



John Turner has described his experiences with squatters and owner builders in Latin America and the USA as 'the reeducation of a professional'. Here he examines

# The fits and misfits of people's housing

John Turner returned to England last year 'for an experimental period' after working for nearly seventeen years in 'the older and newer New World' – Peru, Mexico, and the USA – as an architectural consultant to squatters, low cost housing agencies, and owner builders.

In this article – which is a new and rewritten version of the talk he gave to last year's RIBA conference on 'Homes fit for humans' – Turner discusses his experiences abroad, criticising the unrealistic standards and inept procedures enshrined in many of the government housing

programmes imposed on the poor and the homeless in developing countries. Turner concludes that the lessons he has learned about the assumptions which underpin the institutionalisation of services are very relevant to all kinds of professionals in the rich and powerful urban industrial world

## Images of schooled and unschooled design

I left London for Peru early in 1957 and stayed there until 1965. My first job was with a pioneering Peruvian government agency set up a year or two earlier to help the development of the 'urbanizaciones populares' – or 'popular subdivisions', 1 – in Arequipa, the second city of Peru.

These autonomous urban settlements were largely planned and partially controlled by a nongovernment association of 'urbanizadores populares', or 'popular developers', which was, in effect, the real city planning agency. My involvement with the builders and residents of the settlements continued, with some interruptions during which I worked in villages and small towns, for the rest of my nine year stay in Peru.

The 'pueblos juvenes' – literally 'young towns', as they are now called – represent about two thirds of all contemporary city growth in Peru. And Peru is far more typical of the modern world than are England or Scotland. Perhaps half of all housing today is more like the young towns of Peru than our own suburbs.

In Arequipa in 1960, for example, I found that 90 per cent of all development since 1940 was either unauthorised or uncontrolled: it was mainly outright squatting on state owned land. In 1965, my Peruvian colleagues and I calculated that the squatters had developed more urban land and built more dwellings than had been developed and built between the Spanish conquest of the sixteenth century and 1945. And between 1945 and the late 1960s, the national population had doubled and the cities had tripled, both in population and in their size.

Most of this phenomenal growth takes place through the piecemeal efforts of ordinary people – mainly by the better paid and more stably employed blue collar workers' families and the lower white collar class. Typically, these extremely hard working people build their homes little by little, starting from a shack on unimproved land, 2, often obtained by outright invasion if either land speculation or middle class building standards have priced it out of their reach.

It takes a family from two to twenty years to build themselves a house incrementally, 3, often finishing with a duplex which has considerable market and rental value, 4. It is important to note that, under usual

market conditions, unsubsidised occupiers' dwellings are generally worth two or three years' income. Those who build or subcontract their own homes, however, whether they be secure urban squatters in Peru or rural, small town, or suburban owner builders in the USA, generally achieve ratios in excess of 1:3 and often greater than 1:5.

Various forms of the self build system as it occurs in many different countries have been described in recent books, such as Paul Oliver's *Shelter and society* [Barrie & Rockcliff: Cresset Press] and William Mangin's *Peasants in cities* [Houghton Mifflin]. But 'urban progressive development', as it is called, though perhaps more complex today than in St Thomas More's time, has a tradition as old as the city itself. More described it in his *Utopia* like this:

'Houses in the beginning were very low, and like homely cottages or poor shepherd houses, made at all adventures of every rude piece of timber that came first to hand, with mud walls, and ridged roofs, thatched over with straw. But now the houses be curiously builded after a gorgeous and gallant sort, with three stories over one another.'

People who practise this tradition, adapting and developing it to their





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own situation, know what they are doing. I have found it hard to find either procedural changes or even substantial design changes that would be real improvements for the people themselves. I have learned from them far more than I have taught them, or been able to pass on from the sophisticated western education that I received.

On one occasion in Peru, I well remember criticising the local habit of building a more or less finished street facade even while the owners lived in a shack behind it, 5, and receiving a highly articulate lecture from Senora Romero, the homely lady I was speaking to, about the sense and economy of doing just that: how the preview of a street of finished homes confirms the faith of the builders and stimulates the realisation of their expectations.

## Housing by trained professionals for untrained masses

In architecture schools, we learn how to dream up finished environments. When the social, financial, and political constraints are tough, even the best designers cannot do much better than my Peruvian colleagues did in Ventanilla, Lima (one of many



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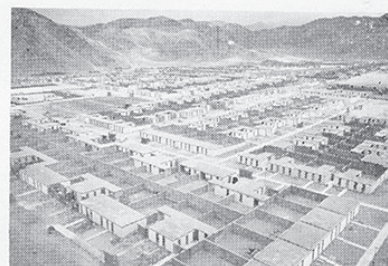


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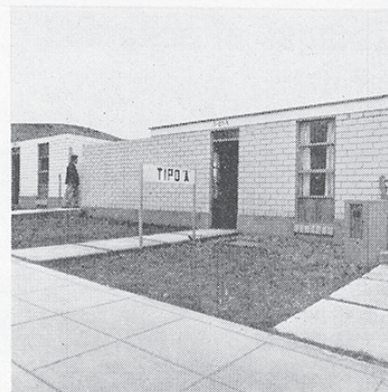
quite well designed, publicly sponsored and built housing projects for lower income urban families), 6 7 8. When governments' administrative and financial resources are so limited, with per capita budgets amounting to only a few dollars annually, their operations have to be extremely limited in relation to the scale of population growth and urban settlement.

The limited productivity of state sponsored housing is, of course, mainly caused by the wholly inappropriate procedures used. In contrast to the traditional 'progressive development procedure' of the mass of owner builders, governments generally insist on the 'direct' or 'contract' construction of complete packages.

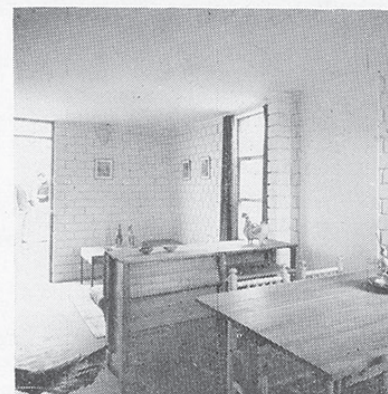
It is necessary, here, to make an essential distinction between the few irreducible elements of housing (eg, land, labour, materials, and finance or exchange), the many and highly variable components (eg, access paths or roads, utility networks, community facilities, and dwellings), and the infinite variety of sets of components, or packages. As I have pointed out in a report on low income housing in metropolitan Mexico [to be published shortly by AURIS, Estado de Mexico, Toluca,



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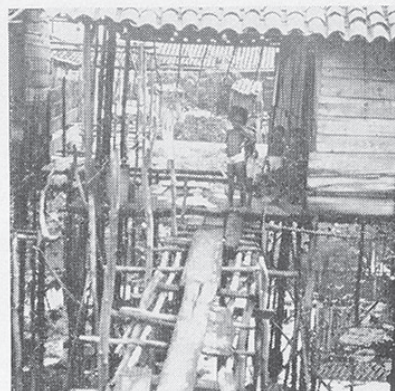




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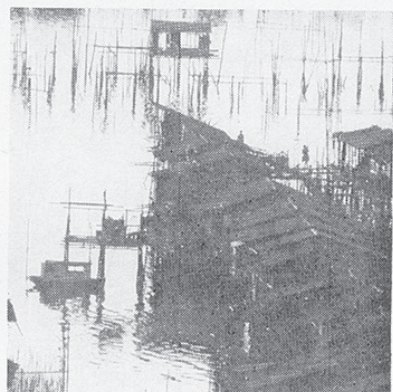
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Mexico], policy instruments and strategies vary greatly according to the 'level' of action taken.

Most government housing agencies mistakenly assume that the most effective level of public action in housing is to build projects: that is, to provide finished products instead of the tools that people and local organisations can use themselves so much more efficiently.

In a country like Peru, the result is that new housing is not acceptable to the vast majority of planners, engineers, architects, and their employers unless it meets the material and aesthetic standards that are minimally acceptable to the vastly wealthier middle classes of modern urban industrial society. Moreover, if these standards cannot be met at once, then nothing else is allowed – even if it means extreme overcrowding, 9, of the existing stock of very old housing, 10, or forcing people to squat, 11.

Even more damaging and counter productive than the artificial specification standards commonly imposed (on publicly sponsored and legal commercial housing, anyway) are the administrative procedures, which result in large areas of fully serviced but underoccupied subdivisions, contrasting with fully occupied but unserviced and unauthorised settlements nearby. The absurdly high 'minimum standard' has to be achieved all at once. Even if a large

proportion of the people needing new housing and willing to invest much time and effort as well as money are actually capable of reaching those standards over time, they are officially forbidden to do so.

Instead, they are forced either to wait for the generally unwanted opportunity to get a mortgage loan – which robs them of the security they seek through home ownership – or to build illegally, often taking the land by force. In fact, the direct construction package deal is generally twice as costly to build in the first place and, if one takes financing costs into account, three to four times as much as the progressively developed owner built home of equal or better standard on completion.

## The necessity of the freedom to build

The wisdom of my friend, Senora Romero, who understands the situation that she and her neighbouring young town builders live in, and the unwisdom of presumptuous outsiders like ourselves, are not really surprising. If we are not responding to the demands of those who have to live with what we do, but rather to the demands of those who decide what is 'good' and 'bad' for poorer or less influential people, then we are almost sure to make more bad

guesses than good or sensible ones.

The absurdities of the contrast between officially approved and completely serviced but uninhabited subdivisions, and fully occupied but unserviced squatter settlements, tell us something about our own situation and roles as professionals in an urbanising world. The lesson that I and others have drawn from these experiences and observations is summarised in a book, *Freedom to build* [Collier-Macmillan, reviewed on pp 34–35], which some of us published recently:

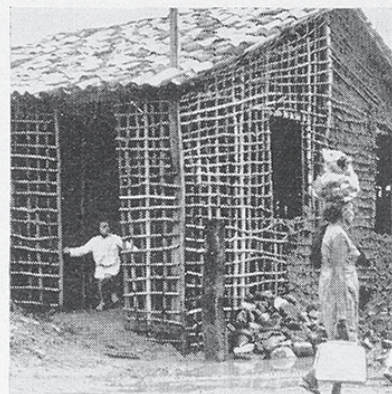
'When dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contribution to the design, construction, or management of their housing, both this process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well being. When people have no control over, nor responsibility for, key decisions in the housing process, on the other hand, then dwelling environments may instead become a barrier to personal fulfillment and a burden on the economy.'

In other words, we are now finally admitting the increasingly obvious fact that, while certificates of school time consumed do indeed increase wealth, and so endow us with authority of one kind, they do not show that we have any more understanding or real authority. But before discussing the basic issue of who decides, and the problems of who pays for our professional services and





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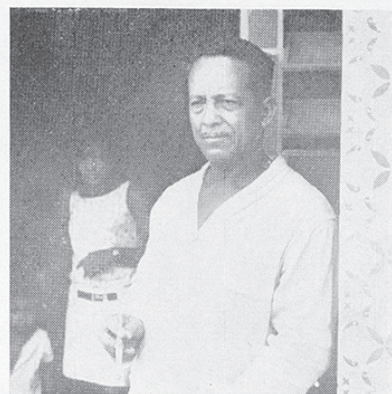
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who gets them, let us turn to Brazil and compare the 'alagado' with the 'conjunto' – a comparison which, I hope, will more fully explain the fallacy of 'decent housing'.

## The alagado in Brazil: an ecosystem

As I understand and use the word, 'housing' signifies activity: it is not a noun, but a verb that describes people doing things. In the case of housing activities, the things produced are people's surroundings, or their dwelling environment. An environment, by the way, is an environment only by virtue of the life that it surrounds. We do not talk about surroundings without reference to the people surrounded, nor should we talk about housing as a thing of intrinsic value separate from the people housed.

I will return to this basic and, once spoken, obvious point, but, for the time being, I just want to emphasise that I see housing as a process that subsumes the physical objects produced, or as an ecosystem which can be understood only through the interrelationships between people, their actions, and their environment. The Brazilian 'alagado' that I am about to describe illustrates my meaning. It is an evolving system in which the lives of the people who

build and live in it, their building techniques, and the forms and uses of what they build, all change together in mutually supportive ways.

At first, the settlement consists of fishermen's families' offshore dwellings accessible only by boat, 12, during high water. All that the family needs are a boat or a dugout canoe and the authorities' or the neighbours' tolerance of their erecting a pole framed shack of materials, 13, taken from their surroundings or, perhaps, bought if these have been urbanised.

As urbanisation takes over, and as fishing declines or becomes relatively less profitable, the water is displaced by dry fill: in this particularly economic case, the inhabitants persuaded the reluctant municipal authorities to dump the city garbage beneath their homes, 14. This provided an alternative or additional source of income: raking over the freshly dumped garbage, 15, every able family member sorts out saleable glass and metals while the family pigs, 16, fatten on the edibles.

When the fill is completed and compacted, it is covered with a layer of earth, 17, and more substantial houses, 18, can be built on this newly created and increasingly valuable urban real estate by the original inhabitants (or successors who have bought them out), who now live at a higher economic standard, 19 – thanks, to a considerable extent, to the ecosystem itself.

Think about the excellent matching of these people's changing needs and priorities with their changing economy and environment. Initially, they may be among the poorest of the urban poor. But the fishermen can use their nonurban skills, independently and with minimum capital, to feed their families and to sell any surplus to the nearby markets. As they get to know the city and its markets, they can improve their living standards and prospects by diversifying into the recycling trades and pig farming.

This additional income supports their growing families and, as new members themselves become economically active or productive, the surplus grows and is invested in real estate that gives them both added comfort and security, not to mention an improved social identity.

I was recently told that the Brazilian authorities are making efforts to support the self improvement of such settlements. My informants say that the change in attitude has been caused partly by the organised pressure brought to bear on the government by the nineteen neighbourhood committees, and partly by the official acknowledgement of the fact that the great majority of the inhabitants cannot possibly afford either the direct or the indirect costs of relocation elsewhere.

Philosophically and historically, of course, the 'alagados' can be seen as





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part and parcel of an excessively exploitative political economy, as many of my friends are quick to point out. Though true, this is beside the point of my present argument, which is that these extraordinarily well balanced systems were not preplanned or 'designed'.

## The conjunto in Brazil: an anti system

The evolving ecosystem that we find in the 'alagado' is very different from the 'conjunto' – the unbalanced and dysfunctional system, or anti system, 20 21 22, imposed by the Brazilian government agencies for the express purpose of eradicating 'slums' of the kind just described. And the doers in the 'conjunto', or low income and supposedly low cost government housing project, are a very different set of actors from those in the 'alagado' settlements or, of course, in any Peruvian subdivision or young town.

The 'conjunto' dwelling units and facilities are intended for use by the same kind of people as live in the 'alagados', but they are allowed no say in what they have to pay for until all planning, design, and management decisions have been taken and the package has been delivered – or rather, after they have been delivered to the package, since the project is likely to be beyond the urban fringe and many miles from their usual habitat.

But in addition to the habitual and often crippling disruption and

alienation involved in government rehousing – defects which are now a worldwide phenomenon – the direct costs of the 'conjuntos' are extremely high. Not only do the 'beneficiaries' have to spend hours every day busing to work, 23, where, before, many spent only a few minutes walking. Not only do they have to spend more money on subsistence goods and services while suffering reduced incomes, because casual jobs for wives and children are inaccessible. They also have to pay twice as much, or more, for the dwelling itself, which is often less satisfactory than the shack it replaced: sometimes smaller, and frequently poor quality for the price demanded.

The one redeeming feature which these projects have – though hardly for the city or the nation – is that the occupants can often successfully resist paying their monthly quotas. (From the many reports that I continue to receive, it seems that the average recovery rate for housing loans in low income and rapidly urbanising countries is about 30 per cent.) In these very frequent cases, the whole enterprise becomes an extremely wasteful means of giving away money. If only one third were given directly in cash, the people would have made far better use of it, both for themselves and, in the great majority of cases, for society as a whole.

We can draw some general lessons from the example of the 'conjuntos'. Let me summarise the well documented conclusions that I and some colleagues have reached. These centrally administered package deals, built by big contractors and funded by big



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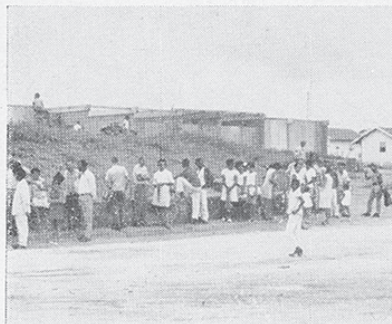
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banks, generate less low income employment than would be demanded through support for traditional systems. They increase the maldistribution of income between classes and regions, and therefore accelerate rural-urban migration and the premature suburbanisation of the cities. They also increase the dependency of the poorer nations on the wealthier ones which finance the programmes, or which profit from the business they generate.

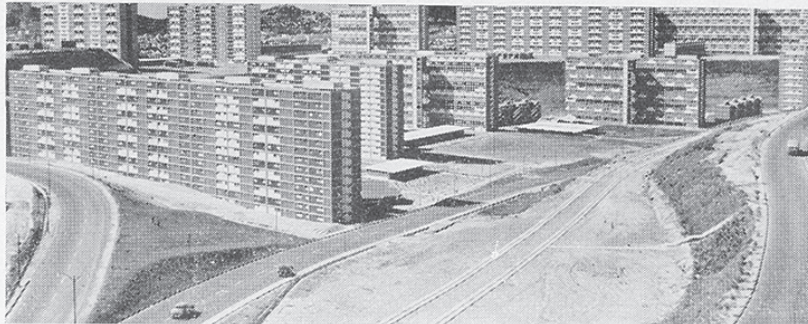
In other words, and in contrast to the 'alagado' settlements, the 'conjuntos' and similar projects are the opposite of an ecosystem. Far from being life supports and generating a life giving environment, they are a burden to their inhabitants and, especially if the latter resist paying, a burden to society at large. Of course, big business profits as long as the government carries the liabilities: and where the government authorities have no direct interests in the construction industry, the business representatives and executives still reap plenty of political profit – in the short run, anyway, and while the projects remain photogenic, 24.

I cannot end this discussion of the Brazilian 'conjuntos' without pointing out that the tragedies which 'urban renewal' and other common urban disasters represent for the lower and lowest income sectors in developing countries are well known by those rich enough to avoid them but compassionate enough to read. But equal or worse disasters are currently befalling many inner city people throughout the world because, alas, the greed of real estate speculators





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and the corruption and megalomania of politicians and their professional lackeys far outweigh the influence of those who have the honesty and courage to see and know the people they deal with.

## A basic issue: values and standards

With a somewhat rhetorical question, I can now return to my key point. Which of the two forms is better as housing: the physical project or the unplanned settlement? If my interpretations are correct, the answer is obvious: what is commonly described as 'bad' housing, what most observers would regard as a ghastly slum, is a far better environment – for the people in the situations described – than the project, in spite of the latter's physically 'decent' and sanitary appearance.

But when settlements are destroyed because of the 'indecent' perceived by those who have the power to destroy, and when their inhabitants are unable to escape back into the city, they stagnate or even starve in the suburban project. Even if the physical project was superbly designed, that would make no essential difference to its destructive effects on socially and economically displaced persons.

Housing and banking authorities in developing countries seem to be universally insensitive to the realities of low income household budgets. It is commonly assumed that any household can and will pay up to one

quarter of its regular income for household services. That is an absurd and dangerous assumption to make on behalf of people who must spend three quarters or more of their income on food in order to keep themselves in fair health.

The vast majority of the main urban population in low income and rapidly urbanising countries (more than three quarters in Dar es Salaam, and more than two thirds in Mexico City, for example) cannot spend more than between one tenth and one sixth of their generally insecure income on rent or loan payments and utilities. In the lowest income countries (eg, Tanzania), as distinct from low income countries like Brazil, Mexico, or Peru, at least one quarter of the urban population is living either below or dangerously near the absolute minimum – that is, on what I call 'subsistence income'.

I define that as income from which 80–90 per cent must be spent on food and cooking fuel for the household to maintain a minimally acceptable diet – that is, one which will allow the upkeep of health and growth under local conditions. If people on or below subsistence level have to spend more than 5 per cent on rent, or even less, then any physical environmental improvements they pay for are likely to be more than cancelled out by malnutrition.

In the light of facts like these, we must ask ourselves: how have we come to base our actions on the absurd premise that the shape of things matters more than what they do to people, or what people can do with them, or that beauty is somehow

independent of existential utility? My main purpose here is not to resolve but to present the basic moral, linguistic, and political issues, which are too often ignored. And the first of these is the issue of 'value', which is so clearly raised by the absurdity of slum clearance and the resettlement of the poor by the rich.

The choice between values which are frequently in conflict – such as usefulness or commercial exchange or social prestige – is not a simple either/or problem. When and where should we apply material or commercial standards and values, and when or where should we apply human or functional ones? 'Value' has – and will continue to have – two meanings, and most of us would agree that we need both of them in any large scale, organised society.

But the problems that we face are rooted, in part, in the habitual misuse of those meanings, as illustrated by the Brazilian case. It is by no means a particularly Brazilian evil, of course, since the governments of almost all countries – Venezuela, 25, Hong Kong, 26, Spain, 27 – are guilty of similar practices.

The real origin of these humanly destructive, but commercially and often politically profitable, resettlement programmes can be traced to what Jacques Ellul has called the 'institutionalisation of values' – that is, to the conversion of activities into commodities. This process is a perversion of genuine culture common to the USA and the USSR, and to all countries and classes in between. I find a grim sort of





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satisfaction in the fact that Brezhnev has been buying Pepsi-Cola from Richard Nixon.

Rather than extend, here, my own interpretation of this key to an understanding of the problems I am presenting. I will repeat two of my favourite quotations, and encourage you to reflect on them. The first is by Edward Sapir, writing in 1924 on 'Culture: genuine and spurious' [*Culture, language, and personality*, ed David Mendelbaum, University of California Press]:

'So long as the individual retains a sense of control over the major goods of life, he is able to take his place in the cultural patrimony of his people. Now that the major goods of life have shifted so largely from the realm of immediate to that of remote ends, it becomes a cultural necessity for all who would not be looked on as disinherited to share in the pursuit of those remoter ends. No harmony and depth of life, no culture, is possible when activity is well nigh circumscribed by the sphere of immediate ends, and when functioning within that sphere is so fragmentary as to have no inherent intelligibility or interest.

'Here lies the grimmest joke of our present [urban industrial] civilisation. The vast majority of us, deprived of any but an insignificant and culturally abortive share in the satisfaction of the immediate wants of mankind, are

further deprived of both opportunity and stimulation to share in the production of nonutilitarian values. Part of the time we are dray horses: the rest of the time we are listless consumers of goods which have received no least impress of our personality. In other words, our spiritual selves go hungry, for the most part, pretty much of the time.'

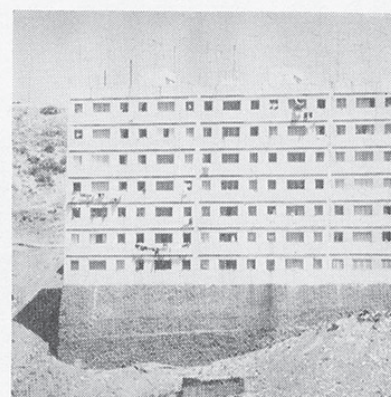
And this is how Ivan Illich puts it in his recent book, *Tools for conviviality* [Calder & Boyars]:

'People not only need to obtain things. I think they need, above all, the freedom to make things – things among which they can live. To give shape to them, according to their own feelings, their own tastes, their own imagination [28 29]. And to put them to use in caring for each other and about each other. Prisoners often have access to more things and services than other members of their families. But they have no say in how things are to be made, and cannot decide what to do with them. Their punishment consists exactly in being deprived not of things but of what I call "conviviality". Not of products [30] but of intercourse – real live social intercourse [31].

'I choose the word "conviviality" to designate precisely the contrary of productivity. I want it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and intercourse of persons with their environment [32].



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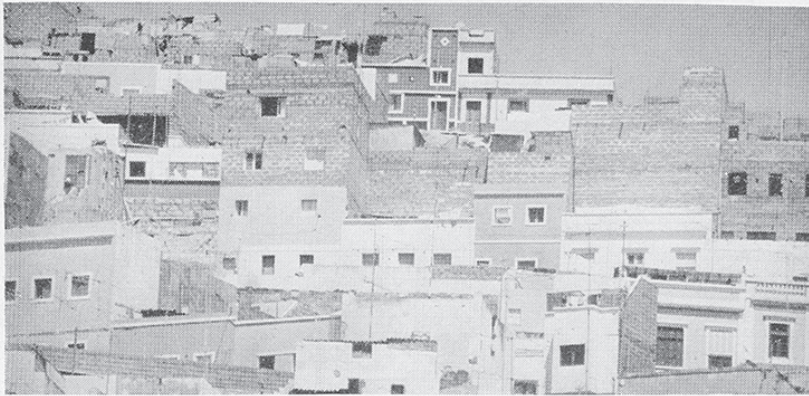
In this sense, I oppose conviviality to the conditioned and efficient response which persons give to the demands made on them by others.'

## Cultural values and the economy of autonomy

I want, in conclusion, to turn to the issues of authority and economy, which underpin the question of who decides and who gets what in the housing process, and therefore directly touch the problem of the professional's role. These more specific issues are bounded, however, by the issues of value and culture discussed above. I argue for local and even personal autonomy in housing – for the packaging or assembling of housing, that is, rather than for the production of components. I have experience of the autonomous or self help production of bricks, and I know that that job is better left to the factory, where real economies of scale can be achieved.

The arguments that my friends and I advance in *Freedom to build* cannot be understood except in the context of the larger issues of value and culture. Our perception of value determines our conception of the world that we live in and, therefore, the nature of the relationship between the human and the natural worlds – between





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culture (or civilisation) and the biosphere. But the other two basic issues hinge on the relationship between people and the environments they create – which raises the issue of economy – and on the relationship between people themselves – which raises the issue of authority, power, and autonomy.

The proposition of *Freedom to build* which I quoted earlier is that the housing users' economy is closely tied to the level of their autonomy. This implies, for example, that the appallingly uneconomic 'conjuntos' would never have been built if the intended users had been allowed a measure of control over the process at least equivalent to their expected contribution: the supposed beneficiaries were, after all, expected to pay the greater part of the financial cost of the projects. The fact that many of these shanghaied and unwilling mortgagees resist paying, often successfully, reinforces the strength of this argument.

The analysis is based on a simple but often overlooked fact. In any kind of exchange or conversion system involving goods or services that people must pay for in one way or another, effective demand is a variable which is dependent on the expected supply. In other words, no one is going to get off his arse unless he can expect something better to come about as a result – even if it is only the reduction

of anxiety created by not doing what is customary.

Problems emerge in housing, as in many other activities, when those motivated to sponsor, design, and build are separate from those who have to use and pay for what is built. The bigger and more highly centralised the producers, and the more alienated they are from the users (whom, of course, they regard as consumers), the greater the likelihood of gross mismatches between supply and demand, and the greater the frictions and resistances in the system as a whole.

The disfunctions and diseconomies of centrally organised housing become obvious in situations where the users themselves still control the greater part of the resources necessary for housing – that is, where most of the land, labour, and cash available for investment in housing is still controlled by the people who need houses – as distinct from the so called 'private' or the so called 'public' corporations.

For the rich nations, then, the true significance of the Peruvian young towns or the Brazilian 'alagados' lies in the fact that these sectors still have de facto control over the bulk of available housing resources for the mass of the people. Under the circumstances that I have described, their systems generally work, whereas those that we build for them fail.

Crude as the young towns or 'alagado' settlements may be, they represent the evolution of authentic culture. Unlike our energy-rich and increasingly shortlived and rigid urban industrial housing, they do not filthy the larger environment. They neither defile people nor desecrate the meaning of life. In a word, they do not pollute: despite their often appalling poverty and great personal hardships, these people's actions are a celebration of human life.

## The problem of being an architect today

And it is here that I finally locate my view of our problem. I mean that the problem of being an architect today – or a planner, or a doctor, or an accountant, or any kind of professional in the urban industrial sector – is nothing less than the problem of being a privileged member of the dominant rich minority in a divided world with a very uncertain future.

It no longer seems paranoid to speak about this crisis of confidence in the world's future, nor is it embarrassing to mention its personal counterpart. I am now looking back over ten years' professional school training, over another ten years of retooling activities – partly helped and partly frustrated by that schooling – plus about seven more years spent trying to make sense of it all. I am not sure what I see behind me and, therefore, I am even less sure about what I can see ahead.

I have returned to my home country for an experimental period, after nearly seventeen years in the older and newer New World, partly because I feel that the issues I am talking about seem even more pertinent in the USA or the UK than in Peru or Brazil – even though the problems which they give rise to are more acute, and cause more suffering, on the urban industrial periphery. I have learned more about life and about real skills and demands, especially in the field of housing, on the periphery than I ever did at the centre. In fact, I am no longer sure that this centre/periphery model is correct. Certainly, the assumptions behind our current concept of 'marginality' are being questioned.

I am not, of course, saying that we should all go and live in 'alagados', or even that we should junk our machines. But I do believe that we should take a new and open look at the real values of what we do and, of course, at our own personal values, which our activities presumably reflect. I look forward to working with those who feel as I do, so that we can liberate both our thought and our action as creative people.