agency required to build the vision, remains problematic.

Plymouth, like Lisbon, each in its own way and context, illustrates drawing a line as a way to deal with trauma. The result is clearance, wiping the slate clean, erasing the difficult past in a spirit of a new, better tomorrow. The city of the future rests on rational proportions and an orderly regulation of space, in the interests of mobility and efficiency but also of human interaction and security against doubt (since the vicissitudes of nature are mainly overcome, except in disasters or human-made crises); yet in the process of applying this benign vision, a utopian idealisation of the city, a transition occurs from abstract design as a philosophical *metaphor* to a prescriptive spatial ordering: an *instrumentalist* power-over. A utopian vision is thus turned into a negativity of imposed ordering of the kind to which totalitarian regimes aspire. This leads me an earlier use of the grid.

A colonial grid

In classical Greece, the grid was used in colonial cities and ports, such as Piraeus, the port of Athens, where most people were foreigners (including sailors and traders). Like women and slaves, they were excluded from Athenian democracy. Indra Kagis McEwen writes of Piraeus as, 'full of shifty characters' who did not constitute a close-knit community.[37] She adds that, as the most densely populated part of Athens, it was, 'a hotbed of radical democracy.'[38] In a terrain of steep hills and marshy hollows, Hippodamus of Miletus,

> … imposed an orthogonal grid of streets … the intention of which would have been to make Piraeus harmonious, the way a well-built boat or a tightly woven cloth was understood by the early Greeks to be harmonious – even as in earlier centuries the founders of colonial cities had sought to ensure the *harmonia* of their new foundations by laying out regularly spaced streets that intersected at right angles.[39]

This opens two ways of reading the grid: as the harmony of the cosmos as a higher ordering of the world than that of trade, aligned to a separation of knowledge of truth, goodness and beauty from the skills of practical life; and as an exercise in power over unruly publics.

Harmony pertains to a given order but inasmuch as it reinstates that order it has a practical basis in the well-made object, typically the cloth with weft and warp woven at right angles. McEwen adds that a well-made cloth *appears* in a heightened way. Citing Joseph Rykwert that the grid orientates the citizen to a cosmic order, she argues,

> in early Greece … and before either the cosmos or city streets became geometrical, the experience of weavers had already led them to the discovery that the *kosmos* of a tightly woven cloth depended on equally spacing warp and weft threads and interlacing them at right angles to one another.[40]

This gives a basis for the grid in material culture, in the vernacular not high thought, which does not discount the correspondence of the well-made cloth to the perceived cosmic order but integrates it in practicality. The dualism high-vernacular echoes Descartes' dualism of abstract systems-accumulated experience, yet McEwen's reading of the well-made cloth as a foundation for the grid charts, first, a dual sense of high and low in combination, and, in a different way, a dualism which splits abstract high from practical low, or plan from material construction. Both possibilities are there, ambivalently. Reason tends towards power-over but can be power-to. The weaver recreates *kosmos*; the ruler re-creates it in a plan which is aligned to the translation of intention into project, and underpins modernist architecture. Or so it may seem. I find McEwen's reading of the grid interesting because it retains that ambivalence, and does not close the question in a one-or-other way.

Nuanced spaces

While largely critical of Cartesianism, Henri Lefebvre notes a nuance: arguing that 'The laws of space … are mathematical laws' which nothing escapes; nonetheless, human knowledge turns from the contemplation of antiquity to 'theoretical thought,' or invention.[41] Lefebvre's thought is theoretical; but to see space as an object of thought is reductive: 'Thenceforward reflective thought felt that social space was accessible to it … that space is the seat of a

practice consisting in more than the application of concepts, a practice that also involves … lived experience.'[42] Lefebvre's juxtaposition of theoretical thought and lived experience follows Marx's juxtaposition of Hegel's Idealism and Feuerbach's Materialism: 'Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract thinking*, appeals to sensuous contemplation; but he does not conceive sensuousness as *practical*, human-sensuous activity.'[43] Lefebvre extends this in various ways, for instance in saying,

> Abstract space … makes the relationship between repetition and difference a more antagonistic one. … Just like the fleshly body of the living being, the spatial body of society and the social body of needs differ from an "abstract corpus" … [because] they cannot live without generating, without producing, without creating *differences*.[44]

He continues that the architect occupies an uncomfortable position:

> As a scientist and technician, obliged to produce within a specified framework, he [sic] has to depend on repetition. In his search for inspiration as an artist, and as someone sensitive to the use and to the "user", however, he has a stake in difference. He is located willy-nilly within this painful contradiction, forever being shuttled from one of its poles to the other.[45]

Knowledge becomes theoretical thought based in repetition, likening technology to craft, or mechanics; lived experience (human sensuous activity) is the site of creativity, but is aligned to the abstract trio of goodness, truth and beauty. Lefebvre's spatial theory posits a dialectic between the space of plans (conceived space) and that, becoming plural, of occupation and use (lived spaces), insisting that that both are present.[46] Conceived space is dominant but is undermined and overlaid by occupation. For Stuart Elden, Lefebvre interprets Cartesianism as secular theology (a purposeful contradiction). But he notes that Lefebvre saw Descartes as a transitional figure, 'neither entirely within his own time, nor able fully to transcend it.'[47]

Another such figure was Rabelais, standing more obviously for the forces of misrule. Elden identifies Lefebvre's understanding of Descartes in context of, 'multiple, and sometimes contradictory, intellectual and social currents' so that the *Discourse* is understood as, 'a manifesto of Western civilisation, relying on myths, religion, the agrarian civilisation of the middle ages; of industrial society, the modern human's mastery of nature and the earth … and of the ascendant bourgeoisie and liberalism.'[48] The reference to liberalism projects the Cartesian subject into the era of the planned city in the eighteenth century – Karlsruhe and Washington DC – as representing a rising bourgeois class (also represented, coincidentally, in the name Praça do Comercio in Lisbon).

Returning to Lacour's differentiation of *dessin* (plan) from *dessein* (intention) in Descartes' *Discourse*, thought retains the freedom of imagination – an engineer drawing from his fancy – but a plan is prescriptive, an instruction for the work of others whose labour is regarded as inferior to that of the architect's drawing. Dwelling was equally marginalised. The architects and planners of post-war estates saw the inner-city streets they erased and replaced (often in suburbs) as disorderly despite that they accommodated multiple, and not incompatible, practices of urban living. New estates were high-specification but functionalised, separating spaces for different practices as a way to order people's lives for them on the assumption,

at least implicitly, that they could not order their own lives. Thamesmead, for instance, on the south-east edge of London, houses 60,000 people in a new town, with a separation of pedestrian and vehicle space, large green areas, and a mix of low- and high-rise buildings. It was progressive in its design and planning, seen as part of the better post-war world, and Edward Robbins observes, looking back in the 1990s, 'today such a level of investment in social housing would be considered generous.'[49] The difficulty is that progressive planning ignores lived spaces, and Thamsmead, though by no means a disaster, is the kind of estate which now has a bad reputation (and barbed wire round the health centre). Looking to the inner city, in contrast, Robbins argues, 'What appears to be the very chaos of the street is its attraction. Cacophonous though these streets may be, shared understandings of the rules of engagement make the street a most ordered and organised place.'[50]

Since Thamesmead, tower blocks have gained a negative currency, in part through problems in construction in early systems building, in part through the sense of isolation which estates produced when social networks were broken by the move from inner-city areas. Some have been demolished. But much has been gained from architectural and social research showing the importance of co-design and engagement in decision-making. Now, nonetheless, the urban redevelopment industry imposes post-code clearances, demolishing inter-war and post-war estates which need only a bit of maintenance to last decades more, and which house communities regarded as the wrong kind of people in post-codes now rebranded as zones of affluence. Anna Minton cites research on current housing insecurity in relation to mental health, summarising, 'Issues of helplessness and loss of control are at the heart of these findings … this loss of control results in what the psychiatrists describe as "earned helplessness," the inability to influence one's environment or experiences, and can lead to physical and mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.'[51] It is grossly unfair to lay all this at Descartes' door; his differentiation of intention and plan (above) can be read as a paradox, just as Lefebvre reads conceived space and lived spaces as both elements in any society's spatial practice. Still, the gradual shift from metaphor to a practical division of design from building, and both from dwelling, while dwellers – users – are marginalised, is a recipe for disenfranchisement. What alternative is available?

Alterity in practice

If the architecture of iconic skylines is a dominant practice aligned to the abstract space of plans, then Hassan Fathy's projects for new settlements, New Gourna and New Bariz, fuse design and building in service of everyday living for non-privileged populations.[52] Both of these schemes were flawed, New Gourna entailing a forced move of villagers (who never went), and New Bariz unfinished when the war in Sinai led to its abandonment. Yet Fathy's use of traditional vaulting using locally available material (mud-brick) is an early case of the architect as enabler, which is not to say Fathy did not draw designs, nor that he was an urbane and privileged professional (arriving by train at Luxor for the Gourna project with a gramophone and records). Fathy remains an important case, nonetheless, refusing modern technologies in a nationalist spirit. Recognising Egypt's housing problem, Fathy states, 'To solve the problem … we have to have not low cost housing but no cost housing. We must subject technology … to the economy of the penniless … instead of the other way around.'[53]

From 1945 to 1949, during the emergence of the nationalism which produced the 1952 revolution, Fathy worked at Gourna, a village near the Theban necropolis. Many of the villagers worked on excavations in or around the Valley of the Kings, but several had built houses above tomb entrances in pursuit of an illegal trade in antiquities. The Department of Antiquities aimed to stop this by moving the villagers, appointing Fathy for his experience in mud-brick building for the Royal Society of Agriculture at Bahtim (1941, later destroyed) and villas near Cairo, such as artist Hamid Said's house at Marg (1942). At Gourna, a 50-acre site, nearer the Nile than the tombs, was compulsorily purchased. Fathy hoped to recreate the traditional pattern of spatial practice, and consulting village elders on hiring labour; while unable to carry out a sociological survey, he planned the new village around the unit of the *badana*: 'a tightly related knot of people', consisting of ten to twenty families in adjoining houses following a communal way of life.[54] Siting houses in groups reached by right-angle turns, Fathy gave each badana a feeling of privacy, while all quarters had easy access to the mosque and civic buildings such as the theatre (to support a revival of vernacular arts) and market. Fathy saw mud-brick vaulting still practiced in Aswan and brought Nubian masons to apply and seed their skills at Gourna. This is not the vernacular of Luxor, but similar mud-brick vaults are found (partly intact) in the granary of the Ramesseum, part of the Theban necropolis.
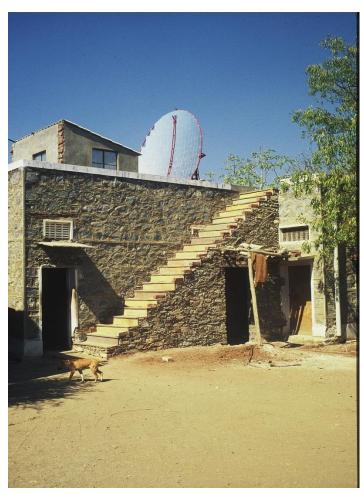
The process was not easy, subjected as much to interference from bureaucrats anxious not to lose their cut from imported materials as to resistance from villagers unwilling to move. As a middle-class, urban professional, too, Fathy's designs were informed by courtyard houses in Cairo as much as by Nubian types; but if his alignment with vernacular building was generalised, it also served socio-economic reasons, and a nationalism which looked to vernacular forms such as folk music and tales as an alternative to European (colonial) and Pharaonic (non-Arab) styles in the construction of a national culture prior to independence.

Only one area of the village was built, eventually settled by workers from Aswan after the construction of the High Dam. The project was compromised, then, by the imposition of a population move, and Fathy was unconcerned with the gender issues which would now be more prominent. Yet New Gourna demonstrates a potential to build according to traditional practices rather than an abstract idea, at minimal cost. Fathy wrote, 'When the architect is presented with a clear tradition to work in, as in a village built by peasants, then he has no right to break this tradition with his own personal whims.'[55] The village is still inhabited, but has expanded with additions (including additional storeys on houses) using concrete, while changes in the water level caused by the ending of annual Nile inundation after the High Dam's construction have led to material deterioration.

In 1965, Fathy began another settlement at Baris, as part of President Nasr's programme to ease the housing crisis in Cairo through a voluntary population move, to be achieved by financial inducements, to oases in the Western desert. The project was abandoned with the Israeli invasion of Sinai in 1967 but what was built includes a market (*suq*) with a central open courtyard and natural cooling of surrounding enclosed areas by wind catches at roof level. The street plan is a grid to maximise shade, influenced by settlements in North Africa,[56] Iraq (where Fathy worked for architects Doxiades in the 1950s), and the *City of the*

Future project.[57] Addressing the Egyptian Society of Architects, Fathy argued for, 'the traditional cooperative system,' adding that, 'one man cannot build a house but ten men can build ten houses easily.'[58]
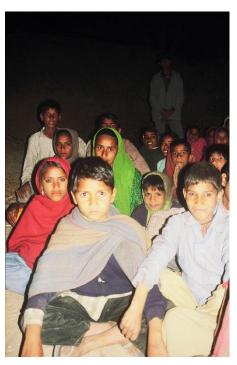
Fathy's work, I suggest, remains an important precedent. A more recent case which is not compromised by the impositions of state power, and did not employ an architect to design it, is the Social Work Research Centre (SWRC) at Tilonia, Rajasthan, called the Barefoot College, a residential campus for villagers run on Ghandian principles, and built by villagers in local stone. Although a professional from Delhi drew a ground plan, the buildings – houses, workshops, a dining hall, a guest house, a theatre, among others – were entirely the product of vernacular skills.[59] It houses up to 250 students on short residential courses, and around 50 staff. A solar cooker on the dining hall roof provides all the cooked food except chapattis, which require a hot-plate.

Geodesic domes made from discarded agricultural equipment provide a communications hub, where village women learn internet skills as well as literacy.

SWRC organises night schools over a wide georaphical area. These are combined with water harvesting so that girls – traditionally water carriers – are more likely to participate. Visiting in 2005, I was told that they teach literacy, numeracy, and 'about society.'[60] I asked how: some of the older students, aged 14, worked in the marble quarries; being numerate, they saw that they were paid 35 rupees a day when the clerk wrote 50 in his book. Complaining through the Children's Parliament – a network of all night schools – they were eventually paid 60 rupees, the legal minimum wage. It seemed that they had learnt solidarity.

Making new

Making new has underpinned modern architecture and design, as if to innovate is to be free. This has evident limitations, not least in the shift from imagination to prescription, or from regularity as defence against fear of change to spatial ordering as a device of social control. The post-war estates were meant to engineer a better world but proved that social fabrics are organic. There are numerous cases in the global South of alternatives, such as the two cited above; but there is a difficulty of perception in transposing lessons from a South still viewed as marginal to the affluent and powerful North, still more so in a period of globalised capital. That is a political question, and the ill effects of the urban redevelopment industry are likely to be stopped by political action, or activism, more than by academic debate. Still, I want to end by drawing attention to a discursive difficulty – as an academic this is what I do – which I find threaded through the whole history of making spatial order, from Piraeus to Plymouth. It revolves around the idea of the radically new itself.

Ernesto Laclau writes of emancipation, as a classical problem of a new order, that either the envisaged new is unfettered by past conditions – New Jerusalem descends from the sky as if miraculously – or merges from those conditions, which it embodies. If emancipation is really new, it is separated from reality by a chasm; if not, is it emancipation? Hence, 'Emancipation means *at one and the same* time radical foundation and radical exclusion … a ground of the social and its impossibility.'[61] Laclau concludes, 'no dichotomy is absolute' so that, 'there can be no act of fully revolutionary foundation' which in turn means that, 'partial and precarious dichotomies have to be constitutive of the social fabric.'[62]

There is no exit from the contradiction of a quest for certainty which is a flight from a chaos which will remain sedimented in the new. This ambivalence shapes modern planning and design, and the post-war estates embody older power structures despite the designers' well-meant plans. But there is unlikely, from Laclau, to be a radical alternative as such, only a negotiated departure which constitutes a process towards alterity, not its attainment. The practices which are maintained in the vernaculars of the South could inform changes in how architecture is done in the North, although this would change, and partly negate, the role of the architect. This still requires a fundamental rethinking of the thinking which constitutes architecture as design, its line-drawing, and the separation of abstract images of certainty from material processes of change. Crucially, it requires acceptance that whatever values are enacted by or implicit in the process of building human settlements will deliver their eventual form as power-relation. The means are the ends, not a signpost to ends which justify any means. Power-to, not power-over.

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