

**Community architecture: how people are creating their own environment** by N Wates, C

Knevitt; Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middx, 1987, 208 pages, £4.95 paper (US: \$16.95; Can: \$12.95)

Lea View House was once described as a hard-to-let, multiracial 'sink' estate where vandals and muggers were in command. Renovation changed all that. Now a sense of pride and self-respect prevails. But this was no ordinary local-authority renovation. Early on it was

realised that making physical improvements to the flats would not be enough, for it was the underlying organisation of the estate that needed to be put right: changing access to the flats, reducing fuel bills, managing communal areas, and customising flats for those with special needs. Involvement by local people meant that the designs met the real needs of residents.

Lea View House is a living example of what Community Architecture is all about. It shows how people are creating their own environment; by expressing their needs, helping themselves and their neighbours, and working with professionals.

Wates and Knevitt guide us through the Community Architecture movement: what it stands for, why it arose, what it is achieving, and where it is going. They take us from the local-authority estates of Hackney, including Lea View House, to the managed workshops of Covent Garden. This is perhaps too metropolitan a view, for local people are actively reviving the urban fabric of cities as far flung as Glasgow and Boston, and even in the shanties skirting Guatemala City something of the same spirit prevails.

Community Architecture could so easily have remained a marginal, antimodernist protest movement. Yet in fact it has become a powerful and effective force—so much so that the chief spokesman, Rod Hackney, is now President of the RIBA. At long last the vox populi is being heard. Undoubtedly, the general reader will enjoy this heroic story. Those seeking practical advice, by contrast, are likely to find the historic survey too proselytising; they would do better to focus on what the authors have to say about 'making it happen'.

The advice is to 'get together, get involved, get things done'. To achieve this developers must start working with the voluntary sector, professionals must become enablers, and local authorities must strengthen local organisations. Worthy aims. But given the level of vested interest will there be widespread change? Can a significant number of professionals really make Community Architecture pay, allowing for the fact that it is a labour and time-intensive process? What if there are too few 'social entrepreneurs' to make things happen? After all, why should we expect people to take the initiative when all around them there is apathy and cynicism? And once the main task is complete, how is the momentum to be sustained?

Perhaps the answer is to shift social values away from the paternalistic 'nanny state' of bureaucrats and experts, in favour of active participation, self-help, and local initiative. Then the state need only serve as an enabler; giving advice, releasing unused land, and providing venture capital. Certainly the British Government's package, "Action for Cities", fits into this mould. Unfortunately, such a course of action may only scratch the surface and it is likely to be seen as 'merely' reformist.

Another concern, not allayed by Wates and Knevitt, is that the movement is essentially small-scale and domestic. Where is the breadth of vision that gives the type of architecture that provides depth, focus, and perceptual cues in the cityscape? And how are we to adjudicate between the claims of one community and another—between, say, local people living in the London Docklands and the incomers who hope to regenerate the derelict land? In short, the interests of 'the community' are not as one-dimensional as the authors imply.

Nevertheless, despite these open issues, we warm to this hopeful message in the same way as an earlier generation warmed to the practical, common-sense thesis advanced by Jacobs (1961). We recognise that with time, patience, and perseverance even modest schemes can have a worthwhile impact. In the end the desire to live in a humane community goes well beyond the tenants of Lea View House: it is something for which we all strive.

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**Reference**

Jacobs J, 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities: The Failure of Town Planning* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middx)