Life-Conditioning – Cedric Price

A greater awareness in architects and planners of their real value to society could, at the present, result in a rare occurrence, namely, the improvement of the quality of life as a direct result of architectural endeavor.

Although basic behavioral pattering of institutions and individuals has been increasingly questioned for the last 50 years, the period of wholesale rejection of old mores, through expediency, necessity, or intelligence, is comparatively recent. Such rejection has enabled a wide range of new, less-well defined, or pedigree-shrouded, social, economic, and administrative patterns to evolve. Thus, the building of a new Colonial office becomes a non-problem, while the days of pit-head baths are numbered.

Far from encouraging such change and accelerating its ordered advance, architecture and planning would appear to show no realization of its capacity to make such a contribution. In fact, most architects and planners have consistently produced three-dimensional packaged ammunition for the reactionaries.

(Civic centers, green belts, the rehabilitation of No. 10 Downing Street, Coventry Cathedral, Brasilia, and Piccadilly Circus Mark 3 do not strike me as particularly constructive solutions to their causatory discontents.)

I consider it unlikely that architecture and planning will match the contribution Hush Puppies have made to society today, let alone approach that of the transistor or loop, until a total reappraisal of its particular expertise is self-imposed, or inflicted from outside.

Unfortunately, the nature of education of architects and planners is primarily directed at producing three-dimensional disciplining for all-comers. Perhaps this would not be so bad if any assessment were made of the valid lifespan of the client's intentions and desires. (The well-meaning progressive parents/institutions who, on planning their future home with their architect/planner, are concerned about inbuilt flexibility that will enable their offsprings to live quite differently from them, tragically ignore the increasing probability that their loved ones will not stay around to enjoy such consideration.)

Change and flexibility in architecture and planning is associated by the professions with the adaptation, extension, or most progressively with the limited life of structures and organizations, which, however, are permanently dependent on their particular siting or interaction with other artifacts. Thus, while institutions, trades and activities question their very existence, the architects and planners are tearing their guts out looking for new ways to justify such existence. (Chester will not be destroyed by a demolition order approved by the Royal Fine Arts Commission; it will die when the last antique-boutique operator and his clientele are bored with hobbling over the cobbles and move out.)

However, architects and planners are desperately dedicated to trying to inject or discover some relevance in civilized man's aged-artifactual droppings – 'keep the cars out, build a by-pass, slap a preservation order on the front and some more square feet on the back'.

If architects and planners were a little more modest about the debt society owes them for possessing such fantastic three-dimensional awareness, and a little more conceitedly optimistic about the immense acceleration they, through their expertise, are capable of providing to the progress of ordered social change, they might in fact warrant attention from the rest for their other qualities. At the present it is difficult to find good reasons why they should not be ignored totally. *(Salvation through Shell does not*

need That Tower to drive the message home while one can Make Money with…; while no one requires a monument to the turning circle of the family car at the Elephant and Castle.)

Over-hot imagery in built form appears to be in inverse proportion to the importance of the activities it houses. *('If St Pancras Station is to go its successor must be even more gloriously recognizable', they said, stepping over the National Computer Grid.)*

I believe that a large proportion of the task of providing either in-built flexibility or planned obsolescence has already been taken out of the hands of the architects and planners at the physical scale of a particular artifact or locale. This has occurred though the allied professions' incapacity to help, but the next phase of life conditioning has yet to be undertaken. Such a phase demands a far more deliberate application of an expendable aesthetic in which, of course, determination of valid social life will be required for all artifactual decisions, being a necessary constituent of such an aesthetic.

This involves the recognition of the fact that as the even availability-network of invisible services increases in both intensity and content *(Credit Cards and communication satellites)* the residual activities requiring physical location, hardware and access become more particular or 'to taste'. *(the wine and food socialists have always been able to send meaningful articles to the Statesman from the South of France while no one cares where Cadbury's Milk Chocolate is made.)*

This in fact becomes a far more critical conditioning task for the architect and planner, since he can no longer take refugee in decision-making as a result of determining the LCD, for it need no longer exist – in his realm, at least. Thus, the consciously planned and purposely built environment that exploits the potential of unevenness of environmental conditioning is likely to become one of the main contributions that architects and planners can make to society.

The obvious danger is that the undertaking of such a task will result in a further contribution to the soul-destroying static fixes in which architects and planners take refuge. *(The publicly embarrassing back-peddling on the definition of 'a balanced community' from the New Town Mark 1 version, demanding juxtapositions of income (class) groups, to that of the Hook Plan, requiring merely an even distribution of age groups, has not rid us of the planners' determination to try to pre-determine the 'Good (collective) Life'.)*

However, once architects and planners rid themselves of the idea that they are capable, through that which they leave on the ground, of re-orientating the past to the advantage of the present generation, then it is likely that the following objectives can be undertaken in the cause of life-conditioning only by good architects and planners.

The architect/planner must exercise all his expertise, on being asked for artifactual conditioning, on the relevance or necessity for doing anything at all. (The best technical advice may be that rather than build a house your client should leave his wife.)

A realization that image-making has passed from Easter Island via the Cathedral Builders to the International Publishing Corp., and that architectural imagery in the minds of observers is always related with delight to the personal relevance of the observed project, even if only a building.

Decisions requiring re-allocation of effort or endeavor on the part of the client should also be suggested by the architect or planner. Thus, the writing of the brief in relation

to, say, the housing of increased population, must be done by the planner and not by the Treasury. *('We want a town of 250,000 people. Tell us where to put it and what it might look like'.)* The acceptance by the designer of the ephemerality of existing definitions of collective conditioning kits such as 'house', 'overcoat', commuter service', and 'shop'. *(It would be encouraging if architectural students were less concerned about what might come through such a shortsighted opening.)*

It is rather pathetic that, while the appearance and performance of clothes, foo, furniture, motor cars and wives/husbands is now considered a subject worthy of only limited-term personal predilection, the value judgement on a house or town is not for the users to make but for posterity.

With these objectives in view the Potteries Thinkbelt is proposed. Underlying its proposals are the following intentions:

The housing of a major activity such as education should be viewed in architectural terms as a demand to increase the availability of such a service on a national scale, though its dispensation may through necessity require a limited locale. This would appear to be in opposition to current higher educational practice where the containers are dressed up to look like a medieval college with power points and are located in gentlemanly seclusion.

An activity that will increasingly occupy a large proportion of everyone's life should be in contact with areas near and far where the rest of life is to be spent.

Education, if it is to become a continuous human-servicing service run by the community, must be provided with the same lack of peculiarity as the supply of drinking water or free teeth.

A major industry, as a source of employment, wealth and delight, must be capable of being implanted and eventually supplanted, with the minimum amount of (i.e. built) fuss in order to avoid, in the case of the Thinkbelt, the Potteries being branded for all time as the ideal spot for scientific education. *(Think of the terrible fate that befell that rather pleasant little East Anglian market town.)*

Through its form and operation, it provides a test-bed condition for large scale peculiar 'imbalanced' urbanistic development.

The prime weakness of the advanced educational system in Britain is a lack of awareness of both the correct scale and intensity at which such education should occur.

Institutions today are too small and too exclusive. Because advanced education is not regarded as a major national industry, it is in danger of failing to achieve both a recognizable social relevance and a capacity to initiate progress rather than an attempt to catch up with it.

This study proposes a valid national and regional distribution of educational institutions. In addition, by postulating various means of exchange, using electronic static communication systems together with mobile and variable physical enclosures, the study adumbrates the requisite flexible physical organization and variable value of a finite location. Defense, energy, and commerce have in the past been sufficient generators of cities. This project assumes that education and the need to exchange information may have a similar generative force: cities can be made by learning.

The fashionable analogy between existing Universities and ideal towns is dangerous

A firm re-assessment of housing requirements together with an avoidance in the first stage of development of any civic design indicates the real order of priorities.

Further education and re-education must be viewed as a major industrial undertaking and not as a service run by gentlemen for the few. Its resultant quality must stimulate its further use and not, as at the present merely enable statisticians to predict future demand under present conditions.

The PTb is planned to break down isolation and peculiarity associated with further education. It is large enough to involve the whole community and thus to make people realize that further education is not merely desirable but essential. Grants must become salaries.

North Staffordshire – including the Potteries and Newcastle-under-Lyme – is less prosperous than the rest of the West Midland region.*

As far as built physical environment goes it is a disaster area, largely unchanged and uncared for since the nineteenth century.

With a population of between a third and a surrounding country is easily accessible.

Proximity to both national routes and patterns of movement is at present unexploited. The industries – steel, pottery, and rubber – though reasonably prosperous, show little sign o major expansion. The major industry, coal, is likely to contract.

Further education facilities including technical colleges and Workers' Education Association, are fragmented. The first post-war New University at Keele showing the slowest growth of all Universities (student population approximately 1000), has little contact with the area and new faculties related to its industrial activities.

There is a large movement of University entrants to other major Midland Universities – Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, etc.