

## “HOLD THE FRONT PAGE – BUILDINGS ARE NOT MADE BY MAGIC”

- 1** The board rooms of multi-national construction firms, the concrete factory managers office, and the debating chambers of politicians and planners, are remote inaccessible places. The camouflaging of the decision making process that occurs in such locations can create the impression that buildings and cities are produced by some sort of extraordinary alchemist's trick that is beyond our comprehension.
- 2** However, it is self-evident that everything connected with the built environment, a drawing, a text, a whole building or indeed a city, is produced by the hands and minds of workers. This process, far from being a politically neutral activity is characterised by conflict and competing interest. Here, it is true, that through organised struggle, architects, construction workers and tenants can influence the way in which buildings and cities are produced. But for most of human history their voices and desires alongside those of the politically dispossessed and economically marginalised, have struggled to be heard against the ideas and motivations of the class that owns and controls the land, technology, and capital which are necessary for building production to take place.
- 3** It follows that historically, the ability to build large scale works and restructure cities has tended to reside in the laps of the rich and powerful, whether the senators of ancient Rome, the Lords and Bishops of feudal Europe, or the state and capitalist bureaucracies of the last two centuries. Not surprisingly then, the production of most urban spectacles from the construction of the first city state of antiquity, to the nineteenth century neo-classical metropolis, and onwards to the twentieth century plans for new cities like Brasilia, Canberra or New Delhi, has been driven by the need to represent and consolidate political and economic power.
- 4** To try and explain how and why such buildings and cities are produced, it is necessary to explore their broader social and architectural context. In particular this requires us to investigate and reveal the political and economic objectives of the individuals and social organisations that control the labour of architects, technicians and building workers, and which direct the activities of users. Here, there is a crucial difference between building activity in modern capitalist societies and that of earlier epochs. The modern city, it's blocks, individual buildings, their parts and contents, along with the labour of architects and building workers are either transformed into, or are produced as, commodities. That is, they become things that are created primarily to be bought and sold in the market place.
- 5** This produces a fundamental shift in the functional and social objectives of building production. It is not enough for instance that a house should stand up, keep out the bad weather, or even encapsulate the desire of its occupant in terms of projecting an image of status and wealth. It must first and foremost make money for the land development company, the construction firm and the bank supplying the credit. The imperative of maximising profits for these institutions can distort the decisions about what, how and where to build. Capitalist society has frequently produced buildings and urban regeneration projects that are at odds with the social, psychological and physiological needs of workers, tenants and users. Sick building syndrome, energy guzzling offices, poorly built ghettos, increasingly intrusive forms of surveillance and collapsing infrastructure are just a few of the examples.
- 6** Under such circumstances it can prove very difficult to produce built environments that prioritise human need and happiness and which consciously explore and expand the realm of individual and social freedom. For in the context of an increasingly privatised built environment of 'fortified' housing estates, retail parks and city centres, human pleasure, environmental comfort and liberty tend to be defined in terms of monetary value and the defence of property. As a result the ability to choose how and where to live is restricted. First in terms of income level, and second in relation to the prescribed "choices" that are available in the carefully controlled and regulated markets for building products and services.
- 7** Despite the appearance of the capitalist production of the built environment as a conspiracy or covert operation, it is not the intention of financiers or construction firms to produce a built environment, that despite all efforts to the contrary, continues to be characterised by profound socio-spatial inequality and environmental degradation. Rather this is a natural consequence of the unremitting pursuit of profit, and of the concentrated private ownership of land and the objects and instruments of building production.
- 8** But things are not quite so gloomy, for alongside the history of capitalist domination exists another history, that of the individuals, groups and classes that have sought to gain control over the production and use of the built environment. The development of different forms of socialised property in land and buildings. The creation of a fully democratised and accountable programme of urban development. The transformation of the labour of architects and builders into a liberated creative activity over which they have control. The production of hitherto unimaginable new building types and changes of use for existing buildings. These are just some of the projects that exist on the horizons of alternative forms of production.