

FREEDOM ORDER AND ARCHITECTURE:

BRIAN MICKLETHWAIT



The world abounds with spontaneous architectural orders. If a group of people all seek to build similar structures with similar materials, to solve similar problems of accommodation, all in one area, the result will be an orderly cluster even though no one decision-maker imposed the pattern. Pattern comes from the repetition of the same materials and shapes, either because each designer arrives independently at the intelligent answer, or because the intelligent answer, once established, is then copied, with minor variations. The result is often not merely architecturally satisfactory but beautiful, all the more so because of the variations in the individual structures. Crystal clusters, in which the individual crystals are similar in shape but not identical, are often beautiful in the same way as architectural design.

The humble terrace of town houses or high street shops did not originate as a single act of design. It was the consequence of different householders and shop owners individually seeking their separate frontages on the same street, like people jostling together to watch a procession. The (not at all obvious) rules concerning how best to build and inhabit terraces *evolved* long before any architect

was able to apply the results of this learning process to the conscious creation of single terraces all built at one time. The terraced glories of Georgian Bath or Regency London could not have been designed without this earlier period of trial-and-error terrace building by multitudes of now unknown artisans. Imposed architectural order is not automatically wrong. It is what architects are paid to do. What matters is whether architects, in the regularities they do create, use the knowledge evolved and embodied in spontaneous orders, or whether they turn their backs on it.

THE SKYSCRAPER CLUSTER

Recent examples of spontaneous architectural orders are rare. One glorious exception is in the form of the skyscraper cluster, which first burst onto the architectural scene in Chicago and New York in the latter half of the 19th Century, and which is now a feature of all major cities whose planners do not (as in London) forbid it. The first skyscrapers were denounced by the American East Coast architectural establishment. They were the result of a happy alliance between steel salesmen eager to find other applications for their product besides railways and railway bridges, and architects who were more concerned to satisfy the wishes of their customers than to submit to the architectural inhibitions of their day. Skyscrapers cluster because all the landowners in city centres face the same

problem (how to maximise floor space in a part of town where rents are very high), but permit one another only one direction in which to go to get the answer (up). The famous Manhattan skyline is a sky *line* because land values vary continuously rather than discontinuously, not because any one person ever drew that line.

ONLY ONE MENTAL CATEGORY

If the first recognisably 'modern' buildings were monuments to human freedom and to the technological ingenuity that freedom had nurtured, the so-called 'modern movement' in architecture was quite different. The modern movement vision of the architectural future was first publicised in the 1920s by such books as Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme* and Walter Gropius' *The New Architecture and The Bauhaus*. (Gropius' Bauhaus, based first in Weimar and then Dessau, Germany, until it succumbed to Adolf Hitler, was without doubt the most influential school of architecture and design in the 20th Century.)

It wasn't that Le Corbusier, Gropius and their allies and followers could not see architectural order. For the idea of order (a word which Le Corbusier often emphasised with italics or capital letters) mattered to them very much. The problem was that they had only one mental category in which to place it. They saw either imposed order or no order at all. The modernists denounced spontaneous terraces and spontaneous skyscraper clus-

Cultural Notes No. 3

ISSN 0267-677X ISBN 1 85637 205 7

An occasional publication
of the Libertarian Alliance,

25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street,
London SW1P 4NN

www.libertarian.co.uk

email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Brian Micklethwait.

This article first appeared, under the title "Fire
The Planners", in the April 1983 issue of
Economic Affairs, the journal of the Institute of
Economic Affairs.

The views expressed in this publication are those
of its author, and not necessarily those of the
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Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

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ters as unmitigated chaos, the characteristic product of the chaotic free market. And the highly regimented terraces then more typical of cities than the new excitements of Manhattan were dismissed by the modernists as tyranny, even though such terraces were directly based on the evolved terraces of earlier times and were built, rented, bought and sold by free people on the free market.

The modernists accepted skyscrapers, but, in order to introduce the natural daylight and rural healthiness that they considered desirable, separated them from each other by wide expanses of 'public open space'. In other words, all the inconvenience and expense of high-rise building was accepted while its one great benefit, an immense floor area to site area ratio, was thrown away. Nearer the ground the modernist rejection of evolved architectural patterns was just as damaging. Terrace-like buildings were proposed which were at least as tyrannical as anything built by the hated 19th Century property developers. But these structures were separated from the roads which are the original reason for terraces in the first place. Pavements (that is, paths bounded by roads on one side and houses or shops on the other) ceased to exist, for no better reason than that the modernist architects regarded them as muddled and unsafe. We now know, from bitter experience and from the analysis of such writers as Jane Jacobs, that compared to 'public open spaces' pavements are very safe indeed.

THE WRONG LESSONS LEARNT

It was Jane Jacobs, whose classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was published in 1961, who introduced the idea of spontaneous order into mainstream architectural commentary. But having been so disastrously ignored by the founders of the modern movement, the concept was then sentimentalised and trivialised by their successors. Spontaneous architectural order was equated

with the small, 'human scale' architecture of far-off times and faraway places. The architecture magazines became filled with picturesque aerial views of Italian hill-towns, African hutclusters, intricate Arabic townscapes and the like. Such things are indeed beautiful, but the wrong lesson was learnt from them.

Architects grasped that there is something desirable and distinctive about spontaneous architectural order, but, making the very same error as the early modernists, they identified this distinctive feature to be ... chaos. Only now they called it 'variety', 'humanity', 'complexity', and so on, and regarded it as a good thing. Architects are now building pseudo-spontaneous orders, that is, places which are not the product of many different interacting plans, but which *look as if they are*. Bland slabs of office *circa* 1955 are confronted fifteen years later by asymmetrical cascades of little boxes, like cottages tumbling down the side of a mountain, or like a crystal formation.

For such a contrast look at the two sides of Victoria Street, London SW1, at the front of Westminster Cathedral. The famous Byker wall, in Newcastle, looks like a gypsy encampment carved into the side of a cliff, an effect achieved by permitting individual dwellers to select their preferred exterior colour scheme from a range of choices offered by the architect. Council estates that would earlier have been done as a lumbering herd of identical concrete monsters grazing in a prairie, in the manner of the award-winning Roehampton Estate of the '50s, are now being tricked out to look like fishing villages, with randomised changes of brickwork and steeply pitched roofs. This latter tendency has been especially marked, for some reason, in the County of Essex, where a special Council manual was produced to spread the correct new style.

This outburst of bogus spontaneity has not been a wholly disastrous develop-

ment. It is not necessary to know why a spontaneous order works well for copying it to be a wise strategy. 'Noddy houses' is the name sneeringly given to the new picturesque style by orthodox modernists, but these Noddy houses are prettier than the old tower blocks, to most eyes. Because the Noddy house designers are imposing an architectural effect based only in a very picture postcard way on anything ever built before, they are now perpetrating the same kind of unplanned disasters (dampness, disintegrating plaster, absurd heating bills, etc.) hitherto only associated with tower blocks; but some fishing village virtues are recaptured. For example, if disaster strikes a cluster of Noddy houses only selectively, individual dwellings can (unlike those in tower blocks) be ripped out and replaced, without everything else having to go as well, and without the overall effect being spoiled.

LET FREEDOM COMMENCE

However, these pseudo-spontaneous architectural orders raise a question mark against the entire legislative and institutional setting within which architecture is now practised. When the modern movement in architecture was launched, there was no talk of muddle being picturesque. The need was for order, grand simplicity, a perfectly straight skyline, and vast, green, open spaces. This vision has now collapsed, and is being replaced by a very different one, but the institutions established to make the old vision come true are still all in place. Yet if pseudo-spontaneous orders are now considered desirable, what is wrong with the real thing?

If the appearance of architectural freedom is now considered beautiful rather than a mess, why may not free people be left alone to get on with it?

Why may they not keep their numerous little plots of land, the institutional precondition for a genuine spontaneous architectural order, and do exactly what they want with them.

Why are planning departments needed at all, if the plans of mere people are now acknowledged to interact in a satisfactory way?

Why brainwash aspiring architects in monastic government-funded seclusion if what they are now required to do is what their clients would have wanted them to do anyway?

Let architects learn the architecture of freedom from their customers, and from their professional seniors best skilled at satisfying these customers. The logic is inescapable: close the planning departments and fire the planners, abolish compulsory purchase orders, close all the schools of architecture except those that entrepreneurs can run at a profit. And let freedom commence.

