

Architectures of Emergence

Eighty years on from first stirrings of the modern movement, **Susannah Hagan's** book contends environmental architecture could be as defining a movement for the new century, as modernism was for the last.

Taking Shape by Susannah Hagan, Architectural Press 2001.

I went round a sustainable building the other day and it was the most tedious, boring piece of architecture. All it said was the most important thing in life was the gas bill.' With this piece of poised controversialism Richard Murphy, doyenne of a certain architectural tendency north of the border, effortlessly set the backs up assorted RIBA council types last year. By way of contrast, Susannah Hagan in *Taking Shape* reports the view from two of the green utilitarian end of the spectrum's best known representatives, Brenda and Robert Vale, whose belief is that, in their censorious words; 'Thoreau's recognition of the subservience of art to the equitable access to resources, so that all may be fed and sheltered, must underlie any green approach to architecture.'

These contrary extremes reflect the trench warfare, which informs a side of the current parlous state of play across the terrain of sustainable architecture. Yet as Hagan outlines it, it is only part of the story, and things have moved on. What, a decade ago was 'green architecture' is currently reconfigured as 'Environmental Architecture', a movement with increasing momentum, moving into and working with the architectural mainstream. As the world wakes up to the eco-imperative, increasing numbers of architects are finding it economically prudent to invest in being part of this scene with a future. The result has been a ballooning of ideas, research and architectural styles all, of which make claims to being environmental from a variety of perspectives. If a mere 20 years ago this was the province of a small idealistic cluster of the architecturally and design-minded today; it has been taken by conventional architectural practices into many the redrawn map's new contours. Hagan's book helpfully outlines a considerable segment of the maps contours. It includes many, be they Norman Foster or Greg Lynn, who think

of themselves as contributing to these co-ordinates. An engagingly hopeful essay on this new environmental architecture's dynamic and possible trajectory, the book nonetheless places a very definite accent on its view of this architectural prospect unfolding.

Subtitled *A new Contract between Architecture and Nature*, Hagan envisages the possibility of environmental architecture becoming a movement, or paradigm in the current moment of the discipline comparable with the early twentieth-century modern movement of Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe and, closer to the point, Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvo Aalto's new architecture. In one sense this is a difficult task since architectural modernism was borne out of the first machine age, then at the least an architecture which claims relations with the natural, yet is clearly in hoc to technology, is surely complicated. And all the more so if the technology being adopted is the part of a new machine age. What it means is that the divide characterised by Murphy and Vale is in need of being healed. This, Hagan sets out to do, searching out an environmental third way between those architectures which express their 'sustainable condition more successfully than (they) operates sustainably, and vice versa'. In effect, this is a positive interpretation for form being as important to luddite utilitarians, as gas bills are to those who connect with the shape and forms they are driven to create. It would indeed be a welcome – and a considerable coup if this new environmental architecture became such a next movement. The implication is that environmental efficiency in all its guises, will merit greater precedence to other considerations, new buildings relations to historical architectural tradition, and discreet architectural identities, to name but two. Whether this becomes so self-evidently part and parcel of future architecture, and in so doing becoming invisible, depends on the success of the movement's momentum. The different constituencies will need to learn to talk to each other rather than senf rhetorical shots across each other's bows. At present though, there remains a gulf between the self-promoting avant-garde theoryheads, the new mainstream middleground, and the unreflexive pragmatism of hands-on building based architecture.

If its influence becomes all-encompassing it may well be compared to the range and regard the modern movement was held in at the height of its influence. Hagan begins by boldly floating this option; environmental architecture representing a new meta-narrative on a par with modernism. Alternatively it may be a continuation, a less exploitative, more mature stage of the very same modernism. Or if post-structuralism is to be believed, an example of multiplicity of versions,



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lacking any meta-linkage beyond the common cause of difference. From there she unpicks the utilitarian roots of environmental architecture's origins where the ethical concern for satisfactorily sheltering all, precedes aesthetic 'art' concern for form, which as 'excess' is ethically unnecessary and therefore dispensable. This is Vale and the utilitarian's challenge and is at the heart of the conflict between an architecture not only operating, but also expressing itself sustainably. Hagan's response is to highlight a new both/and rather than either/or relation between ethics and aesthetics, where each is enfolded into the other. Beauty, Ruskin, Vale and the utilitarian's traditional yardstick of architectural value, is thus recast, and mutually enfolded into aesthetic value. Whether philosophically nimble or a sleight of hand this both/and enfolding enables Hagan to render equally as necessary architects desire to build excess onto shelter's foundations, doing so with non-classical Riemannian forms such as warps, and indeed folds, as it is to shelter's own protean needs.

This may not be satisfactory to the traditional architectural communities. Yet it is clear such forms are found often and repeatedly within the natural world. In

fact at the centre of the argument about this possible new environmental architecture is the emergent, dynamic non-linear systems, life science understanding of the natural world. Having uncovered complexity and chaos sciences, by which she primarily turns to Prigogine's Order out of Chaos theories, as a new emergent apprehension of nature, Hagan goes looking for forms of building which imitate the new 'nature' paradigm; architectures which are not only complex in form, but in their operation. She touches on Peter Eisenmann's evolutionary architecture, some of whose work is influenced by the processes of tectonic plates, and perhaps inevitably, Frank Gehry, but then acknowledges these architect's projects miss the core of complexity in nature, of how to integrate time into the ways their buildings work. Adding to the palette of evolutionary models, Hagan relates the neo-Darwinian computational approach to nature-as-information, which could lead to 'an architecture driven by the same informational codes that drive organisms.' The result could be the creation of buildings evolving, or learning to learn how to self-repair, indeed to breathe, as it were, through fabrics which are the equivalent of animal