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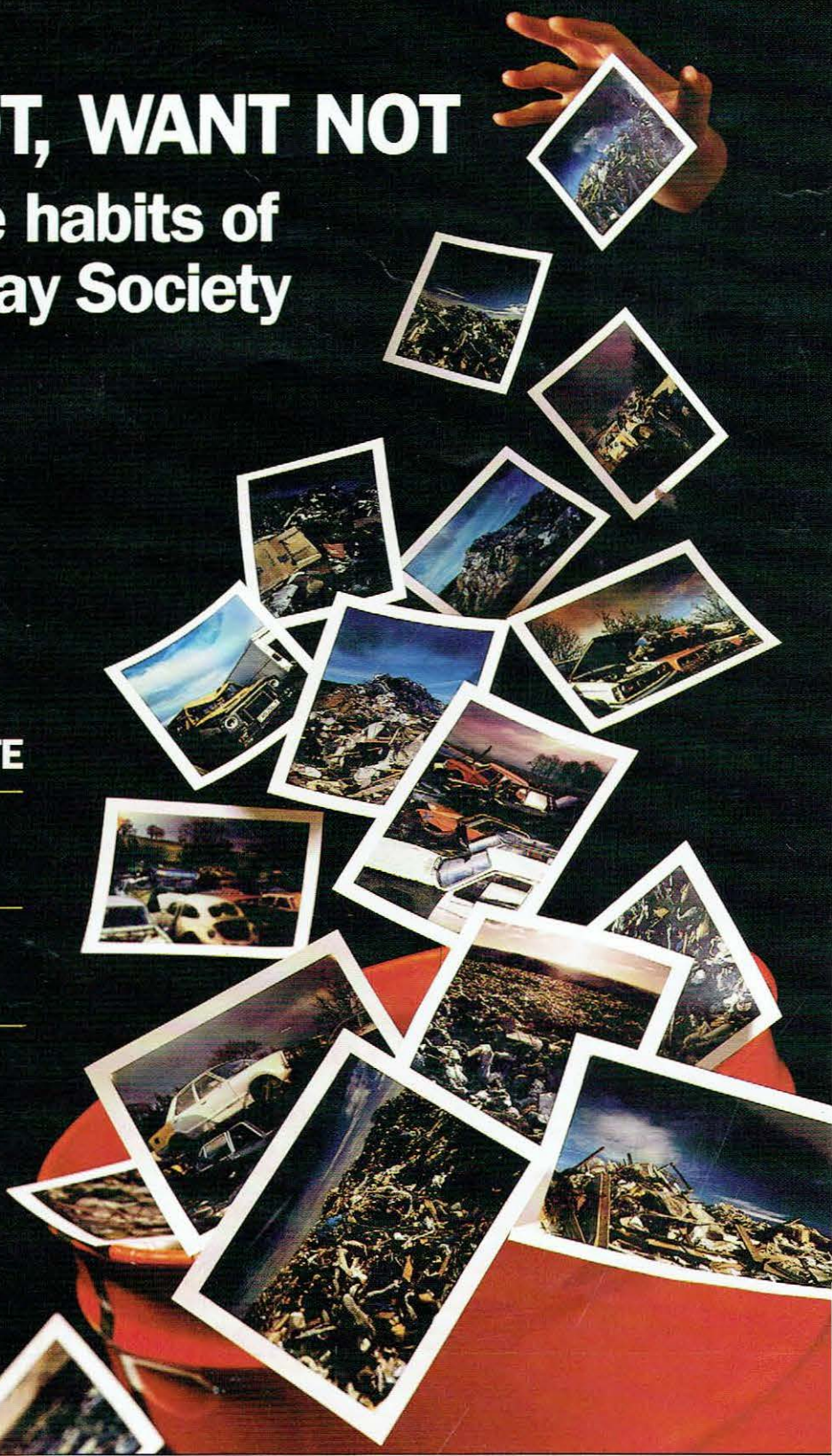
Changing the habits of
our Throwaway Society

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BUT IS IT WATER?**

**FARMING AND
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THE MISSING LINK

Community architecture gives environmentalists a powerful new weapon in their armoury, argue NICK WATES and CHARLES KNEVITT

For the past three years, Prince Charles has been crusading for a "renaissance" of Britain's inner cities, brought about not by experts or government, but by the very people living and working in those areas. In particular he has given his royal seal of approval to the relatively new phenomenon of "community architecture": visiting a score of projects throughout the country, hosting private dinner parties at Kensington Palace for those involved, acting as Patron of award and fund-raising schemes, and making powerful speeches in its support.

But what exactly is "community architecture"? How does it relate to other forms of community and environmental action? Why is its dramatic growth causing shock waves throughout the development industry? Why has the Prince picked it out for such special attention? And how can people get involved?

Community architecture is effectively a campaign for a better way of shaping our cities, towns and villages whereby we are all involved, not just professionals and bureaucrats. It has emerged from a fusion of experience between various strands of the environmental movements which has mushroomed over the past two decades and has led to a new, organic way of thinking about architecture and planning.

It all started with an explosion of protest by residents in the 1960s against insensitive official development plans which, all too often, wreaked havoc on their lives and communities. In the 1970s, these residents — increasingly organised into action groups and community associations — began to link up with architects and planners disillusioned with the 'arms-length' ways in which conventional practice required them to work. These mostly young professionals began to provide residents with the technical advice and vision they needed to convert their protest into positive, practical alternative proposals. By the early 1980s there were notable successes in the form of built projects and a discernible movement was beginning to take shape.

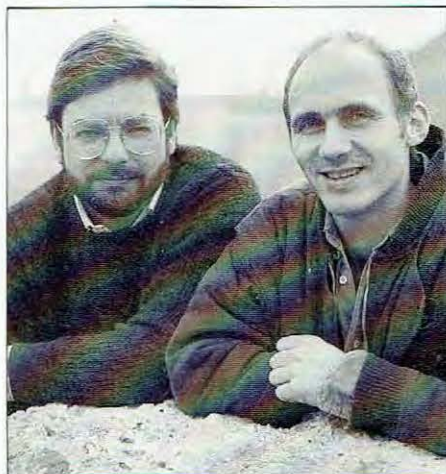
Before long, the message that 'We do it better ourselves' (to borrow the slogan of Liverpool's Eldonian Community Association) was beginning to get through to those with power and influence — and to the general public. A second outbreak of inner city riots in 1985 gave added impetus to the search for alternative approaches and to the view that community architecture should be taken seriously.

Direct involvement

The basic principle at the core of community architecture is that **the built environment works better if the people who use it are directly and actively involved in its creation and management.** Growing evidence shows that this applies at all levels of human

settlements: from housing and landscape projects to neighbourhood regeneration and city planning.

Simple and obvious? Yes, with hindsight. But until very recently, the development industry has managed the built environment on the diametrically opposite principle that it is all far too complicated to be entrusted to ordinary people and should be left entirely to experts and large, centralised bureaucracies. The disastrous results litter every village, town and city in the land: hated monolithic redevelopment schemes; anonymous and sterile office blocks; monotonous, inhuman and sprawling housing estates; dreary, uncared-for wasteland posing as 'public open space'; stifling traffic congestion; and, above all, broken, dispirited and soulless communities.



Facing page: Lea View House, Hackney — renovated by the tenants with help from Hunt Thompson Associates (Jo Reid/John Peck). Above: Charles Knevitt (left) and Nick Wates.

Community architecture provides a way out of this nightmare. Not by imposing yet another set of edicts or universal solutions, but by offering a whole panoply of new tools, techniques and organisational frameworks with which people can solve environmental problems themselves. These range from community technical aid centres and development trusts to participatory design methods and neighbourhood forums. But central to all of them are mechanisms allowing people to develop *creative working relationships* with the experts (not just architects) they need.

It is no accident that one of the common characteristics of community architecture projects is for professionals to work, even live, in the areas where they are building — a practice rarely found in the jet-setting conventional development world where professionals rarely *meet*, let alone work with, the people for whom they are creating environments. In community architecture, experts become *enablers*

instead of *providers*, using their knowledge and vision to help people create and manage their own homes, parks and neighbourhoods instead of merely dispensing solutions at arms length.

The results from pioneering schemes, throughout the country and abroad, are spectacular. The buildings and landscape created are invariably more humane, lively and better maintained. In addition, the process can create employment and help reduce crime, vandalism, mental stress, ill health and the potential for urban unrest. As well as better architecture, community architecture leads to more stable communities and to more contented and confident citizens and professionals. Furthermore it can be put into practice anywhere, even in areas that conventional approaches will not touch. In other words community architecture is more than just the erection of buildings — it is about building communities.

This is what attracted the attention of Prince Charles, whose participation in the inner city debate has been one of the most welcome and remarkable events of the 1980s. It is also why community architecture has stolen the headlines. "Having seen several projects and having met the people concerned, I came away totally enthused by the atmosphere I encountered and by the transformation that had clearly taken place in the lives of individuals and families" the Prince told the First International Conference on Community Architecture in 1986.

He said the issue was "one of extraordinary importance". Under the title *Building Communities*, the conference brought together — for the first time — all sides of the community movement and development industry and all shades of political opinion to discuss the built environment. Paul Ekins, Director of the Other Economic Summit, described the event as 'The Greening of Architecture'.

The Prince's enthusiasm for community architecture has increased over the years despite, one suspects, recommendations from his more cautious advisors. At the end of his speech at the *Building Communities* conference he called for 1987 to be "the start of a new renaissance for Britain — from the bottom up". Last summer, he called for a "crusade" to speed up the process of change.

The Prince's role in putting the spotlight on community architecture has not pleased everyone. How can the support of a 130,000-acre landowner be relevant to such a 'bottom up' movement, cynics ask? And in trendy London architectural circles, community architecture is often sneered at as being no more than a 'bandwagon' for opportunists.

Gaining momentum

Yet a bandwagon is exactly what was needed. As members of Greenpeace,

Friends of the Earth and other groups dealing with different aspects of the environmental know only too well, it takes incredible momentum to overcome inertia and secure the necessary changes in attitude and practice, however obvious and sensible they might seem. This is especially true in physical development because of its complexity and the number of different parties involved. The community architecture 'bandwagon' has at last created that momentum and provided a focal point around which previously disparate and isolated campaigns concerned with the built environment can coalesce. It has provided the missing link.

In organisational terms, the community architecture movement is years behind related campaigns in fields such as nature conservation, pollution and health. But big strides have been made in the last few

high-profile pressure group which will campaign for community-based planning and development worldwide and liaise with governments and international agencies. Increasingly, it is realised that community architecture is an international phenomenon and that there is a great deal to be learnt from sharing experience.

Since the Prince first spoke out on the subject in May 1984, the architecture and planning world has begun a dramatic change. The architectural profession has undergone a revolution with Rod Hackney, the community architecture movement's most able politician, elected as President of RIBA and of the International Union of Architects simultaneously. The idea that physical development is something carried out exclusively by the private or public sectors (prevalent only a few years ago) is well on the way to being replaced by the concept of partnership

bedevilled most other attempts at progress in this field, while at the same time tackling the failings of the conventional system of architecture and planning head-on.

Whether community architecture can respond effectively to the challenges it has set itself on a broad scale remains to be seen. It does not have all the answers. It is not the only solution. But it does provide a new, practical framework allowing people everywhere to get involved in the task of creating a more responsive human environment for themselves and their communities for the future. //

Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt are the authors of "Community Architecture: How people are creating their own environment" published by Penguin Books, price £4.95. The book is reviewed on page 65 of this issue.



years in creating the national communication and support frameworks essential for further progress.

- **Six years ago**, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) set up an invaluable Community Projects Fund providing seed money to help projects get started at local level.

- **Five years ago**, the Association of Community Technical Aid Centres was established to service the growing number of multi-disciplinary local aid centres.

- **Three years ago**, *The Times* in conjunction with the RIBA, set up a Community Enterprise Award scheme to focus public attention on the success of community architecture projects previously ignored by other design oriented award schemes.

- **Two years ago**, Inner City Aid and a National Community Aid Fund were established to raise capital funding for self help and community projects.

- **Last year** saw the launch of a national magazine for the movement, *Community Network*, by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) and the setting-up of a project database at the Association's Manchester Community Technical Aid Centre.

- **Our book**, the first overview of the movement, was published in November 1987; and shortly afterwards Building Communities Bookshop Bymail was launched to provide a worldwide mail-order service for the increasing number of publications, resource packs and videos on the subject.

At an international level, networks were strengthened last year with the formation of the Habitat International Coalition, a



Colour, left to right: Villagers and workforce on the site of the new community centre at Lostwithiel, Cornwall. Improvements to Provost Estate, Shoreditch, designed and constructed by local residents in partnership with the Free Form Arts Trust. An under-fives centre in Poplar — another community project. Above: The Prince of Wales visiting Lea View Estate, Hackney, in March 1986 (all photos Nick Wates).

between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

With pressure on the built environment already reaching crisis point in many parts of the world and with some Third World cities doubling their populations every 10 years, community architecture addresses one of the most pressing problems facing mankind: the creating of harmonious communities and human settlements.

By focusing on 'user participation' as its central theme — instead of land tenure or the lack of financial resources (important though these are) — community architecture has successfully by-passed the political back alleys which have so

Further Information

Community Architecture Resource Centre

A service established by the Royal Institute of British Architects providing information and advice on all aspects of community architecture. Administers Community Projects Fund and Community Enterprise Award Scheme.

CARC, RIBA, 66 Portland Place, London W1N 4AD. 01 580 5533.

Building Communities Bookshop Bymail

Worldwide mail-order service for books, pamphlets, resource packs and videos on community architecture and related fields. Free catalogues available on request. BCB, PO Box 28, Dumfries, Scotland DG2 0NS. 0387 720755.

Association of Community Technical Aid Centres

Umbrella organisation for the community technical aid movement throughout the UK. Supplies general information and referrals to its local members. ACTAC, The Royal Institution, Colquitt Street, Liverpool L1 4DE. 051 708 7607.

Town & Country Planning Association

Britain's oldest voluntary group working to enhance both the built and natural environment. Information and advice, particularly on community planning and planning aid. Also publishes *Community Network*, the regular magazine of the community architecture, design, planning and technical aid movements. TCPA, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AS. 01 930 8903.