Community Architecture: How people are creating their own environments. By Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt, Penguin Books, London, 1987, 208 pp. 27 photographs. £4.95.

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Nick Wates was educated at the University of London in architecture and planning. He is a freelance journalist and consultant, specialising in community architecture, and an active environmental campaigner in London. He is author of 'Battle for Tolmers Square' (1976), *co-editor of* 'Squatting: the Real Story' (1980), *and editor of* 'The Limehouse Petition: For a Future Inner City' (1986).

Charles Knevitt is also a freelance journalist and has acted as consultant for TV documentaries. He gained a degree in Architecture from the University of Manchester in 1975. From 1980–1984 he was architectural correspondent for the Sunday Times, *and from 1984 for* The Times. *In 1985 he devised* The Times/RIBA *Community Enterprise Award Scheme with patronage from Prince Charles, and in 1986 he was appointed Director of the Inner City Trust.*

Both authors have received the International Building Press Architectural Journalist of the Year Award, and together they founded the Community Architecture Information Service (CAIS) Ltd in 1986 with Jim Sneddon and Caroline Theobald.

Paul Rodaway is a lecturer in Geography at Liverpool Polytechnic, and gained his PhD from Durham University. His research interests include environmental experience, participatory research, sense of place and community.

After a decade of rebuilding in British cities, Young and Willmott (1957) observed that the provision of buildings wasn't a sufficient condition for the development of communities. In a study of the East End of London they discovered that very few people wanted to relocate to new housing for fear that this would upset the attachment they felt to local community and place. Three decades later, and much further rebuilding and redevelopment, Wates and Knevitt (1987) still can write of the redevelopment of Limehouse in the East End as 'simply an architecture of neglect, short-sighted expediency and stupidity' (p. 65). However, they argue that things are changing:

> 'Community architecture has emerged as a powerful force for change in the creation and management of human settlements. Like many of the other currents which are presently transforming societies all over the globe, its strength lies in being both an *activity* rooted in rediscovered natural laws and a broad political *movement* cutting across traditional boundaries. The activity of community architecture is based on the simple principle that the environment works better if the people who live, work and play in it are actively involved in its creation and management instead of being treated as passive consumers. The movement is providing the political and organisational impetus for transforming the development industry and putting these principles into practice.' (p. 13)

If we turn to the academic literature, we can also recognise significant developments in thought about built environment and person-environment relationships. Architecture, for instance, has rediscovered nature (Fisher, 1987), the context of buildings and the sense of place (Norberg-Schultz, 1980), the importance of the people who will live in a built environment (Alexander, 1982), and the value of

architects themselves participating in the building of their designs (Downen *et al.*, 1987). Community architecture goes further and calls for architects and planners to work *with* rather than on behalf of users. In addition, it suggests that through such participatory practices building can both preserve and enhance community.

In enthusiastic and lucid prose, Wates and Knevitt describe the rise of community architecture, a wide variety of successful projects, and the prospects for the movement. The main body of the text is logically organised into seven well written—though some may feel rather shallow—short chapters, and each chapter begins with a series of thought-provoking quotations. For the academic reader the book is probably lacking in balanced, critical and in-depth argument, fails to explore many of the wider issues raised by community architecture, and is quite repetitive. Nevertheless, this is a book of commitment and vision which seeks to appeal primarily to the 'general reader' and aims 'to assist the movement' (p. 13).

Whilst community architecture (known as social architecture in the USA) is international, the authors focus on the British experience 'because the movement has developed a unique momentum here . . .' (p. 14). This is the first comprehensive British book on the subject and, published in 1987, it comes at an opportune time. Within ten years (1976–86), *community architecture* has moved from the fringe and obscurity to the centre-stage with Rod Hackney's presidency of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and royal patronage from Prince Charles. It is at a crossroads. As the authors argue, 'community architecture has come to the end of its pioneer phase' (p. 149) and completed a struggle for recognition, and ahead lies the prospects for a 'new renaissance' (p. 155)—'the real adventure of community architecture is only just beginning' (p. 111).

Community architecture is broadly defined as 'architecture carried out with the active participation of the end users' (p. 181). This definition is used very loosely, as is evident in the account of the history of the movement (chapter 2) and the choice of pioneer projects (chapter 4). It is an umbrella term encompassing planning, design, development and management of the built environment. Conventional architecture is attacked (chapters 3) for paternalism, centralisation and a top-down arrogance which denies the participation of communities. In contrast, community architecture is seen as an alternative bottom-up, participatory and democratic strategy which enables people to create their own environment. However, a useful comparative table is oddly placed much earlier (pp. 24–25). In attacking conventional architecture, through the case example of Limehouse (pp. 50–65), the authors are reluctant to blame specific groups, though environmental professionals are much criticised, and instead argue that 'all parties are simply locked into a system which has ceased to function' (p. 65). For more in-depth consideration of possible causes of these problems the reader needs to look elsewhere (Cockburn, 1977).

The first chapter summarises the main arguments of the book, presenting community architecture as vital for the regeneration of communities in the wake of post-war architectural and planning disasters, and the riots of 1981 and 1985. The authors suggest that there is a 'possible link between social unrest and *degree of control that people have over their environment*' (p. 16), and much reference is made to the Scarman Report (1982). There is scope here for critical contributions from environmental psychology.

The second chapter charts the history of the movement, concentrating on the recent British controversies, and gives much insight into the way in which an alter-

native 'paradign' emerges, the role of innovative individuals, relatively conservative official bodies (such as the RIBA) and the significance of the popular media. In particular, the battle in the RIBA for recognition of community architecture, the campaigning role of Rod Hackney, and Prince Charles' patronage of the movement are explored with care and much insight. Interestingly, however, only a paragraph is devoted to the intellectual foundations of community architecture (p. 30).

Throughout the book the emphasis is on showing community architecture *by example*. This is particularly evident in the pivotal and longest part of the book (chapter 4) which gives a brief outline of a series of successful projects. These are taken from various sectors of the built environment, including housing, social, business and institutional facilities, and neighbourhoods—and so goes someway to counter the assumption that community architecture is merely a solution to the housing crisis. Whilst recognising some general principles, the authors emphasize the distinctiveness of specific solutions to specific problems. Each example reveals the role of new forms of organisation, such as trusts and neighbourhood councils, and a new role for the architect as enabler. Later in the book (chapter 6), much material from this chapter is selectively re-presented to highlight how to make community architecture happen.

A number of questions are raised by these examples. What about those projects which failed to get off the ground or failed subsequently? Surely, it would be instructive to consider in detail such failures and to ask why they failed. Success stories all to easily confirm our preconceived ideas, whilst failures force us to critically reassess our ideas. The authors brush aside the problems that successful projects have faced and fail to develop the brief, but very significant point, that 'most have failed to achieve their objectives due to institutional or bureaucratic constraints' (p. 70). The authors are reluctant to blame either communities or their enabling architects. More fundamentally, there is a paradox: community architecture builds, or brings together, communities but is also dependent on a prior sense of, or propensity to be, a community.

The authors then move on to a discussion of three general principles (chapter 5): user participation in the environment, creative working partnerships and the need to consider a wide range of environmental needs and take an evolutionary approach (p. 113). They suggest that these might be termed 'laws of community architecture' (p. 113), or even 'natural laws governing the relationship between human beings and the built environment' (p. 112). Environmental psychologists will beg to ask: can these principles be called 'natural laws'?

However, as already noted, community architecture does make an important practical statement about the nature of the relationship between people and their environment, that is between building and community. As Martin Heidegger has also argued, 'we attain dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building' (1971 p. 145). Conventional architecture separates those who design and build from those who live in given environments, giving power to the outsider over the needs, perceptions and aspirations of the insider. In contrast community architecture seeks to enable the insider, or the local community, to participate in the making of their own environments. This would seem to be dwelling through building. Consequently, a distinctive feature of community architecture is an emphasis on *process* rather than the end product. Attention is focused on the creative interaction of people and environment, and so it significantly integrates the building of environments and the

emergence of community, sense of place and home. It leads to the generation of new working practices such as architect as enabler and concepts such as participatory design (p. 141). Here, there are radical implications not only for the practice of architecture but also for the research and application in environmental psychology, and so possibilities for closing the so-called 'applicability gap' between research and practice.

Wates and Knevitt end their text with a 'manifesto for community architecture' (pp. 151–155) and make highly optimistic claims for the future (chapter 7). However, a sober observation is that the majority of architectural projects continue to follow more conventional practices.

Finally, a series of appendices make the book useful to a variety of readers with quite different needs. In recent years a number of comparable books have appeared on the market with a similar format (e.g. Pye-Smith and Rose 1984). The present book can be treated, on the one hand, as a 'manual' for community architecture with appendices providing details of the services supplied by community technical aid centres and a directory of information sources, and, on the other, as an introduction to the study of community architecture with an useful concise history, a glossary of terms and an extensive bibliography including books, reports, pamphlets, journal articles, speeches and films.

Therefore, this competitively priced book, taken as a total package will be a useful introduction and reference for both general readers and environmental psychologists. With a picture of Prince Charles on the front cover, a comment by his royal highness on the back, and a well written forward by Lord Scarman, the book clearly hopes to attract a mass market. It deserves a wide readership, and should stimulate environmental psychologists to contribute to this exciting area.

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