#16
MALCOLM MILES: LIVING LIGHTLY ON THE EARTH

one

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers a possibility for radical transformation in the construction of cities. The term 'construction' denotes the generation of the conceptual image to which a city corresponds as well as its built form. There is seldom a single image, and built form may correspond to that image, or resist it. Where a city has been built more or less in one piece, as in some colonial cities established to quickly announce the order of the colonizing power, form and concept are unusually close. Similarly, the planned cities of the Enlightenment order space as a metaphor for the rational state. But urban environments are complex, and informal acts of appropriation by dwellers construct a psychological space overlaying physical space. This is not chaotic; it is a different kind of order. The city of appropriation, being socially produced, may in the end be a more sustainable system. But why should this concern us now?

Half the human inhabitants of the Earth now live in cities, in luxury apartments or cardboard boxes, because they have chosen the excitements of an urban lifestyle or because they have no choice. Many recent immigrants to cities in the southern hemisphere live in informal settlements surrounding those cities. Elizabeth Wilson cites estimates that in the 1960s about one-quarter of the populations of Manila and Djakarta, one-third in Mexico City and one-half in Lima lived in such settlements, and that these proportions are increasing.[1] Within the cities of Europe and North America, enclaves of corporate development marginalize adjacent neighbourhoods. Gleaming office towers such as Canary Wharf or the World Financial Centre in Battery Park City are linked by information super-highways in a 'global city' of continuous dealing, an electronic realm with neither horizon nor nightfall.[2] But is there a disparity between the autonomy of a world accessed by computer terminals and modems and the everyday experiences of urban publics, between expectations of an ever-expanding economy and the destruction of natural resources? The free market on which the global city depends is expensive for people disaffected by gentrification, or subject to market rather than human values; its economy pillages the Earth, causing environmental damage in developing countries, but not only there. And, whilst the fastest rates of urban growth are in the southern hemisphere, the model of the western city is exported throughout the world in a kind of economic colonialism.

Contemporary views of the city, in the literature of urbanism, tend to negativity. Academics and architects are captivated by war-stories from the urban frontier.[3] Their view is supported by scenes of violence and the breakdown of values in films such as *Clockwork Orange* and *Strange Days*. Yet for many of its inhabitants the city remains a viable place of informal mixing, unplanned encounters, cultural diversity and exhilaration – the positive image which draws people into metropolitan centres. Since Georg Simmel argued that the tumult of the metropolis brought about an 'increase in nervous life',[4] urban publics have shown an ability to reconstruct webs of social support within the metropolitan environment, despite the effects of modern planning. In the UK, house renovation, or signs of ownership such as Georgian-style doors and stone cladding, mark a desire for identity. In Turkey, contrastingly and from economic necessity, people build whole houses from scrap materials, yet paint them bright colours.[5] Despite their economic mismatch, could there be any relation between these cases?

1 Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, Berkeley: University of California, 1991, p. 128.
2 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

two

DYSTOPIA AND ITS CAUSES

The perceived dysfunctionality of cities is, perhaps, a projection of a disintegrated subjectivity affirmed by a professional methodology. A naturalizing explanation – couched in the term planning blight with its sense of crop failure – paradoxically masks processes of regulation by professionals who establish a territory of expertise from which users are effectively excluded, and makes explicit the impact of such regulation. The term 'user' itself, according to Henri Lefebvre, is a linguistic marginalization which '... has something vague – and vaguely suspect – about it'.[6]

In a liberal society there is a supposition that urban planning serves the public good. And modernist architecture espouses notions of utopia. More often, today, both professions serve private-sector urban development.[7] Geographer Aram Eisenschitz notes that the history of capitalism 'demonstrates its scant regard for human life' adding that to be poor means 'constraints in access to the basics of life and in the ability to participate in ordinary society'.[8] David Widgery, a doctor in east London, reflects on Canary Wharf as an attempt to insert a USA-style financial district in Docklands, alluding to the way political economy and geographic imperative are presented as inevitable, and the development's portrayal as a 'great leap forward to freedom (redefined as the market) against all the unwanted nonsense of the Welfare State'.[9] He notes the frequency with which people can be seen sleeping in skips, adding that Cesar Pelli, the

3 For instances see: Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, London: Verso, 1990; J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson and L. Tickner, *Mapping the Futures*, London: Routledge, 1993; R. Plunz, Beyond dystopia; beyond theory formation in P. Lang (editor), *Mortal City*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995, pp. 28–36; L. Woods, Everyday war, in P. Lang (editor), *Mortal City, op. cit.*, pp. 47–53; N. Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, London: Routledge, 1996.
4 David Frisby, *Simmel and Since*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 71.
5 M-A. Ray, Gecekondu, in S. Harris and D. Berke (editors), *Architecture of the Everyday*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997, pp. 153–165.
6 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 362.
7 R. Deutsche, Uneven development – public art in New York City, in Diane Ghirardo (editor), *Out of Site*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1991, pp. 157–219; J. Bird, Dystopia on the Thames, in Bird *et al.*, *op. cit.*, note 3, pp. 120–135; Sharon Zukin, Space and symbols in an age of decline, in Anthony King (editor), *Re-Presenting the City*, London: Macmillan, 1996, pp. 43–59.
8 Aram Eisenschitz, The view from the grass roots, in M. Paccione (editor), *Britain's Cities*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 150–176, p. 153.
9 Cited in P. Ambrose, *Urban Process and Power*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 181.

architect of 'the fat Canary' has said that 'A skyscraper recognizes that by virtue of its height it has acquired civic responsibilities ... [a] unique and socially charged role'.[10]

Two factors characterize such developments: a polarization of corporate affluence and human poverty; and an erasure of the multi-layered past of the site. But the construction of a *tabula rasa* is the project of modernity as interpreted by Le Corbusier in *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning:* 'my settled opinion, which is a quite dispassionate one, is that the centres of our great cities must be pulled down and rebuilt ...'.[11] In modernity, the space of clearance is a site of inscription – a new city made in one go, a site for aesthetic autonomy in the design of signature buildings, or its parody in the grotesque vernacular-style of supermarkets. Yet whose is the city in which the gleaming towers rise? Sociologist Sharon Zukin writes that the question 'suggests more than a politics of occupation; it also asks who has a right to inhabit the dominant image of the city'.[12] She draws attention to the exclusion of women and marginalized publics from spaces which represent the city's dominant image.

The separation of a masculine public realm of affairs from feminine spaces of domesticity is ossified in urban planning and justified by an appeal to biological causes. Elizabeth Wilson writes of Patrick Geddes, whom she sees as an important influence on town planning, that, having been trained as a biologist, he emphasized sexual difference, 'since "what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament".'[13] A biological theory of urban growth characterizes, too, the concentric ring model of Chicago sociologist E.W. Burgess. Burgess saw urban expansion as analogous to anabolic and katabolic processes of metabolism, asserting that a segregation into discrete zones determined by class 'gives form and character to the city' because 'segregation offers the group, and thereby the individuals who compose the group, a place and a role in the total organization ...'.[14] Burgess's description has become a prescription as cities re-code their centres as central business districts.

Burgess's view of the city as biology masks its cultural production. Modern city form, whether following the ring or the grid plan, manifests the idea, for instance, of a purification beginning in the seventeenth century, giving rise to rigid spatial boundaries which widen divisions of gender, race and class. In 1656, deviant and non-productive elements of the urban population – the insane and the vagrant – were excluded from visibility and confined in the Hôpital Général.[15] The process of purification continues in the ending of burial in shallow graves around city churches for fear of contagious auras[16] and the introduction of sewers. Purification is accompanied by the appearance of vistas, turning the city from a space of occupation to one of representation.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 184.
11 Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, New York: Dover, 1987, p. 96. Originally published Paris, 1925.
12 Sharon Zukin, Space and symbols in an age of decline, in Anthony King, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
13 E. Wilson, *op. cit.*, note 1, p. 101.
14 Burgess in R. LeGates and F. Stout, *The City Reader*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 94–95.
15 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, London: Tavistock, 1967, pp. 38–64.
16 Ivan Illich, *H_2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, London: Marion Boyars, 1986, p. 50.

In the subjectivity of modernity, the city is reduced to an object in the mental life of its designer, translated into actuality when planning and technology, in service of power and money, make this possible. When the city becomes unliveable, one solution is to re-construct the countryside as sub-urb. Edward Robbins sees such solutions as regressively anti-urban. He further argues that although modern planners and designers are well-intentioned, the disparity of the aim of social reform and the outcome of run-down estates of tower blocks follows prioritization of spatial form over social process: 'social reformers failed to look at the way their critique of space ... unwittingly destroyed the social and cultural energy' of working-class neighbourhoods.[17] The disparity between intention and outcome results from an abstraction of the city which allows professionals in a liberal society to plan development which is destructive in its impact. There are two locations for the origin of this abstraction: the subjectivity of Cartesian dualism; and money.

three

REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE

Henri Lefebvre, relating what he terms representations of space, or the conceived spaces of plans and architectural designs, to the development of linear perspective, situates this in the new economic relations of Tuscany in the thirteenth century. He posits as a complementary form of spatial practice the representational spaces around the body, the spaces of feeling, appropriation and atmosphere which, he emphasizes, are not abolished by the dominance of representations of space. But it is in the inert medium of representation, characterized by a computer screen or a blank sheet of paper on which lines are drawn, that the conceptualization of the modern city, as Lefebvre sees it, takes place. He writes of the architect ensconced in a space bound to graphic elements such as plans and elevations,[18] the basis of which is Cartesian dualism.

Descartes, distrustful of sense impressions and writing in the secluded space of the study – described as 'an intellectual space beyond that of sexuality'[19] – articulated a realm in which the world is reduced to representation. In a passage from the *Discourse* (1637), he writes:

> ... buildings which a single architect has undertaken and completed are usually more beautiful and better ordered than those which several architects have attempted to rework ... Thus these ancient cities are normally so poorly proportioned, compared with the well-ordered towns and public squares that an engineer traces on a vacant plain according to his free imaginings.[20]

17 Edward Robbins, Thinking space/seeing space: Thamesmead revisited, *Urban Design International*, 1, no. 3, September 1996, pp. 283–291, p. 289.
18 Henri Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, note 6, p. 361.
19 Mark Wigley, Untitled: the housing of gender, in Beatriz Colomina (editor), *Sexuality and Space*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 327–389, p. 347.
20 Descartes (1637) cited in C.B. Lacour, *Lines of Thought*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 33.

Representation takes the form of line, and is ordered in the self-contained systems of geometry and mathematics, in which problems can be reduced '... to such terms that a knowledge of the lengths of certain straight lines is sufficient ...'.[21] Claudia Brodsky Lacour comments:

> The act of architectural drawing that Descartes describes is the outlining of a form that was not one before. That form could combine reason ('qu'un ingénieur') with imaginative freedom ('tracé à sa fantasie'). It is not only new to the world, but intervenes in a space where nothing was, on a surface ('dans une plaine') where nothing else is.[22]

In solitude, Descartes conceives an image of an engineer drawing regular places on a blank ground.

four

MONEY

The abstraction of money parallels that of representations of space, distancing individuals from possessions. Simmel writes of the owner of shares, the creditor of a state and the owner of a leased estate as gaining independence through leaving their property to purely technical management by means of money,[23] from which follows the objectification of labour and deterioration of the position of the subordinate in the relation of capital to labour. The freedom of a money economy is contradictory. The way in which freedom presents itself is, Simmel argues, as irregularity and unpredictability; this leads to the anomalies of liberal political constitutions.[24] These anomalies include the liberty of free market economics to determine city form. The abstraction of money linked to that of representations of space produces a city in which urban publics are users of spaces regarded as value-free settings for a city which is not theirs.

five

URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

Mapping the model of the modern city onto the urban fabric of older, inner-city neighbourhoods, or onto settlements in non-western countries, demonstrates its limitations. Ivan Illich notes that '... dwelling by people is transformed into housing for people. Housing is changed from an activity into a commodity'.[25] Abigail Goldberg, in a study of informal settlements in South Africa, contrasts an official view that such settlements pose a threat with an idea that they celebrate the do-it-yourself innovations of their inhabitants. State policy either acts like a farmer and scatters the birds; or allows settlements to exist but seeks to harness them by upgrading, developing as assets

21 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
22 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
23 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 333. Originally published 1907.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 338.
25 Ivan Illich, *op. cit.*, note 16, p. 54.

what a more authoritarian approach regards as liabilities; or ignores the problem until there is a crisis. The second option has pitfalls, but Goldberg sees it as the only humane and viable approach.[26]

The pitfalls are demonstrated in the case of Winterweld, taken by Goldberg as the basis for her article. This settlement arose from the forced removal of black people from Pretoria. An economy of shack farming produced a spontaneous and continuously modified development of single-storey shelters of mud block and corrugated iron, paths and enclosed open spaces used as meeting places. When the State attempted to introduce electricity without consulting dwellers the power boxes were stoned. Clearances took place in the late 1970s, and the spaces of informal meeting – people's parks – were destroyed. Since the 1980s, various consultants have proposed upgrading schemes or plans for new towns. One new housing scheme was constructed using modern technology and materials, termed Beirut by local people on account of its design.[27] The informal settlement remains and people's parks have begun to reappear. Goldberg concludes that schemes are more likely to succeed when the consultants adopt a non-business strategy of phasing themselves out. An extension of this would be to hand over to dwellers the power and resources to construct the settlement themselves. Some efforts to do this are beginning to happen in South Africa. An implication of such cases is that planning and design cease being practices of representation and become processes of participation in which the expertise of dwellers on urban living is equated in status with that of planners on planning and designers on designing. Professionals then become facilitators not controllers of the process. This dissolves the Cartesian split between concept and actuality, the subjectivity of the designer and the objectification of what is designed. But if this implication is to be more widely taken up, then models are needed which demonstrate its practicality.

Models of participatory practices exist in art, planning and architecture. Artist Suzanne Lacy uses the term new genre public art to describe art projects for social and ecological healing.[28] The use of urban design action teams has been proposed by the Urban Design Group in the UK, and advocacy planning in the USA was described by Paul Davidoff in the 1960s.[29] In some alternative, communitarian and ecologically responsible settlements, architecture becomes community building. Examples include Arcosanti, designed by Paolo Soleri in Arizona[30] and Findhorn in Scotland. Two cases of alternative settlement have been noted in critical writing: the Open City at Ritoque, Chile,[31] and New Gourna in Egypt.[32]

26 Abigail Goldberg, The birds have nested: design direction for informal settlements, *Urban Design International*, 1, no. 1, pp. 3–15, p. 6.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
28 Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.
29 Paul Davidoff, Advocacy and pluralism in planning, 1965, in LeGates and Stout, *op. cit.*, pp. 422–432.
30 C. McLaughlin and G. Davidson, *Builders of the Dawn*, Summertown, TN: Book Publishing Company, 1985.
31 A. Pendleton-Jullian, *The Road that is Not a Road*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
32 Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973; originally published 1969.

NEW GOURNA

New Gourna, designed by Hassan Fathy and built by local masons, is a model of no-cost architecture for non-industrialized countries. Although intended to facilitate the resettlement of families from old Gourna (Figure 16.1) who, for generations, made a living from the proximity of their houses to archaic tombs, New Gourna can be seen as a model of the use of appropriate materials and technology serving a carefully researched pattern of village sociation. Although the Gournis refused to move, the village is now fully inhabited and supports a stable community. A second attempt was made by the Egyptian government, around 1995, to remove the population of old Gourna to a village of concrete houses built on an arid site near the Valley of the Kings. This, too, is occupied. When asked how people were persuaded to move there, a taxi driver replied: 'they shouted at them'.

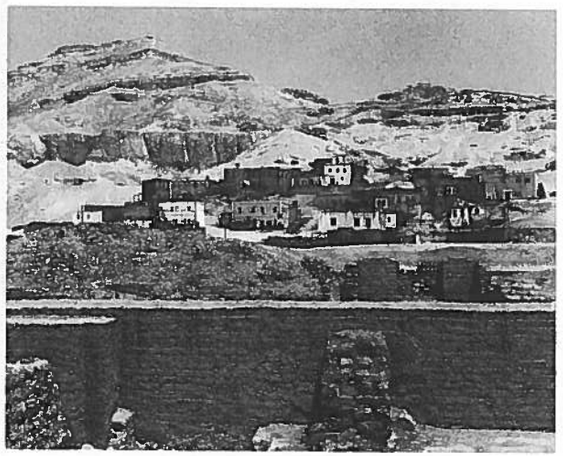


figure 16.1
OLD GOURNA

In contrast to the technology of concrete, Fathy's work used mud brick. Cases of mud-brick vaulting survive in the nearby Ramesseum, dating from the nineteenth dynasty (Figure 16.2). Fathy began in 1945 by researching the social structures of village life. The spatial organization of New Gourna is determined by the social patterns generated by the extended family. Varying degrees of privacy and publicity are offered by house interiors; interior courtyards shared by related families; streets, some of which have detours to discourage strangers; open spaces outside public buildings – the mosque, the theatre, the khan – and the open market for produce and animals.[33] The courtyard is of particular importance:

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–62.

figure 16.2
MUD-BRICK VAULTING, RAMESSEUM, NINETEENTH DYNASTY

> In an enclosed space, a room or a courtyard, there is a certain quality that can be distinctly felt, and that carries a local signature as clearly as does a particular curve. This felt space is in fact a fundamental component of architecture, and if a space has not the true feeling, no subsequent decoration will be able to naturalize it into the desired tradition.[34]

Fathy sought to reproduce the social pattern of the village rather than to engineer changes to it, and replicates a traditional gendering of domestic space:

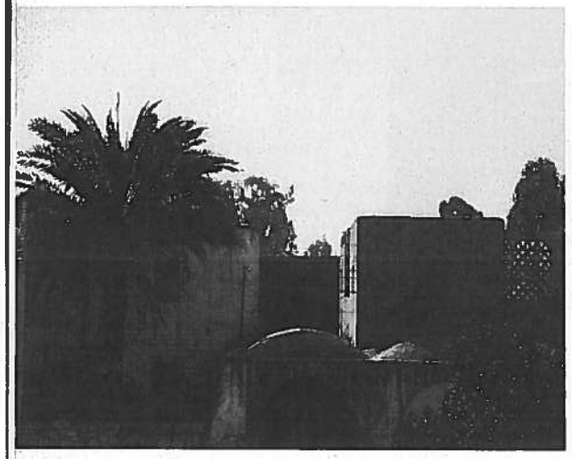
> The inward-looking Arab house, made beautiful by the feminine element of water, self-contained and peaceful ... is the domain of woman ... Now it is of great importance that this enclosed space with the trembling liquid femininity it contains should not be broken. If there is a gap in the enclosing building, this special atmosphere flows out and runs to waste in desert sands.[35]

Fathy may have looked, in prioritizing the courtyard, to the houses of Cairo rather than to village models, and it could be argued that his traditionalism affirms structures of repression. On the other hand, if social structures are to change, the force for this needs to come from within those structures. Egyptian village life is conservative in its value structure, and Fathy has worked from the social processes which differentiate the village from the city. That the houses and public buildings are still in good condition, proudly shown to visitors by their inhabitants, testifies to the success of New Gourna (Figures 16.3–16.6).

Fathy sees New Gourna as an answer to the housing problem brought about by Egypt's rapid population growth:

> What aspects of the problem does it solve? First, that of money. It is built entirely of mud and costs nothing. Second, that of space ... there is no limit to the size of the house; ten rooms are as cheap as one. Third, that of hygiene. Space means health, both physical and mental,

34 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
35 *Ibid.*, p. 57.



left figure 16.3
NEW GOURNA

right figure 16.4
NEW GOURNA

while the material, mud, does not harbour insects as thatch and wood do. Fourth, that of beauty. The demands of the structure alone are almost sufficient to ensure pleasing lines.[36]

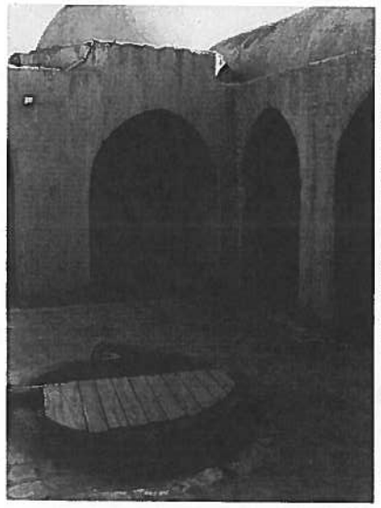
Given that a substantial part of current urbanization takes place outside the western industrialized States, this model has obvious practical interest; it contrasts with schemes for expansion such as the new suburb of Esenkent, Istanbul.[37] But it goes further in redefining the role of the architect. At New Gourna, the practice of architecture is revisioned to reclaim the representational spaces of dwelling. The process of building is not a replication of plans which are external to the site and superimposable on more or less any site, but a social process involving architect, dweller and builder – a continuation of traditions which have developed through adaptation.

This model of architecture in which form is determined by patterns of sociation can be mapped onto a society in which social structures are mediated by critical democratic processes. Then, it is likely that the production of space would be a process of continuous modification. The possibilities of self-build, or a situation in which dwellers are co-designers, offers more scope for this than the conventional methodologies of planning and design. New Gourna, then, constitutes a model of alternative design methodology for cities in the industrialized States; it entails an integration of the aesthetic and the social, the conceptual and the experiential; and a relation of architect and dweller in a process of negotiation of design possibilities.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
37 A. Aksoy and K. Robins, Modernism and the millennium – trial by space in Istanbul, *City*, no. 8, December 1997, pp. 21–36.

left figure 16.5
NEW GOURNA

right figure 16.6
NEW GOURNA



RITOQUE

The Open City, sited on dunes by the sea at Ritoque, was founded in 1970 by the architecture school of the Catholic University of Valparaiso. Its buildings adapt to the constant movement of sand (Figure 16.7). Each is founded by a poetic act which establishes its site, and all are open to modification by common will; decisions on all issues affecting the community are made in open meetings. Machinery is not used in construction, which is carried out by the community. The city has no plan.

Ann Pendleton-Jullian writes that the group who founded the Open City, linking architecture with surrealist poetry through the persons of Alberto Cruz Covarubias and Godofredo Iommi, adopted a morality in which 'beauty is associated with the elemental, and wealth and power are rejected in favor of a "voluntary poverty".'[38] The city's founders see grandeur as too often linked to power and wealth, and instead look to inner potentialities. These do not denote a Cartesian subjectivity, but something closer to a Fourierist libidinization of work. Iommi proclaimed: 'the university must be erotic, if it is not erotic it stops to be a university'.[39]

The difficulty with Fourierism and the Open City is that they may entail a withdrawal from the mainstream of society; if such a withdrawal turns life into art, it may become a refuge for the unfree, whose captivation in it then prevents the realization of freedom. Yet alternative models are vital if urban societies are to avoid collapse. The Open City meets the needs of a city to be a grouping of buildings and a place for sociation, and constructs a communal means of acting. Its field of activity is set out in Iommi's poem

38 Pendleton-Jullian, *op. cit.*, note 31, p. 23.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

'the amereida' (1965), which is its charter. Like New Gourna, it re-integrates the practice of architecture in the practice of everyday life. Pendleton-Jullian writes that the physical environment of the city evolves from this field of activity, in contrast to '... the hierarchical European Renaissance cities in which a built idealized architectural plan was expected to determine a higher state of living'.[40] In this it corresponds with the many communitarian settlements founded from the 1960s to the 1990s[41] which provide for the needs of their members through an ecologically responsible lifestyle.

six

URBAN DESIGN AS PRAXIS

Ernesto Laclau, in an essay on emancipation, arrives at a position of negotiated possibility between freedom and unfreedom. This is a way out of the logical contradictions of a concept which supposes a chasm between a past from which society emancipates itself and a future necessarily formed in that past.[42] His position suggests a praxis, revealing an understanding of preceding conditions which indicates possible future conditions, that is, imagining possible rather than ideal futures.

How, then, does a new social and ethical foundation for the production of city form arise? Does it mean the abolition of planning, or is there an equivalent to Laclau's negotiated possibility between freedom and unfreedom? Elizabeth Wilson writes:

> Planning is necessary if cities are to survive. What needs to change is the ultimate purpose of planning. Hitherto, town planning has too often been driven by the motor of capitalist profit and fuelled by the desire to police whole communities ... to create a city of order and surveillance rather than one of pleasure and opportunity.[43]

Wilson references Richard Sennett's *The Uses of Disorder*, and foresees a city which offers excitement and risk rather than conformity.

Perhaps it is the excitement, and acceptable levels of risk, which prevent a total collapse of metropolitan life. An alternative process of determining city form, then, requires that sociation produces form, rather than form, as a product of representation, coercing sociation. When the Cartesian split of subject and object is mended, it is possible to live lightly on the Earth, creating settlements which are both sustainable and convivial.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
41 McLaughlin and Davidson, *op. cit.*, note 30.
42 Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, 1996, pp. 1–19.
43 Elizabeth Wilson, *op. cit.*, note 1, p. 156.

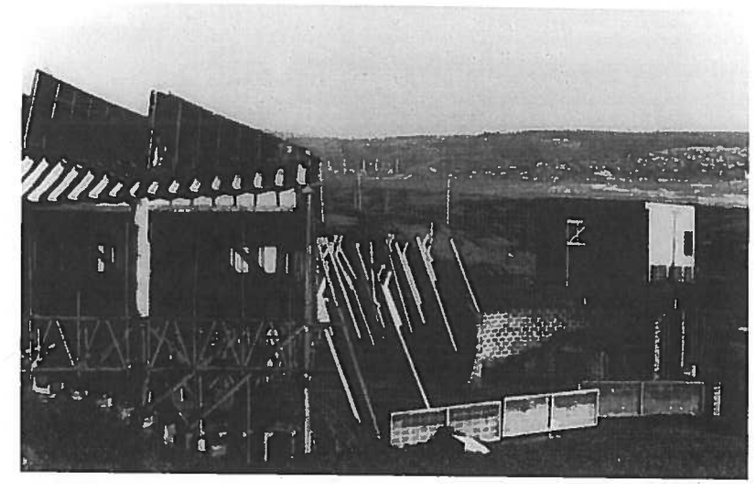


figure 16.7
RITOQUE