BUILDING DEMOCRACY

Graham Towers

Community architecture in the inner cities

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COMMUNITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE INNER CITIES

Graham Towers

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Rod Hackney

Graham Towers has great faith in community architecture. This personal testament is his story of how a few architects, sometimes forgotten, sometimes alone, are struggling to provide a worthwhile service to the thousands of people entrapped by a system that cares little for community and even less for architecture.

Although Towers is new to publishing, with this work he has filled a niche that needed to be filled, between the distorted figures provided by quangos and government of how well statistically Britain is faring in the provision of housing numbers, and the stark reality of the growing need for caring professionals in the building world to provide an affordable service for those in desperate environmental need.

He sees through the so-called glamour of the headline grabbers, including developers who see much mileage in calling their (otherwise speculative) schemes community architecture, a term that will guarantee them a better hearing in front of the planning committees.

He dispels the overt credits given to a movement heralded by monarchy and fêted by sycophants. Community architecture is a daunting task, yet inevitably satisfying, having often achieved remarkable results.

Community architecture is hard work. The majority of those who practice it do so without much recognition, and yet those who persist and succeed trigger a tremendous rich vein of enthusiasm that gets things done. Towers credits many through the fine case study analyses at the end of most chapters.

Why is it money and power cannot solve these inner-city problems? Why do people destroy their community centres and damage the very property they live in? Perhaps they are fed up with the sham and hypocrisy that surrounds them. Towers hints at other reasons. He concludes rightly that nothing can be done until the community gears itself up to the task.

Towers has survived his own inner doubts about the community architecture movement. He has seen the real benefits of the movement and comes solidly down in favour of this simple way of working as a real opportunity to give ordinary people something worthwhile. Community architecture is about raising the spirit. Reading this fine work should raise the spirit of the reader.

PREFACE

During the late 1960s, as a newly qualified architect, I worked on some of the largescale public projects which were so characteristic of that era. First on a new hospital, then on the development of an urban motorway. That experience convinced me that elevated roads offered no solution to urban transport problems and were highly destructive to boot. It was with more positive anticipation that I moved on to work on a large new housing development. The designers were socially committed and they set high environmental aspirations. The work was technically demanding and it created interesting design problems, but it was wholly a drawing-board exercise and it seemed entirely divorced from reality. It was taken for granted that the existing houses and the people who lived in them would simply be swept away. In two years I never once met a representative of the Council that commissioned the scheme, let alone any of the people who might eventually live in it. My tentative suggestions that users might participate in the design of buildings they were to occupy were dismissed with incredulity by my, otherwise enlightened, employers.

It was a time of radical protest, and by the early 1970s community action was beginning to generate direct intervention in urban environmental issues. Planners, architects and other designers were beginning to get involved in supporting these protests. In 1972 I went to work for an inner-city community organization campaigning for better local facilities and, in particular, for more sensitive housing redevelopment. Over the following few years I worked with several small community groups who were developing their own housing or social buildings. By the late 1970s, I and others who had been doing similar work for years were somewhat bemused to find our activities redefined as "community architecture". The new interpretation generated a wide-ranging debate about the nature of community architecture and the direction it should take. For myself I was convinced that local government could be reformed to provide a genuine service to the community.

In the early 1980s I went to work for a local authority. There was a constant struggle against entrenched attitudes, but I believe we did succeed in developing effective user participation in social housing improvements and other community projects. Meanwhile, the cause of community architecture was attracting increasing attention, although it was attention of a peculiarly narrow and distorted kind. The focus of the trade press was on a few individuals and a handful of projects. There was little understanding of the development of community technical aid. There was still less interest in the work of local authorities. However innovative their approach, they were all tarred with the brush of insensitive bureaucracy. My attempts to publicize our work with tenants in modernizing run-down estates met with luke-warm responses. It became evident that the architectural establishment in general, and the professional press in particular, were beset by exclusive pre-occupations. First was the pre-occupation with innovative design and the visually eye-catching. Such bias

left little room for recognition of the social value of design ideas and processes. Second was the presumption that innovation was invariably the work of the creative individuals. This put private practice in the forefront of press attention and gave little recognition to the co-operative mores of the voluntary sector or the collective approach of the public sector. These preconceptions meant that, where community architecture was publicized at all, it was almost exclusively as the work of individual private practitioners working with self-help groups.

The purpose of this book is to try to correct this imbalance: to counterbalance the pre-occupation with design with a better understanding of the process and practice of community architecture, to place alongside the work of well known individual practitioners the achievements of co-operatives and the impact of the work of local government. In doing so I hope to give credit to some of the many people who have helped to produce successful community projects. By no means all of them conform to the traditional image of the architect. The story behind the cover illustration demonstrates that, to succeed in community architecture, you don't need to be a middleclass man—you don't even need to be an architect. Jo Thwaites worked for years in a variety of administrative jobs. At the age of 30, finding herself to be a single parent, she decided to re-train as a building surveyor. After serving her apprenticeship, she undertook the conversion of a disused basement into a nursery. She had no training in design but worked closely with the user group and had the support of a co-operative technical group with a collective approach to design work. The completed Walnut Tree Nursery is an attractive scheme, highly valued by its users. In the cover photograph, Jo's daughter sizes up the finished product.

Many people have contributed to the creation of this book. Special thanks are due to John Bussy, Pauline Nee and Suzy Nelson who have shown dedication and perseverance in reading the text as it progressed. Their commentary, based on their own expertise in this field, has informed and helped to shape the contents. Thanks also to the following who have, at various times, provided advice, support, information and material drawn from their own experience and archives: Norman Beddington, Judith Blakeman, Alison Clark, Keith Cook, Sheila Field, Liz George, Jo Thwaites, Stelios Voutsadakis and Gill Watson.

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Graham Towers October 1994

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for Pamela

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness, poverty, declining educational and moral standards, increasing crime and lawlessness, sporadic violent unrest, derelict land and crumbling buildings: any or all of these phenomena blight much of urban Britain in the mid-1990s. The problems are serious, perhaps approaching crisis proportions. Some see their origin in the social and economic policies of 1980s. Certainly, economic decline and reductions in social spending have made matters much worse, but many of the problems were already there. Others look further back, to the large-scale redevelopment of the 1960s. Then, large parts of the old cities were destroyed and replaced with huge new estates. Highrise housing proved decidedly unpopular. Those who could choose, opted not to live there. The estates quickly degenerated into ghettos of the deprived and have become breeding grounds for deep-seated social problems. The redevelopments of 30 years ago have undoubtedly visited their legacy on the present day, but it would be wrong to see in them the origin of the urban predicament. The housing drive of the 1960s was, itself, an almost desperate attempt to solve a problem that had already been at the top of the public agenda for more than a hundred years.

The roots of the urban question go back to the beginning of the industrial revolution. During the early nineteenth century the co-incidence of new industrial technology and large numbers of people displaced from the land combined to generate rapid urbanization. As a result of the unprecedented speed with which the new industrial cities grew, they were unplanned and poorly built. Within a short time they became polluted, overcrowded, insanitary and disease-infested. Living conditions for much of the urban population were appalling. Social reformers and philanthropists sought to address the worst of the evils, but their efforts bore little fruit until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Then, public health was improved by better sanitation and regulation to control new construction. More positively the efforts of philanthropic institutions and the public authorities were directed to the construction of new types of buildings, buildings that were purpose-designed to improve conditions for the urban working class—blocks of flats to provide better-quality and healthier housing; centres for recreation and personal development; spacious schools for the education of the children; public baths, libraries and other facilities for the improvement of the body and the mind. In these buildings the skills of architects—hitherto the preserve of rich patrons—were exercised for the benefit of the mass of ordinary people. It was the beginning of a new field of building design: social architecture.

From the 1840s, conditions in the industrial cities aroused increasing public concern. Despite the efforts of reformers, early progress was so slow as to be indiscernible. The squalor intensified and in the process the very notion of the city was besmirched. Radicals of the time, almost universally, detested the urban nightmare around them. They sought a

future free from the industrial city, a future that lay in small self-contained settlements set in the countryside where even the poorest could live close to nature. The new ideal became the Garden City—combining the best of town and country—and the urge to escape the industrial city was to become a major force in shaping the urban development of the twentieth century. As the State began to take more and more responsibility for social provision, local authorities were given new powers to tackle the problems of the cities. New and more spacious standards were adopted for the design of new housing for the working classes. Decentralization became the key objective. Estates of social housing were built on the urban fringes to relieve overcrowding in the cities. Meanwhile, the middle classes were busily rehousing themselves in the suburbs that speculative builders were throwing up around the major cities.

By the 1930s, it was evident that this strategy was not working. Generally, it was the better paid workers who moved to the peripheral estates and, with the increasing flight of the middle classes, the old cities became concentrations of the poor and disadvantaged. Physically, they were as bad as ever: concentrations of poorly built overcrowded houses lacking adequate sanitary amenities; or of larger houses, which several families were forced to share together. Decentralization alone had not solved the urban problem, it had exacerbated it. It was evident that the cities had to be rebuilt and, because of the severe congestion, blocks of flats were increasingly seen as the most appropriate housing for the urban poor. After the Second World War, these trends were accelerated. Decentralization continued, both as public policy and individual choice. More and more effort was put into urban redevelopment in an attempt to solve, once and for all, the persistent problem of the slums.

The urban local authorities were given unprecedented powers and capital funding to achieve this historic task. Social architecture approached its zenith. Many designers were inspired by the ideals of the modern movement in architecture. Like the Victorian idealists, the modernists despised the industrial city. Unlike them they did not look towards an extra-urban Utopia but resolved to sweep away the old cities and replace them with a new ideal: cities of multi-storey flats, bathed in light and air, set in generous parkland and served by spacious highways. Released from the slums, housed in their bright new flats, the workers would become healthy and contented. All this could be achieved quickly and efficiently by exploiting the benefits of industrial mass-production. Here, at last, was a model to replace the discredited image of industrial urbanity. The model, the means and the historical imperative came together to set the stage for a determined approach to urban renewal that accelerated throughout the 1950s and culminated in the massive redevelopment drive of the 1960s.

That period had a major impact in shaping the cities of today. It is manifest, not just in the multi-storey housing estates, but in the legacy of elevated urban motorways, commercial office blocks and shopping centres. But the more redevelopment took place, the more evident it became that the reality of the modern city fell very far short of the ideals of its protagonists. It was not just the inadequacy of the new developments that excited controversy, it was the sheer destructive power of the process. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, widespread protest movements swept through Britain's inner cities. Community action (as it became known) was in part a protest against the destruction of familiar environments and the break-up of urban communities. It was opposed to the unbridled power of the large urban authorities and, equally, to the commercial forces that were seeking to capitalize on urban redevelopment. More positively, it sought to draw attention

to the real needs of deprived urban areas and to create new structures through which urban communities could take part in determining their own future.

Community action generated a wide range of new ideas and revived quite few old ones. It created new movements that were to have a significant impact on urban life. Among these was a new approach to building design and development that became known as community architecture. Community architecture began with the architects, planners and others with technical expertise who entered community action to support local groups in their resistance to redevelopment plans, and in their efforts generated urban development that reflected their own needs. Initially, the work of all these activists was disparate and uncoordinated. By the late 1970s they had assembled under the community architecture umbrella, and some basic principles had emerged. There was extensive debate, though, about the way forwards. Three broad schools of thought emerged, each of which claimed the true path to enlightenment. One was based around the support provided by sympathetic architects to a broad range of community groups who were organizing their own developments through "self-help" initiatives. A second sought to bring specialist help to locally based campaigns for urban improvement by setting up "community technical aid centres". The third aimed to reform and break down the large technical departments in local government, making them truly responsive to community need.

Although these schools of thought contended with some hostility, they shared many basic principles and objectives. Chief among them was the belief that the users of building developments should play a key role in the design of the environments in which they were to live and work, or the facilities that were intended for their benefit. With user participation as the key principle, other things flowed from it. The involvement of technically untutored users could be achieved only through co-operation. Aloof professionalism, intent on protecting its role and expertise, was inimical to the process. Co-operative principles had emerged strongly from community action and they were to come to characterize the practice of community architecture. Once users were allotted a leading role, comprehensive redevelopment was largely ruled out. Preserving communities commonly meant preserving existing buildings, adapting and improving them for modern use. Where new building was essential, it should be small scale or piecemeal, presenting minimal disruption to the community structure and respecting the existing built environment. Above all, buildings should be designed to reflect the needs and demands of their users, rather than the concerns of their designers or developers.

In the development of its principles and practice, the term "community architecture" has become something of a misnomer. In the first place, it is by no means the preserve of architects. It embraces all aspects of building design in the broadest sense - planning, architecture, surveying, landscape, interiors, graphic design—and seeks an integration of these skills, which have become increasingly disconnected. It requires the development of new skills to assist inexperienced user groups in the initiation, development and funding of their projects. Its successful practice requires understanding well beyond the conventional concerns of building design; understanding of the social organization of communities and the historical context of urban environments; understanding of the political context and the tactical realities of campaigning, which can make or break a community project.

In its motivation, community architecture has the same objective as the social architecture that went before. It seeks to improve the lot of the poorer members of society. Not, though, by paternalistically imposing preconceived solutions that are supposedly for their benefit. Rather, it seeks to empower those who have least opportunity to control their own environment and who could not normally afford to employ architects—tenants, community

groups, ethnic minorities—the disadvan taged. Over more than 20 years it has built up a solid body of practice. This practice has been widely influential. Rehabilitation has become more common than comprehensive redevelopment. There has been a more sensitive approach to the planning and design of new developments. "Consultation" has become widespread in the development process. The full implementation of democratic building design has, however, been relatively limited. Given wider understanding and commitment, it could yet make a major contribution to the lasting resolution of Britain's seemingly perpetual urban problems.

This account is divided into three parts. The first reviews the historical developments that led to the emergence of community architecture. Chapter 1 deals with the nineteenth century. It outlines the development of the industrial cities and the various responses to industrialization. In these responses lay the seeds of many ideas that were to influence later urban development and organization and which still have considerable relevance to the present day. Chapter 2 traces the impact of decentralization in creating the social divisions that have exacerbated the problems of the inner cities. It also traces the origin of the urban "ideal" that resulted in the misguided large-scale developments of the 1960s. The third chapter deals with community action and its impact in generating a new approach to urban development.

Part Two covers the practice of community architecture. Each of the three broad strands is given a separate chapter. That on self-help covers community self-build, new types of producer organizations, and the development of housing co-operatives, all within the context of a re-invigoration of co-operative principles. Chapter 5 covers the development of community technical aid and the growth of the new voluntary organizations that formed the basis of their work. Chapter 6 deals with the response of local government: policy changes in response to community action, the decentralization of services, and the development of participation in addressing the problems of housing estates. The final chapter in Part Two discusses the principles of participation and outlines the range of techniques that have been developed through which people can be effectively involved in building design.

Part Three takes up some of the theoretical aspects of community architecture. Chapter 8 discusses the implications for design. It focuses primarily on the conventional process of architectural design. Architects have no monopoly on the design of building developments, but the perspective generated by architectural education, and the attitudes that it engenders, govern the prevalent approach to most building design. If the architectural establishment were to take on board the lessons of community architecture, far-reaching changes would be both desirable and necessary. Chapter 9 reviews the political implications. The political basis of the community movement stand outside conventional perceptions. In part, at least, it represents a third way that is characteristically different from either the "free market" or the organization of provision through the State. As such, it has suffered in the conflict between the predominant ideologies. The final chapter examines the three main facets of community architecture—social awareness, environmental sensitivity, democratic participation—and the implications that these might have for a new approach to addressing the problems of the inner cities.

The chapters are interspersed with a series of case studies. These explore seven participatory projects in some detail. Most relate directly to the issues set out in the preceding chapter. Although they are not integral to the main text, they help to amplify it. All the case studies are projects developed in Inner London over a period of 20 years. Community architecture developed in many British cities. London, though, has by far the largest inner urban area, which has been the focus of enormous problems both historically

and more recently. As a result, both the number and the variety of participatory projects has been greater in inner London than anywhere else. The case studies offer a flavour of the range of social background to community architecture and the often dramatic protest movements that led to new approaches in urban development. They describe and illustrate the building projects that emerged, projects quite different from what would have happened otherwise. Taken together, the case studies illustrate a new approach to the design of developments in the inner cities, which provides both appropriate and sustainable urban renewal.

Community architecture is a broad movement with many areas of interest. Focusing on its urban roots—and its potential role in the regeneration of the inner cities of Britain—means that other areas are not fully covered. One of these is ecological design. "Green architecture" sprang from similar political roots and many of those involved in community architecture are also interested in this field of design. It relies primarily, however, not on participation, but on the commitment of designers to seeking alternative technical solutions. Such solutions seek to create buildings and lifestyles that are in sustainable balance with the environment. They seek to conserve the world's natural resources through energy efficiency and the recycling of materials and waste products. A major concern of urban community architecture has been conservation and the re-use of old buildings. Although this is part of the Green agenda it does not fully reflect the range of "alternative" design. Not does it encompass the moral commitment to world conservation with its emphasis the use of renewable and environmentally friendly materials.

A concern with global issues is also reflected in the potential, which many see in community architecture, in the Third World. Communal co-operation has very strong traditions in many Third World countries. In rural housing, community selfbuild often plays a major role and has considerable potential in the cities of the Third World. Particular interest focused on the 1960s work of the British architect, John F.C.Turner, in the squatter communities of Lima, Peru. This lead has since been followed in other parts of Latin America. More recently, Yousef Mangunwijaya worked with a squatter community in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The architecture of Kampong Kai Cho-de was a distinguished achievement that has been recognized by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Similar community projects have taken place in Sri Lanka, Botswana, Kenya and elsewhere, often assisted by technical aid charities such as Intermediate Technology. Through such projects, participation and co-operation could play a significant role in world development.

In the First World there have been a wide range of participatory projects. Developments in America and Europe have been given some coverage where they exerted a direct influence on community architecture in Britain. But there have been many other interesting projects, which it has not been possible to include. In the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, campaigns by squatters groups led to the regeneration of the area. The architectural group Stern renovated old housing with the participation of residents and, in one area, introduced a range of experimental ecological solutions. In Cahors, France, workers in a co-operative bank participated in the development of an innovative design for their new building. In West Germany, Austria and Denmark, co-operative housing developed with the participation of users has produced novel and distinctive designs. These, and many other projects, offer considerable scope for further exploration of the benefits of participation in design.

In Britain itself, community architecture has not been an entirely urban phenomenon. Its ideas and its principles have spread into rural areas. In some projects they have been used in the regeneration of communities in economic decline, particularly those affected by the

collapse of rural industries such as mining. Many of the practices of community action have also been adopted by wealthier communities in defence of their environment or in the promotion of new facilities. These various spheres of interest, at home and abroad, all deserve fuller investigation and coverage. Some are already written up elsewhere, but there may well be scope for other publications. This book concentrates on urban Britain, the forces that gave rise to and nurtured community architecture, and the considerable contribution it could still make to the regeneration of the inner cities.

PART ONE

The historical background

CHAPTER 1
The legacy of the nineteenth century
THE RISE OF SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE

The nineteenth century, when Britain came to rule half the world. was a time of massive industrialization and urbanization. The growth of empire abroad and of great cities at home brought with it wealth for the few. For much of the population it brought exploitation, poverty, overcrowding and squalor. Gross inequality and harsh treatment were the hallmarks of Victorian Britain. But the misfortune of the many also brought forth the seeds of social movements that attempted to improve the lives of industrial workers and the urban poor—initiatives.that were to bear their fullest fruits in the twentieth century. Among these movements, attention was given for the first time to the application of architecture—of good design and construction—to social purposes.

The history of architecture has traditionally been seen solely in the legacy of important buildings—temples and cathedrals. palaces and mansions, civic buildings and cultural institutions—the icons that spelt out the development of the great styles of Western architecture. Although historians analyzed these landmarks in painstaking detail, only rarely did they lower their gaze to the mass of everyday buildings that surrounded them—the homes and workplaces of ordinary mortals; these were, quite simply, not architecture. This was partly disdain for the humble and vernacular, partly a reflection of historical fact: design was largely the prerogative of the rich. The holders of wealth—princes and merchants, the institutions of Church and State—were the patrons of the arts. The artists and architects served the wealthy. Slowly, during the nineteenth century, this situation began to change. Once the sole preserve of the rich and powerful, architectural skills began to be used for the benefit of poorer members of society.

The pioneer

Perhaps the earliest example of social architecture was the work of Robert Owen (1771–1858) at New Lanark in Scotland (Fig. 1.1). In a narrow valley of the fast-flowing upper reaches of the river Clyde, New Lanark was founded in 1784 by banker and industrialist David Dale. Dale brought to his newly built cotton mills orphans from workhouses, and destitutes displaced from the land. By 1796 Dale employed 1,340 workers, more than half of them children as young as six, who worked in the mills for 13 hours a day. Today, such conditions truly evoke the "Dark Satanic Mills" immortalized by William Blake. Yet by the standards of the time Dale was one of the more enlightened employers.

Robert Owen, a Welshman who had made his fortune in Manchester, bought New Lanark from Dale in 1800 and set about building a model community. In the mills he

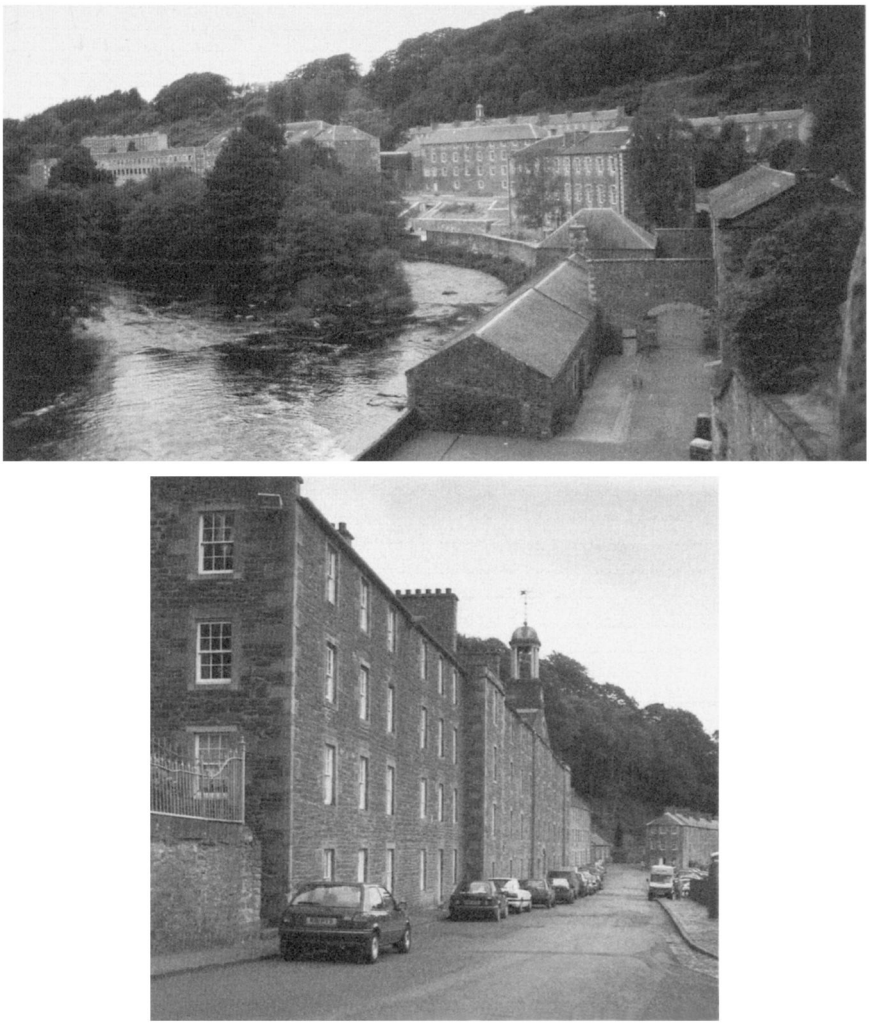

Figure 1.1 *New Lanark, the Scottish industrial settlement where Robert Owen conducted his pioneering experiment in enlightened social provision and co-operation.*

established a regime that was firm but fair, and set up a pension fund, levied on wages, for the sick and old. He built a school for the children, taking them out of the mills and into full-time education from the age of 5 to 10. He built the Institute for the Formation of Character, where workers attended morning exercise classes and evening lectures. He built a co-operative grocery store, a bakery, slaughterhouse and vegetable market. He organized refuse collection and a communal wash-house. He improved the existing houses and built new housing to standards well ahead of the time, with large rooms, well lit and solidly constructed. The houses were a mixture of two-storey cottages and four and five-storey

tenements (even then, multi-storey flats were a common form of housing in Scottish cities). Housing was built in a plain style from locally hewn grey stone. The public buildings were a little more elaborate, designed in a pared down classical style.

New Lanark was an experiment in social progress, although it was by no means a democratic exercise. Owen was noted for autocratically imposing on his workers his own ideas for their self-improvement. He sought to prove that a good environment could mould a healthy individual with stronger character; that a well treated work-force was a productive one. And his experiment was an economic success, showing steady profits and increasing value. The many thousands of visitors who flocked to New Lanark during Owen's 25 years in charge came not just to see the social facilities but, no doubt, to learn what enlightenment could do for their own self-interest. What Owen practiced, he preached at length. Later in his life, in his writings and speeches, Owen formulated many of the ideas that were to form the basis of the co-operative and trade union movements.[1]

Although Owen's ideas became widely influential, his foundation could not provide a physical model for what was to follow. New Lanark was a small community, never larger than 2,500 people. The mills of the early industrial revolution were dependent on water power and many were sited in steep and inaccessible valleys, with strict limits on their potential for expansion. Early in the nineteenth century, the development of steam power freed industries from the valleys. Long before Owen left New Lanark, the stage was set for the most massive upheaval in social geography.

Urbanization

Between 1800 and 1850 the population of England and Wales more than doubled and the number of households increased by 135 per cent. At the turn of the century 80 per cent of people still lived in the countryside or in small settlements. By 1851 over half were living in cities and 25 per cent of the population was packed into ten urban areas with a population of 100,000 or more. Much of this development took place around London, but growth was most rapid in the industrial cities of the north. During this period Glasgow's population more than tripled. In a single decade between 1811 and 1821 Manchester grew by more than 40 per cent. In the decade from 1821 Liverpool and Leeds grew at a similarly rapid rate.[2] The development of the railways from the 1830s only served to accelerate urban growth.

The urbanization of Britain has no parallel in terms of its scale and speed, and the effect on housing standards was disastrous. By the time Engels and Chadwick conducted their influential surveys in the early 1840s, much of the urban population was living in the most appalling conditions. A great deal of urban working-class housing was provided by the now notorious "back-to-backs". "An immense number of small houses occupied by the poorer classes in the suburbs of Manchester are of the most superficial character" reported Chadwick, "The walls are only half brick thick…and the whole of the materials are slight and unfit for the purpose…They are built back to-back; without ventilation or drainage; and, like a honeycomb, every particle of space is occupied. Double rows of these houses form courts, with, perhaps, a pump at one end and a privy at the other common to the occupants of about twenty houses".[3] Thousands of these back-to-backs were built throughout the cities of northern England. Mostly they were two rooms about 12ft × 10ft built, "one-up, one-down" in two-storey terraces. Some also had a third storey, some a cellar beneath (Fig. 1.2).

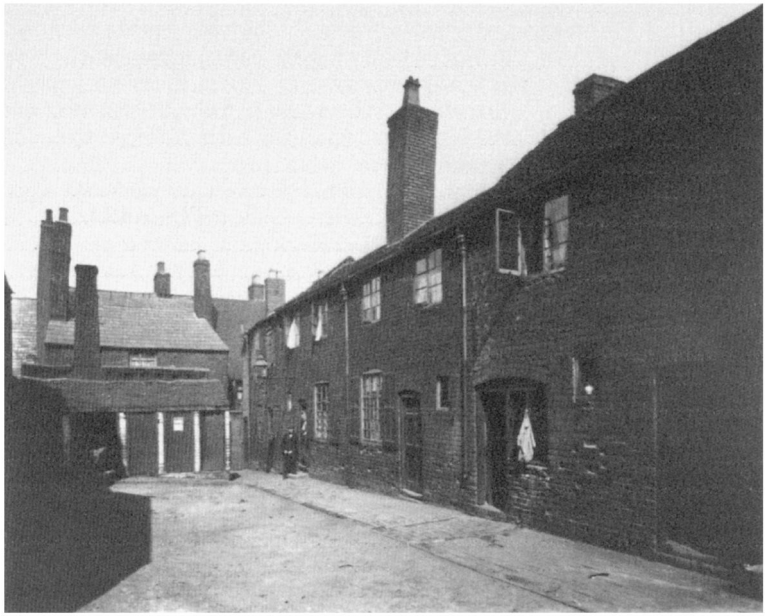

Figure 1.2 *A back-to-back court in Birmingham, photographed at the turn of the century.*

Bad as they were, at least the back-to-backs provided families with the privacy of self-containment. Many lived in much worse conditions. Much urban housing was adapted. "Tenementing" was common—larger houses built for better-off families were divided up, let and sublet. Whole families lived in one room sharing such toilet and cooking facilities as there were. Many older houses became common lodging houses where letting was by the bed rather than by the room. Six or seven strangers might share a single room, with no furniture other than bare mattresses, Men were mixed with women, couples and families with single people. Often the beds themselves were shared, their users taking turns to sleep in shifts. Tenements and lodging houses could be found in all cities, but were most numerous in London where the slums they created reached into the heart of the metropolis. Soho, Westminster and Covent Garden contained areas of lodging houses—or "rookeries" as they were then called—as well as more outlying areas.

Worst of all were the cellar dwellings. Poorly ventilated, poorly lit—sometimes without windows at all—cellars were always damp. Many were just bare earth or partly paved, and poor drainage often caused them to flood. Insanitary and often grossly overcrowded, cellars offered the barest form of shelter to the most destitute of the urban poor and were often a breeding ground for infectious diseases such as typhus. Throughout the older industrial towns thousands of families lived in cellar dwelling, but they were most prevalent in Manchester and Liverpool. Engels estimated that, in 1844, 40,000–50,000 people lived in cellars in greater Manchester, while in Liverpool 45,000 subsisted in cellar dwellings—more than 20 per cent of the city's population.[4]

Small wonder that such conditions led Engels and Marx to prepare their revolutionary treatise. In the Communist *Manifesto,* first published in 1848,[5] they declared "The

bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life" and proposed a "Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country." But Marxism had no immediate impact and was never to have significant influence in urbanized industrial countries. More immediately two strains of reform started to develop during the 1840s. In the cities the emergence of the philanthropic movement and the beginnings of legislative control slowly began to try to improve life. On the other hand, many rejected the evils of the city altogether and proposed a return to the idyll of rural life.

Flight from the cities

The earliest practical attempt to rescue working people from the evils of the city was the Land Company founded by the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor. The Chartists were mainly concerned with pressing for electoral reform and, in particular, the abolition of the property qualification for the franchise. Very few workers owned their homes at that time and the vast majority were thus deprived of the right to representation. As a working-class organization the Chartists were also concerned at the dire working and living conditions of their supporters.

In 1843 O'Connor attacked the evils brought by machinery and sought independence for the victims of the industrial revolution from employer and landlord. He proposed life on the land as a way out of the new industrial society. He planned to build 40 "estates" providing 5,000 families with a cottage and a smallholding from which they could earn a living and, in pursuit of Chartist aims, the entitlement to vote. Each estate would have its own community centre, school and hospital. In 1845 he formed the Chartist Co-operative Land Society to carry out the plan. O'Connor sought the support of Marx and Engels, but they disapproved of all forms of private property and saw in this a diversion from their revolutionary aims.

But it did catch the imagination of a large section of the urban working class. By 1847 the Land Company had 60,000 members with 600 branches in England, Scotland and Wales, mostly drawn from the skilled section of the working class. Each member held 2 or 3 shares at £2 10s. Like an early version of the football pools, these shares would entitle them to enter a lottery for a smallholding and an escape from urban life. The first estate was started at Heronsgate (or O'Connorsville) near Rickmansworth. In 1845 the Company completed 35 cottages built in semi-detached pairs, each in its own smallholding of 2, 3 or 4 acres. 1,487 members had sufficient shares to qualify for a homestead, and a ballot was drawn for the winners. Over the next three years a further five estates were started in Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Oxford shire. 250 houses were built, as well as schools and community buildings. The houses were designed by O'Connor himself, often as homes and farm buildings combined (Fig. 1.3). They were built from O'Connor's sketches by small builders, some of whom were members of the Land Company. And they were very well built. The great majority survived, suitable modernized, as twentieth century commuter homes.

O'Connor's project attracted national attention at the time, but its economic concept—of supporting a family on a smallholding and making enough to repay a debt—was always dubious and repeatedly attacked. Worse, the Land Company fell foul of the law and was never properly registered as a legal entity. In 1851 the Company collapsed amid allegations

Figure 1.3 *Cottage cum smallholding at Minster Lovell in Oxfordshire, one of several settlements built by the Chartist Land Company to provide working people with an escape route from the industrial city*

of disorganization and corruption. The project had largely failed, but it had raised the dream of escape from the cities.[6]

The Arts and Crafts movement

That dream was shared by leading intellectuals of the day. The prolific critic of art, architecture and politics, Oxford academic John Ruskin, similarly despised machinery and modern urbanity. Ruskin emphasized the importance of craft work as an antidote to drudgery and the poor quality of machine production, and supported a somewhat authoritarian version of socialism. But it was his pupil William Morris, rather than the esoteric Ruskin, who was to popularize these ideas.

William Morris (1834–96) earned his living as an interior designer to the rich, but he was a polymath in the arts and politics and a major figure in the latter half of the century. Through his activities, Morris brought together the Pre-Raphaelite painters and poets and the Arts and Crafts architects. Through his membership of the Social Democratic Federation and as editor of *The Commonweal,* he propounded an idealistic view of socialism. Morris had strong views on the environment. He regarded the timeless domestic architecture of England as a model for future development—an architecture of simplicity that owed little to the historical styles. He believed in repair and conservation, and set up the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.[7]

Towards the end of his life, Morris set down the beliefs that had guided his work in the utopian novel *News from nowhere*. In it the narrator goes to sleep in a suburb of the hated industrial London and wakes up in an idealized socialist society in the twenty-first century, full of healthy, happy people living a co-operative life. He is taken on a journey into central London and he witnesses Morris's vision of the urban future.

> We turned away from the river at once and were soon on the main road that runs through Hammersmith. But I should have had no guess as to where I was if I had not started from the waterside; for King Street was gone and the highway ran through wide sunny meadows and garden-like tillage.... There were houses about, some on the roads, some amongst the fields with pleasant lanes leading down to them, and each surrounded by a teeming garden. They were all pretty in design, and solid as might be, but countrified in appearance. like yeoman's dwellings; some of them of red brick like those by the river, but more of timber and plaster, which were by the necessity of their construction so like medieval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century;...On the north side of the road was a range of building and courts, low but very handsomely built and ornamented, and in that way forming a great contrast to the unpretentiousness of the houses round about; while above this lower building rose the steep lead-covered roof and the buttresses and higher part of a great hall, of a splendid and exuberant style of architecture, of which one can say little more than that it seemed to me to embrace the best qualities of the Gothic of northern Europe with those of the Saracenic and Byzantine, although there was no copying of any one of these styles.[8]

Morris's vision took as its model an idealization of the vanished medieval lifestyle and the replacement of the Victorian city by a dispersed agrarian craft economy. It has often been dismissed as backward-looking and romantic, but it was an ideal many were to come to share. In many ways *News from nowhere* was a retrospective manifesto for the Arts and Crafts movement in architecture. Morris worked only briefly as an architect, as a pupil of G.E. Street in 1856, but he undoubtedly had an influence on the house that Philip Webb designed for him in 1859. The Red House, with its steep pitched roof and traditional materials and details; its simple and informal approach to design is normally seen as the key influence that started the Arts and Crafts movement.

The movement did look backwards and it revived such traditional features as expressed pitched roofs, bay windows, casement windows, tile-hung walls and expressed timber beams —all of which had been obliterated by the classically inspired Georgian and Recency urban housing. It was to take these features, and a traditional approach to detailing and use of materials, forward into a new synthesis of British vernacular architecture in which new buildings respected the environment and were designed to fit in with their surroundings. For the first time, humble buildings provided the inspiration for architects—not the Great Styles of historical monuments. Not that the leading lights of the movement exhibited any practical social commitment. Webb, Lethaby, Norman Shaw and Voysey all earned their living from prestige buildings for wealthy clients—mostly large houses set in the beloved countryside. Only Ashbee was to form a direct relationship with the urban poor. Nevertheless, they created an architecture that was more democratic in its origins and that was highly influential and very popular.

Model towns

From mid-century onwards a handful of employers became concerned about the living conditions of their workers. Whether from philanthropic motives or from interest, the idea, pioneered by Robert Owen, of building good housing for a company workforce, began to take physical shape in new settlements. First was the Halifax worsted manufacturer Edward

Figure 1.4 *Port Sunlight, most picturesque of the model industrial towns which generated a new ideal as an alternative to the industrial city.*

Akroyd. He built two model villages at Copley (1849) and Akroydon (1859) on virgin land in the Yorkshire Dales. Akroydon was designed in domestic Gothic by the noted architect George Gilbert Scott.[9] In 1853 Titus Salt, a Bradford alpaca manufacturer, started the more famous model town, Saltaire, designed by local architects Lockwood and Mawson in a simplified Georgian style. In 1888 the soap manufacturer W.H. Lever founded Port Sunlight near Birkenhead (Fig. 1.4). The model village he built for his workers was designed by several architects and drew on a mixture of styles. Predominantly, though, it is a romantic and evocative revival of domestic Gothic, authentically replicating the design and construction of Tudor housing. A little later came the chocolate towns: Cadbury's Bournville near Birmingham (1893) and Rowntree's New Earswick near York (1901). In all these model foundations working conditions were good and high quality housing, public buildings and facilities were provided all on Owenite lines.[10]

In many ways the model towns were the embodiment of Morris's vision and the later ones in particular were strongly influenced by Arts and Crafts architecture. Bournville owed much to domestic Gothic and the revival of English vernacular. New Earswick was designed in cottage vernacular by the architects Parker and Unwin, who provided a strong link between the Arts and Crafts Movement and the new campaign for Garden Cities. Raymond