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# Democratic architecture

## *a challenge to the working class*

**A**rt, architecture, aesthetics - these are not words that open doors. When you're having a beer you don't want to discuss the latest trend in architecture. That's how arty middle-class people spend their time. Workers deal with real life: improved wages and working conditions, more houses and land.

The state has always concerned itself with these 'airy-fairy' matters. Those who hold the real power in our society know full well that the form, the style of a building is intimately related to how it is intended to be used, and what it is meant to communicate.

Whether we listen or not, buildings speak to us. They talk about our cultures. Workers produce these symbols, but see culture as something which belongs to someone else. Workers are, in brief, alienated from their own work, their surroundings and from their fellow human beings.

### **Alienated work, alienated architecture**

The buildings we put up reflect the way they are produced. Pleasure has been squeezed out of the production process - time, we are told, is money.

The priority is getting the job done: cutting costs, standardizing, automating, streamlining. Architectural workers at the drawing board, typists in the typing pool, workers on site - all are subordinated to the drive for profit. Small wonder, then, that our buildings repel. They are built not to delight

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*Alan Lipman and Howard Harris issue a challenge to workers to take charge of their living and working spaces.*

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us but to ring the cash registers ever louder.

Shoddy or slick, the examples are everywhere: the bare, mechanical uniformity of townships; the standard, handed-down, little-box houses in which the more fortunate of us live, those gleaming, overbearing office blocks construction workers build but seldom enter; the ugly, uncaring factory interiors that look out onto slick office 'parks'.

There is little pleasure either in the way our built environments are produced or in the way they are experienced. The few who can afford to, tend to flee them; to seek relief in green suburbs in the countryside, by the sea, in the mountains.

### **Another vision**

It need not be like this. If people were able to work differently, we could overcome this alienation.

Imagine a life in which people work freely - they control how they work and what they work on. They can see the whole production process in which they are engaged. They imagine how the products



*One-room house in Eldorado Park; our buildings rebel.*

they make will be used. Work is not drudgery but imaginative exploration. It is a creative activity that helps to shape the lives of producers and users.

There are plenty of examples of this kind of work in South Africa. Look at our ubiquitous mud-block, thatched huts with their sturdy, readily available and climatically suitable construction, their elegant *lapas*, decorated walls, door and window openings, their harmonious setting among the similar buildings about them. Look at our tough, spare barns and graceful verandah farmhouses tucked into clumps of trees that offer shade and protection from winds.

Look in the now unfashionable inner suburbs of our cities and towns, at the brick and corrugated iron row houses with their intricately patterned timber railings and trellis-work.

Not least, look at the inventive use of common materials - sheet and corrugated iron, industrial plywood and timber

packing cases - which impoverished shack dwellers assemble in powerful abstract patterns.

These are not the products of alienated labour. They are expressions of the fusion of beauty and use, of the unity of pleasure and work.

### Speaking out

What do we want of our architecture, of our physical surroundings? In the new South Africa, with the taste of liberation still sweet, we must speak up, loudly, clearly. Others are not so quiet, they have developed the habit of talking for us, of deciding what we need.

We live in the broken-down world they have passed off on us: tiny, shoddy, crumbling houses; pared-down, uninviting school buildings, ugly, inadequate, often burnt-out railway stations; bleak shops behind threatening razor-wire; hostile, closed-off police stations that dominate our

forlorn suburbs, work settings that insult the aesthetic sensibilities of those who are obliged to occupy them. Is this what we want, is this us? Hardly. This is a world hungry for design.

We need an architecture that reminds us of where we have come from, which understands and is inspired by the past, but never forgets it belongs in the present.

This will not be an architecture that wallows in the past, that turns its back on the future. This is not fat cat, fast-car architecture, not the off-the-shelf, stuck on, centimetres thick, not quite accurate replicas of elsewhere that now litter our cities.

This concept of architecture - which is known as 'architectural modernism' has its roots in the struggle for socialism in Europe between the two World Wars.

## Participation

In Europe such ideas remained the preserve of a small elite. We need to go beyond this elitism, to come together as producers and consumers, builders and users, to pass beyond the current separation of cultural experts, specialists, from the rest of us.

If architects are to draw on their knowledge to help solve our problems, they must listen to us. They must learn directly what our problems and desires are. That means comprehensive public involvement in building design.

This requires open, democratic participation by all in the decisions that bear on their lives. It is something more than a consumer's opportunity merely to select from set, predetermined alternatives - like which miche-meal to choose from all the brightly packaged brands. It's more than voting with one's money, a process in which wealth and power carry privileged access to resources, including building resources. Full participation arises from the right to play a full part in deciding what choices are to be made available, discussing them publicly and

then choosing.

Efforts to approach this ideal are rare in South Africa. Some examples which spring to mind are the Belhar Housing Project at Bontelucwul on the Cape Flats, the Bransdale scheme in Phoenix, Natal and the Workers' Library in Newtown, Johannesburg.

Participation presents the possibility of breaking through the usually closed relationship of client and architect; to include, as a matter of course, those who will live and work in what is designed. It rests on co-operation between them and designers, through shared control of resources, in order to plan, erect and then use buildings that are suited to and fit for those who will occupy them.

Realisation of this vision will come closer when communities reach out to their architects, their painters, carvers, sculptors... For, as the radical sociologist C Wright Mills wrote, "you cannot 'possess' art merely by buying it, you cannot support art merely by feeding artists - although that does help. To possess it you must earn it by participating to some extent in what it takes to design and create it. To support it you must catch in your consumption of it something of what is involved in the production of it." ★

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