

Contemporary Architecture 8

the case for considered design

Humans struggle to let go of the past, this sentimental attachment has meant the preservation of many important moments in history, however it has also led to a reluctance to move on. We can all appreciate work by ancient civilizations; they're a part of history, and should be protected, but no serious architects are looking to build another Chichen Itza. So why do we feel the need to carry on building and designing modernist, International style, and other styles of the past?

There are great examples of this work which will be protected, but it's time to move on - 'moving on' doesn't mean creating a building without renaissance's beauty or modernists ruthless practicality. It means taking lessons from the past while adapting and expanding on them. It means creating architecture which is beautiful, functions impeccably and which simultaneously tackles current issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, social and economic inequality.

We need to be drawing inspiration from the positive aspects of architectural history without merely re-building it. We need to be looking at more than our own experience in buildings, we need to be looking at the buildings interaction with local communities, local ecosystems, wildlife, different social groups, the projects embodied carbon footprint and energy use - we need to consider these issues throughout the projects lifetime, from the first drawing to the demolition (or alternative) - This is a lot of work before construction

can begin, however it is the way architectural and design fields will help our species (and many others) survive.

Reversing our impact on the natural world (from one of detraction to contribution) while rectifying social injustices sounds, well ... difficult, but humanity has already seen rapid and radical changes to society, culture and our relationship with the environment. So why doubt we can do it again? The built environment influences the way of life for nearly all of humanity, however it is easy to forget that it also hugely influences the natural world. From drainage and sewage systems to highrises and powerplants it is becoming increasingly difficult for anyone (or anything) to avoid human interference. Unfortunately the collision of these natural and unnatural worlds is an uncooperative one, too often these two worlds see each other as a series of obstacles and threats instead of opportunities. We as designers need to rethink our relationship with the natural world and consider how living, working, building and designing alongside nature can be mutually beneficial.

I am confident our generation will see this change realised, however for every decade, year and month we delay change, the consequences become more dire. Architects and designers need to truly consider (at all stages of design) how their project (however big or small) will interact with and utilise the environment in a way which will benefit society, the environment, and will also retain/increase

profit and quality. The following considerations at a minimum need to be accounted for throughout any projects lifespan.

Site Considerations

_What is to be done with what is previously on the site whether this is an empty field, or an existing building. Can materials be salvaged, used or sold/distributed with value.

_Consider the local area and what the site was previously providing to it, what is needed in the design to promote the positive aspects of the community and ecosystems instead of degrade them?

_Consider available and abundant natural resources on site, can these be used whether in construction or in the finished project?

_What materials will be used, how are these produced, where do they come from and why them. (because thats what we normally use is not a correct answer)

_Consider carbon, environmental and social footprints? Are the materials toxic or unhealthy for humans or nature?

Construction considerations

_Can we reduce the impact on the local area (environmentally and socially), such as not building at unsociable hours, limiting heavy machinery use, reducing road closures/blockages, and limiting noise and waste pollution etc?

_How can the construction benefit the local area, are you employing local people or training unskilled people? Can sections (such as green spaces) be finished first and begin benefiting the local ecosystem and community before the rest of construction is complete?

Use and lifetime considerations

_How will the building benefit the client and users - will it be cost effective, produce a positive environment with natural lighting, use passivhaus techniques to reduce power usage and will it look good?

_How will the building benefit the ecosystem - is a green roof or walls and planting with local species enough? This will largely depend on the location of the project.

_How will the building benefit the local community - are there spaces which can be enjoyed by all, are you blocking daylight or sightlines etc?

Demolition/After-life considerations

_What happens to interior materials (carpets, floorboards etc) can these be re/up-cycled?

_What happens to construction materials (brick, steel etc) - is the steel treated in a way it can be easily recycled; will materials eventually decompose to benefit soils?

_Consider the foundations and underground floors?

_Consider the project being open for adaptation and repairs over time, with the ability to replace parts,

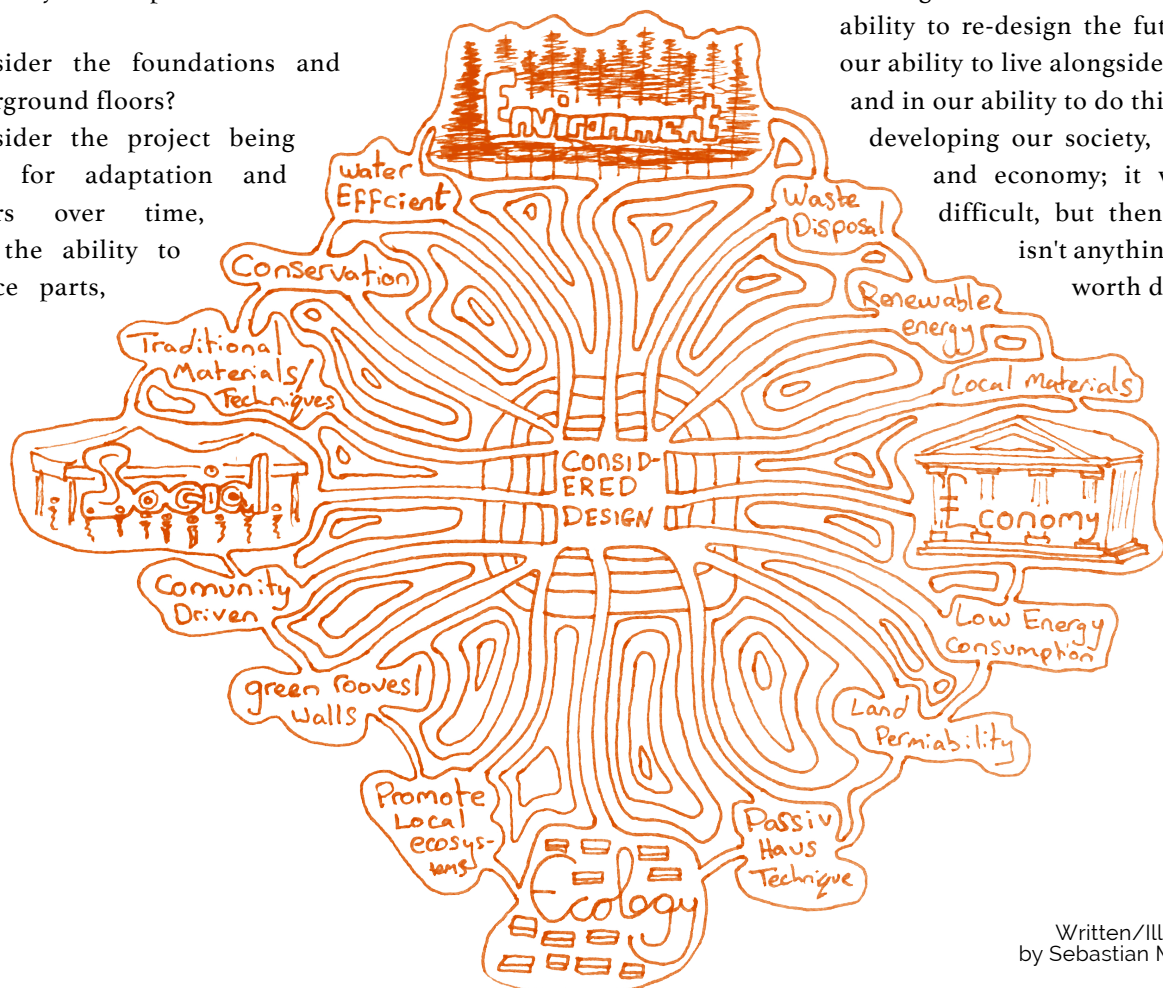
and even expand, allowing the function to change.

There are several examples of projects using innovative materials, techniques and ideas in order to reduce the negative impact of their buildings. The Cork House by Matthew Barnett-Howland, Dido Milne and Oliver Wilton is contemporary and luxurious, sacrificing nothing by using a natural, waste resource which would biodegrade if left untreated. Many projects by William McDonough and Partners are also extremely interesting; implementing their Cradle to Cradle Design Framework into architecture pushes designers toward more wholistic considerations before, during and after the building's lifespan. As well as these, much of the work by Laurie Baker is particularly inspiring, who used local construction methods to produce

truly affordable and energy efficient buildings to benefit local communities and families.

Unfortunately sustainability is not enough at the moment, we have a lot to make up for and it is time we start making a positive change for the world. Many designers use varying techniques to ensure their local ecosystems and communities benefit from their projects; however these projects should be the norm, not the exception. These projects need to be celebrated over a shiny new skyscraper which ignores any original thought; as great projects should lie in their ideas, not in the resolution of their renders.

We will develop new strategies, new materials and re-discover ancient techniques, re-shaping the future of architecture and design. We have lived harmoniously alongside earth before, and we can do it again. I am confident in our ability to re-design the future, in our ability to live alongside nature and in our ability to do this while developing our society, culture and economy; it will be difficult, but then again, isn't anything that's worth doing?



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