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School of Architecture

Articles

Dublin Institute of Technology *Year* 2003

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Architecture at Work

by Noel Brady

"Architecture is a very special functional art:
it configures space so we can dwell in it..." [1]

Some say we get the sort of environment we deserve. This self-fulfilling prophecy is bound closely to the social contracts we enter into. When Rasmussen wrote *Experiencing Architecture* in 1959 he was voicing a thesis that architecture is a holistic act of dwelling (echoing Heidegger), involving all of our senses while expressing our cultural values and context. Based on this thesis architecture could be seen as a haptic reality formed from life as lived with all its aspects of being, work and play.

Separation

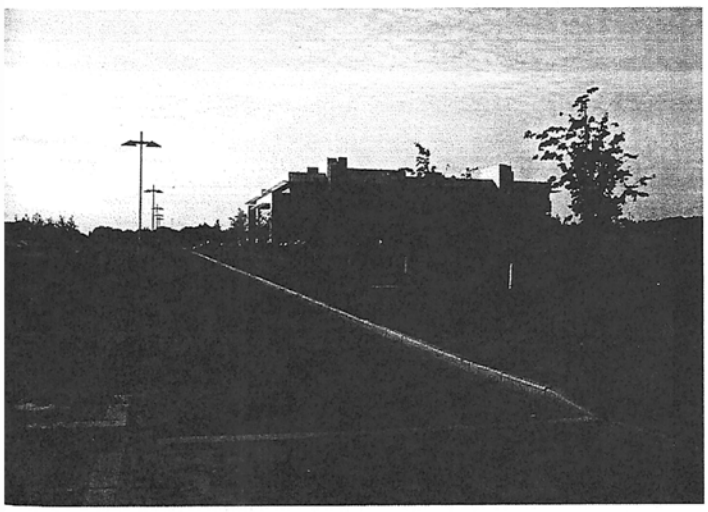
Life today appears to be a much narrower concept as it is experienced though so many surrogate mechanisms. In addition, the demands of modern life have been segregated from the remaining direct experience into discrete entities; work being a major one. Life, or rather the quality of life, is loosely considered as that experienced outside of work. Regardless of how we feel about it, work will remain a fundamental (and necessary) part of our dwelling in the world, capable of giving meaning and substance to our lives. However, if this is to be a satisfactory relationship we need to invest in the fabric of its definition.

Before *organisation man,* work was integral with all aspects of life, necessary both for comfort and survival. The move from an agrarian culture to an industrialised (usually urban based) culture has been a feature of all civilisations involving the specialisation of activity and people.

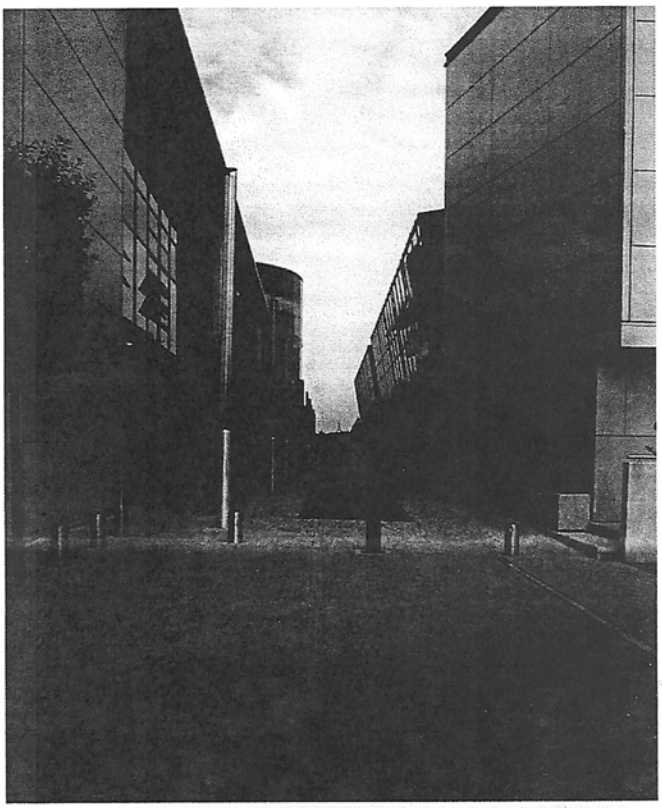
The Victorians gave us what we recognise as factories; they invented much of the regulations that define the workplace, even today. The move from manufacturing to service types of work has involved the creation of factories of 'knowledge' rather than 'muscle'. Freed from the requirement of nearby energy sources, these new places of work could be placed wherever (not withstanding economic and transport requirements) one wished. Initially these found their place within the city itself. Now it is nearly inconceivable to have a campus of offices anywhere but on the periphery.

In the move to so called high value employment (clerical/office based) this separation has increased to promote islands of work along the sub-urban peripheries of our cities. This banishment may indicate a number of reasons, the desire for a healthier work environment (landscaped office parks), the need for access to a sub-urban population and a relatively accessible road infrastructure. The growth of linear cities with shopping malls, office parks and suburban residential nodes is well documented from the 1960s onwards.

The ideal of non-urban office parks originated with corporate centres, such as IBM and John Deere, in the USA. Set in the natural topography of suburban



Cherrywood



Beacon Court

hills linked to extensive freeways, providing easy access to markets and workers (mobile) they became the attractive alternative to crowded and sometimes polluted cities and the inspiration for many contemporary architects seeking to find a place where their vision may be un-reined by context. Recent Headquarters projects for such companies as Benetton and Vitra by luminaries from Ando to Gehry reinforce this trend. These corporations hire architects to embody not just their infrastructural needs but their cultural statements as well, confirming their economic and social power.

It configures space so we can dwell in it

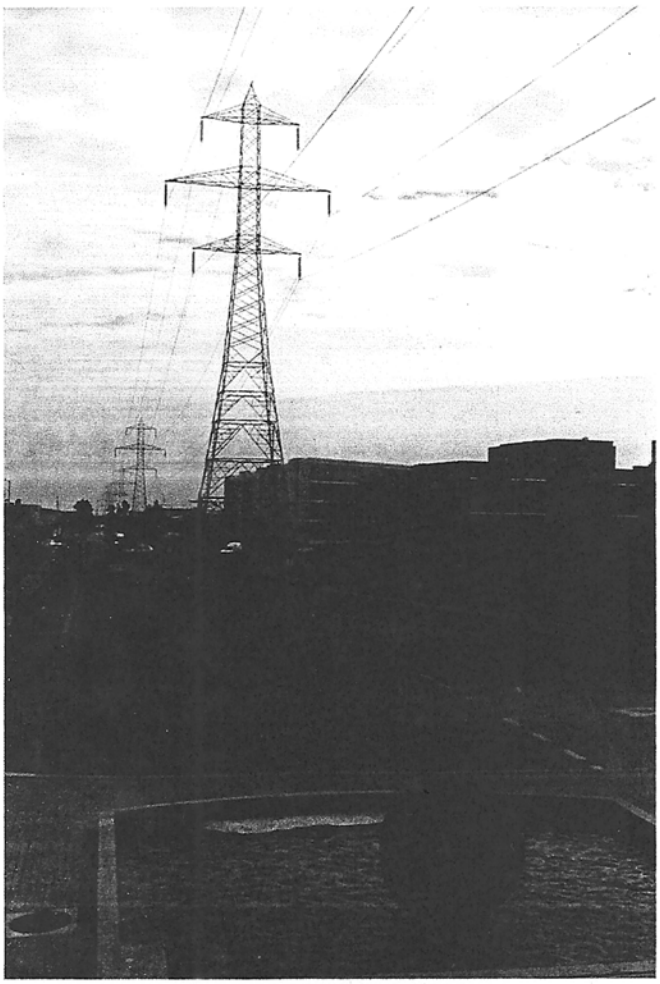
Speculative office parks do not have the same unity of purpose or representation. How do we dwell in a configuration of space that is meant to be everything to everyone, warehouses to receive any sort of work environment or activity? How, especially, if these warehouses are limited in height and in the light that is allowed to enter, in the adaptability of its floor plate? How if the only component the architect can devote his/her energy to is the façade?

Object Orientation

Isolated in compounds, work is now defined by large 'factory' type estates of common office structures, with relatively simple floor plates clad in a sort of architectural wrapping. With the exception of single building complexes such as Beacon Court, most office parks are made from several motifs, not necessarily complimentary ones. The temptation is for the architect to concentrate energy on making the project unique, ignoring any possibility of context. Certainly in most situations the possibility of shared design characteristics are resisted because it may restrict the client options and thus the marketability of the facility. Because of this individuation the environment is united not by the materials and form language but by the space between. The interaction between each building and the external environment is minimised producing often buildings that neither respond to context or any activity beyond the front door. Thus the unified landscape is often barren.

The space between

The ability to dwell requires a place (space) in which to dwell. In an office park the most important space is the space between the buildings. It is the tissue that unites the experiences of the workers. However it is often the thing, which gets even less attention than the bare shell that is provided in the office buildings.



Parkwest

This is recognised in higher quality speculative office parks, such as Stockley Park UK begun in 1984, where a large investment has been made in both the landscaping and responsive architecture. It is ironic when it is investment in a quality landscape that is more likely to raise real estate values than investment in the building fabric. Anyone visiting Eurodisney will clearly identify this in the gap between the wallpaper buildings cosseted within a verdant and lush landscape.

The richest biodiversity occurs at the edge of ecosystems where there is in essence a phase transition, a sort of randomised but structural organisation of forces. The better office parks exploit this phenomenon allowing buildings to directly interact with immediate landscape. In light of recent proposals regarding health legislation (smoking) there will be a greater need to provide for these interstitial spaces.

Topography of loneliness

The overwhelming sense of office parks is one of deadness (except at rush hour) where nothing happens, screened and isolated form an external life; even in Beacon Court where the mall is the simulacrum of the street, the only sound is of the ubiquitous water fountains.

Outside wide roads dominate the external environment with minimal responses to topography. In the case of Park West the main electrical power grid dominates the central avenue. Whatever topography did exist, such as the hedgerows and tree bosses in Cherrywood, is often eradicated to provide a level platform for the singularly simple rectangular floor plates of new buildings. Where buildings attempt to establish a more intimate topography, or a context of their own, it is lost to their own internal rationalisation, internalising any relationship they might have with the larger world. Even the presence of the ubiquitous horizontal brise soleil (a overt response to the natural world) appears redundant and fragile, almost forgotten.

Where there has been an attempt to provide some semblance of topography (even if it is artificial) in Beacon Court, the result is an environment, which is nearly impossible to occupy. Grass that cannot be walked upon, paving that is uncomfortable and the paranoia that results from the panoptic condition of the space to the completely glazed elevations. Whether the absence of presence in Cherrywood and Park West or the overtly corporate image of Beacon Court the sense is one of being excluded.

Organisation and inevitability

The overriding feeling within these places of non-dwelling is a similar melancholy that pervades the paintings of De Chirico. While these images inspired the urbanist Also Rossi to revisit the city as a vessel for dwelling, we have forgotten the necessity of the shared urban experience, because it is within the walls, streets, squares and parks of the city we learn how to dwell in being, work and play.

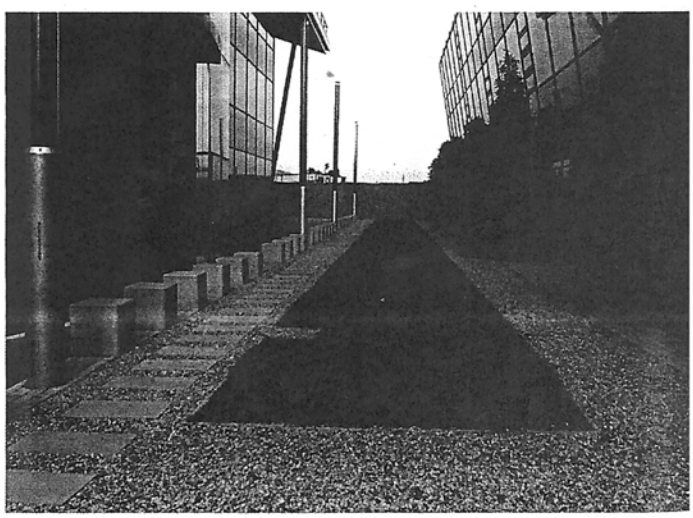
The desire for a responsive haptic environment is not an unreasonable request. It seems however that this is to remain the preserve of expensive environments.

The office parks that begin to dominate the periphery are the residue of the social contract we enter into and there is a sense of inevitability about them. The industrial revolution was not a philosophical creation, merely the inevitable consequence of human self-organisation. The form of the revolution was however within the hands of the industrialists, the political reformers, the suffragettes, the emancipators, the poets, the artists and architects.

What the Victorians illustrated was the capacity to guide the inevitable new technologies and social constructs to provide for the growth of the modern city. We need a similar vision, which allows us to dwell, in which all aspects of life are embraced. We must recognise the patterns as they are emerging and guide their development with great care. The knowledge that the growth of cities is inevitable must be an argument for a more densely populated, living, working city capable of providing for that necessary haptic experience that will allow us to dwell.

"....even though people interact with one another by virtue of their own personal decisions, suspicions, plans and schemes, there nevertheless emerges a very regular pattern. And that pattern seems to have far less to do with the nature of people as people than with a universal kind of organisation that tends to well up in any collection of interacting things." [2]

[2] Mark Buchanan, *"Ubiquity"* 2001 P.161



Beacon Court