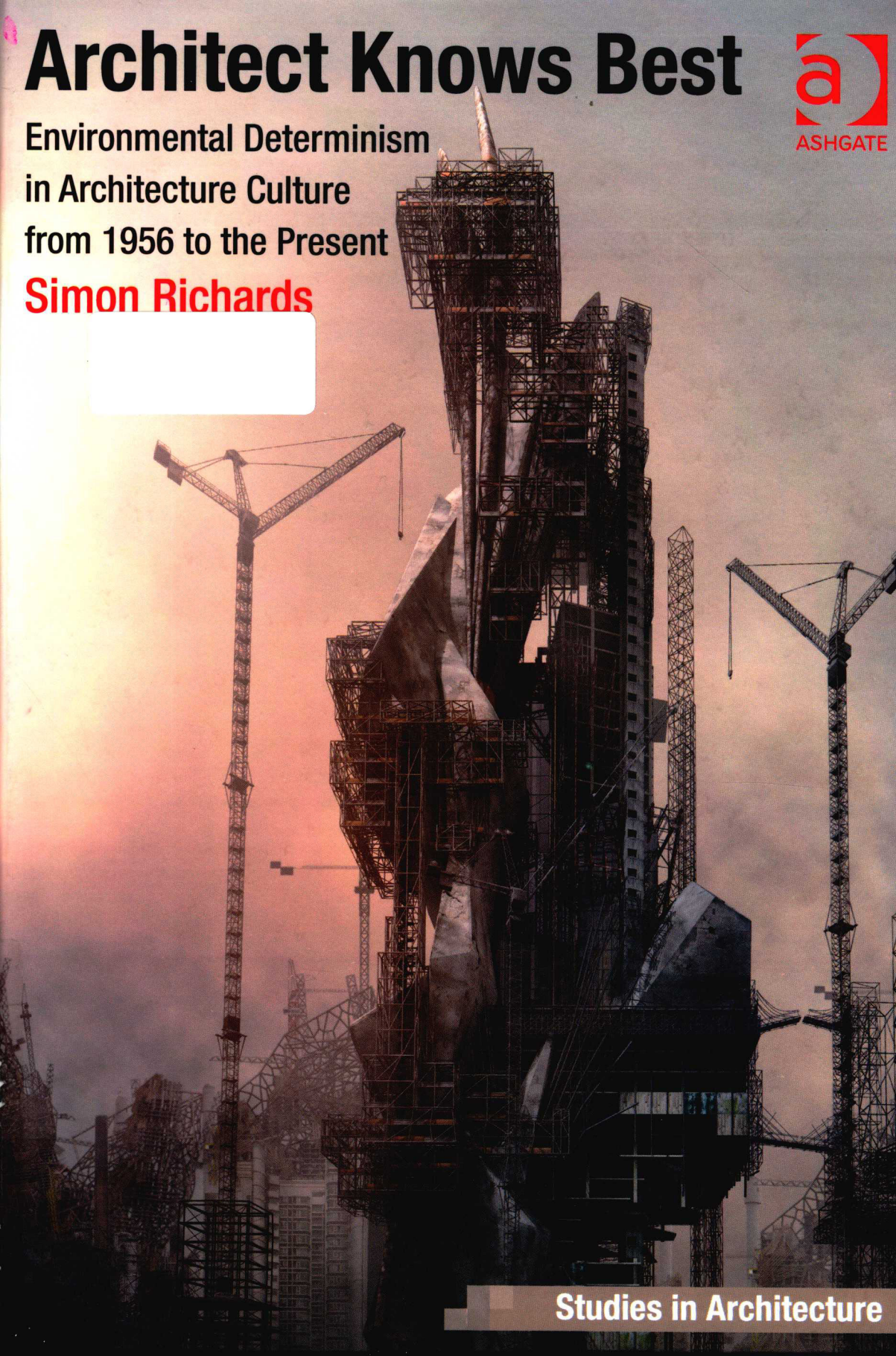


Architect Knows Best

Environmental Determinism
in Architecture Culture
from 1956 to the Present

Simon Richards



Studies in Architecture

Architect Knows Best

Environmental Determinism in Architecture Culture
from 1956 to the Present

Simon Richards

University of Leicester, UK



ASHGATE

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For Kumiko

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Introduction

This book is about some of the things that changed in architecture and planning in the second half of the twentieth century. More centrally, though, it is about one thing that has not changed: the idea that the right kind of building can transform us into happier, healthier, better people.

Maybe we associate this with a time long past, for example when people were decanted from the crowded city centres and into high-rise tenement blocks. Far from going away, however, this idea has become more deeply entrenched and has diversified in complex ways. High-rise tenements are no longer seen as the answer, at least not by many. But while the architectural forms and solutions may have changed, the commitment to use them to reform behaviour and society has not. Strangely, there are not many historians and even fewer architect-planners who acknowledge this. Maybe they do not think it is an issue. I think it is *the* issue. The main purpose of this book is to explore some of the more striking manifestations of this phenomenon over the last half century and assess its ongoing role within the discourse.

This book has two objectives. Firstly, we shall trace the history of what has changed in architecture and planning over this time by looking at some of the most important designers and writers, buildings and movements. Secondly, and more importantly, we shall reflect upon the one crucial aspect that has remained the same: the belief that architecture and planning are capable of transforming the world and everyone in it for the better. Architect-planners are still telling people how they should be living, and this is tied to a multitude of ideas about human nature and about the self, about community, spirituality, bodily growth, the mind and memory, and many other things besides. In essence, we shall be exploring ideas about the intersection between architecture and life.

These ideas are among the most fascinating but also troubling features of the discourse of architecture and planning. They are fascinating because they sometimes involve a genuine philosophical view about the nature of humanity, about what people are and what they need. In these cases they show that

architects care and think deeply about improving the conditions of life. But they can be troubling as well as they often involve passing judgment on the lives and behaviour of ordinary people, as well as a desire to reform them through the influence of the built environment.

The chapters that follow focus on theories and debates where these issues were discussed with the greatest intensity and ambition, and where the results of these discussions had some impact on the built environment. The areas to be covered are:

1. the role of architecture in reinvigorating community, civic responsibility and the public realm;
2. the role of architecture in reconnecting people with the past, both as public history and private memory;
3. the special and almost spiritual qualities of place and landscape, as well as the importance of respecting the human body, senses and emotions;
4. the role of architecture as a language that can uphold and project meaning, and teach us to think and communicate more satisfactorily;
5. the relationship between architecture and the unsettling experience of contemporary, media-saturated lifestyles.

The examples will be taken from Britain, Europe and the United States, as these are the geographical areas that have dominated the discourse. In the *Account of Architects and Architecture* (1664), John Evelyn said that our buildings and cities are shaped by four different kinds of architect, working in tandem but more often in conflict: the builder, the designer, the patron and the writer. With that in mind we will be looking not only at influential architects and planners, but also journalists, sociologists and philosophers. But before we can get into this topic and the reasons for its neglect it is important to get a better sense of the history of architecture and planning over recent decades.

The More Things Change

HEROES AND VILLAINS

You do not have to be an architecture historian to sense that there were major changes in architecture and planning in the second half of the twentieth century. When prospective students arrive to check out my department on the seventeenth floor of the Attenborough Tower, which was built by Arup Associates in 1970, they are often disparaging of its rough-textured pre-cast concrete surfaces and the saw-tooth profile created by the window casements. Sometimes they remark that the building well deserves its nickname of 'The Cheese Grater', given to it by the people of Leicester without even a trace of ironic affection. The students' parents will reminisce occasionally about a time when buildings like this seemed the norm, and although the Attenborough Tower is an office block, will associate it resentfully with a time when people were moved from their family homes and made to live in tenement blocks, ostensibly for their own wellbeing and happiness. I like the Attenborough, even when the paternoster lift breaks and it rains inside, but my visiting guests have often told me they are glad that buildings like this do not get built so often nowadays. The Brutalist heap of Denys Lasdun's Charles Wilson building nearby does not improve the overall impression.

The reason that buildings like this were so commonplace in the 1960s and '70s was because of an unprecedented consensus that swept the architectural establishment earlier in the century. Established in 1928 in Switzerland by the aristocratic art-patron Hélène de Mandrot, the architect-planner Le Corbusier and the architecture historian Sigfried Giedion, CIAM (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) became the official body of modern architecture and planning, aggressive in its disdain for architectural tradition. Members would gather together for conferences every three or four years in various cities throughout Europe in order to thrash out what amounted effectively to design policy. But CIAM was truly a global organization, with delegates attending from the Americas, North Africa, India and the Far East. After each conference, delegates would return

1.1 Attenborough Tower (Arup Associates, 1970) and Charles Wilson Building (Denys Lasdun, 1963), Leicester
Source: The Author



to their countries in order to lobby for the implementation of the ideals of CIAM, both in the building and land-use legislation of their respective governments and also in the educational curricula of their schools of architecture and planning. This is the reason that one subsequently found CIAM principles emerging in built form the world over, such as in the practice of separating cities into discrete zones determined by use: industry set apart from housing set apart from schools, from shops, from hospitals and so on. One also found the proliferation of multi-level highway developments and high-rise buildings for residential and commercial purposes. This was tied to the widespread adoption of inner city slum-clearance programmes, usually deemed unsanitary, as well as of historic city centres, in the belief that demolition and renewal was better than the rehabilitation of these areas. Much of this work was done in a stripped down aesthetic inspired by geometric forms and technology and used building materials such as reinforced concrete, glass and steel. The architect-planner who orchestrated all this activity was usually presented as an expert, whose views were grounded on the most reliable science and whose judgment and right to legislate on the built environment, including the relocation of industries, waterways and populations, should run unopposed. In the most influential CIAM document, *The Athens Charter* of 1943, the ancient conundrum of the city was boiled down into a neat puzzle with just 'four functions' to be slotted together: dwelling, working, circulation and recreation.

These were the elements and strategies thought best to improve lives and make everyone happier, healthier and better behaved. And although only some of them ever came to pass, it was believed that human physiology, psychology, society and even spirituality could be laid bare by science and optimized through the efforts of

architect-planners for satisfaction guaranteed. Predictably, the enterprise carried a strong whiff of messianic utopianism.¹ It must be stressed that there was not a perfect global consensus of design ideology within CIAM, let alone of political ideology, as communists and liberal capitalists vied to dominate the agenda. Nonetheless there was consensus to a very marked degree, which established some sense of shared purpose among personalities as diverse and strong-willed as Karel Teige, Cornelis van Eesteren, Josep Lluís Sert, Mies van der Rohe, Jacqueline Tyrwhitt and Hannes Meyer (Mumford 2000).²

In the 1950s that consensus was fractured. This is not to say that CIAM was sunk immediately: its principles remained influential in government policy and in the architecture schools and they continued to have an impact on the built environment for a long time to come (Crinson and Lubbock 1994; Mumford 2000: 267-74). Even so, the hegemony of CIAM was undermined. Many alternative ways of thinking about architecture and planning emerged at this time, not only from architect-planners but also from sociologists, economists and philosophers, and these were formulated in large part as an antidote to the things that CIAM was felt to have gotten wrong, important qualities that it neglected. Critics pointed also to a series of high-profile building failures in Britain and the United States as symbolic of the final discrediting of modern architecture, both structurally and in terms of its social-reformist ambitions. Popular sentiment was galvanized by the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis in 1972, for example, after an expensive campaign to remedy its social problems had failed. A similar milestone was Ronan Point in London, a high-rise tower that partially collapsed in 1968 as a result of a gas explosion, causing the loss of four lives.³

The perception that things must have changed radically around this time is underlined by the new buildings and town plans that received attention subsequently, and a quick cross-section gives an insight into some of the values that we seem now to seek from the built environment. One of the most common assumptions about architecture over the last few decades, quite simply, is that it should be exciting and stimulating. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum (1997), an origami battleship of metallic folds and ribbons, was a spectacular success for the city of Bilbao, likewise the interlocking shells or billowing sails of the Sydney Opera House (1973) by Jørn Utzon. On a more playful level there is Will Alsop's Peckham Library in south London (1999), a candy box perched on stilts, or the inside-out tangle of the Pompidou Centre in Paris (1977) by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano. Striking a different emotional register is Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin (1999), with its awkward labyrinthine axes and angular zinc-clad exterior slashed with cuts. And approaching the bizarre is Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette in the suburbs of Paris (1991), a phalanx of scarlet follies plonked down in a grid pattern that is wilfully useless and inconvenient and all the more intriguing for it. When discussed in the press, on television, and in academic writing, buildings like these tend to be described as bold, exuberant, provocative, enjoyably confusing, unsettling perhaps and even traumatic.

Architecture is expected sometimes to be less challenging and more respectful of the context into which it is placed. Tadao Ando is famous for situating his buildings sensitively within the landscape, for opening views onto water and sky and trees,

even though the buildings themselves are made of the most unnatural and hard-edged materials. The Water Temple in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan (1991), which is entered by stepping down into it through a circular lily pond on the roof, seems almost to dissolve within the landscape. But the context may be about history rather than nature, with the architect striving to preserve the memory of the past by using traditional materials, motifs and styles. The Sainsbury Wing extension to the National Gallery in London (1991) was designed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to reflect the main museum with its neo-classical proportions and detailing. The architects did this rather playfully, however, as the pilasters on the new façade are squashed together and overlap like the bellows of an accordion. Also in London, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron acknowledged a different kind of heritage when they transformed the Bankside Power Station into the Tate Modern (1999). Apart from adding some pastel light-boxes, their most celebrated feat was to open up the cavernous Turbine Hall and let the industrial grandeur speak for itself. And offering a simple yet sensitive solution is Rafael Moneo's National Museum of Roman Art in Mérida, Spain (1985), which is suspended above an archaeological site of the old Roman town and clad in bricks that feel as if they might have been lifted from the ruins below.

Prestigious buildings of this kind tend to be valued for being exhilarating or for being respectful, qualities that are not necessarily compatible. But they are celebrated for another reason too, one that they hold in common: their role as a catalyst for public pride and urban regeneration. These buildings can give a new sense of identity to a locality, in particular urban areas that might once have been dangerous, run-down, or just a little neglected. They turn dead zones into public places that local residents can be proud of, they give cities a brand image to appeal to tourists, and the resulting combination of people who care and people with cash often helps contribute to social and economic regeneration.

Regeneration is a concept that seems to have become synonymous with town planning as well. The last thirty years have seen pressure mounting against the building of new inner city tower blocks and new housing estates in the suburbs, and in favour of redeveloping so-called 'brown-field' sites and abandoned buildings in the inner cities. This might involve turning old commercial warehouses and factories into flats, for example, which is a common site around Britain's coastal areas and waterways. But it might also involve trying to empower local people to take a more active role in the future development of their neighbourhoods, over issues such as the provision of schools and hospitals for example. This is an older idea that originated in the late 1950s but has gained acceptance only slowly. A good example of both of these ideas is Coin Street Community Builders, which was established in the 1980s by residents seeking to protect their inner London homes from plans to replace them with high-rise office blocks. After putting the developers to rout they invested in local businesses and opened a series of community-minded housing projects, such as the Iroko Housing Cooperative of 2001. This provides affordable rented homes for a diverse mix of people working in essential jobs, like bus drivers and teachers and cleaners, who ordinarily would be priced out of the city-centre market.

The building of new homes outside the city remains essential of course, but an interesting thing has happened here also. No longer is it enough for suburban streets and cul-de-sacs to be thrown down. The expectation is that they too should be built in such a way as to encourage a vibrant community to develop. Streets should be attractive and pathways plentiful and meandering, buildings should reflect the local vernacular both in materials and style, and the distance from the edge of any development to the commercial and civic centre should be a mere ten minute walk. Houses and flats should be jumbled together, as well as being designed with different specifications and prices in order to appeal to different groups of people, including single professionals, young couples, families, retirees, and so on. These ideas are typical of the New Urbanist movement, which has gained in popularity since the early 1990s on the back of planning experiments such as the clapboard and shingles holiday village of Seaside in Florida (1981-present), or the clotted cream and chimney-pots version known as Poundbury in the English county of Dorset (1993-present).

Finally, we should mention the role and power of the architect-planner. Current expectations seem to dictate that all new building work should be done sensitively, in painstaking consultation with the client, the local community, and countless other interest groups with agendas of their own. As a consequence the influence of the architect-planner is to some degree held in check, and the impact upon the built environment has tended to be increasingly modest and measured.

To describe the examples in this – admittedly partial – introductory sketch, I used words like challenging, exciting, stimulating, place, identity, memory, history, tradition, vernacular, context, public, regeneration, consultation, empowerment and community. These are not the words that one would have found voiced too often by the architect-planners associated with CIAM, nor by commentators describing their work and ideas. There is no doubt that something has changed in the practise and values of architecture and planning, but the precise question of how, why and when these changes happened, and indeed the extent of these changes, is open to debate. A lot of research into the history of twentieth century architecture is fixated on this.

Those who were involved in articulating new approaches in the 1950s and '60s, people like the urban economist Jane Jacobs, architects Robert Venturi and Aldo Rossi, and critics like Charles Jencks, often presented the personalities and agenda of CIAM in a simple, unified way that amounted to caricature – not too dissimilar to the account that I offered just now. It was useful to do this. The image of a unified enemy of malicious intent made it easier to present one's own work and ideas as fresh and redemptive departures. These arguments from mid-century all piled up into a kind of composite history that revolved around the idea of a radical turning point. The architecture of austerity, intellectualism and purity gave way to one of exuberance, complexity and fun. The mania for aggressive modernization was discredited by a fresh appreciation of traditional styles and townscapes. The single-use zones were mixed together into a vibrant mess. The arrogant expert was recast as the appreciative listener and collaborator. And the unaccompanied drive along superhighway to high-rise became the gossipy stroll around the urban

village. This change of attitude took time. It was written into theory, sketched on paper and debated in conferences before it began to make an impact upon the built environment towards the end of the 1970s. Even so, a critical mass of opinion was achieved and it swung CIAM slowly into the air, exposing its devotees as unreal dreamers and despots. The battle finally was won.

Many recent scholars take issue with the neatness of this story, stressing that this shift in architectural thinking was much more complex than previously thought, even to the extent that there might not have been much of a shift at all. Some argue that many of the concerns that 'emerged' in the 1950s had been upheld throughout the twentieth century by architects on the fringes of CIAM who were either suspicious or outrightly hostile towards it. When the soon-to-be masters of CIAM were developing their crystalline aesthetic in the early 1920s, for example, Erich Mendelsohn was completing the sensuous, organic curves of his Einstein Tower near Potsdam (1921). Frank Lloyd Wright did all he could to halt the spread of CIAM in the United States and scheduled lecture tours to clash with those of Le Corbusier and siphon away his audiences. Arguably his most famous anti-CIAM manifesto is the Fallingwater residence at Bear Run, Pennsylvania (1937), which is cantilevered out over a river and waterfall, the windows mimicking the sliding screens and 'borrowed landscape' techniques of traditional Japanese architecture. Although they never sought to organize themselves into a coherent body like CIAM, this alternative tradition of architects, which included Hugo Häring, Hans Scharoun, Gunnar Asplund, Alvar Aalto, Hassan Fathy and Luis Barragán, had many things in common: an approach to building that respected, complemented and drew out the best features of the natural environment; a commitment to experiment with the vernacular styles and building materials of a region; a belief in the expressive and communicative potential of architectural form and symbolism; a pragmatic approach that treated each job as unique, rather than as a stepping-stone towards world domination (Blundell Jones 1995, 1999). These architects tended to write little, preferring to let their ideas come through in their buildings, but still they amounted to 'a marginal but persistent counter-tendency – a resistance movement opposed to modernism's reduction to a formulaic schema, unresponsive to the vagaries of human life' (Woodman 2007: 8).⁴ Further confusing the picture is when occasionally we find similar tendencies amongst the high priests of CIAM itself: Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp (1954), for example, was re-built to incorporate the rubble salvaged from a church destroyed in the war, and combines this extremely loaded vernacular-historicist accent with such exuberant movement, colour and symbolism that it is hard to imagine it having been built by one of the signatories of *The Athens Charter*.

This leads to another argument in the revisionist histories: the ideas that came to the fore from the 1950s onwards had been pioneered from within CIAM itself, not by those outside or those who came later. The Spanish architect-planner Josep Lluís Sert, for example, who was president of CIAM from 1947 to 1956, sometimes talked about building communities, respecting the local vernacular and transforming urban design into a more democratic process by recasting the designer as collaborator with various interest groups and professions, rather than being overall

leader. His plans for Motor City in Brazil (1947) and Chimbote in Peru (1948) have been described as exemplars of 'communitarian focus and vernacular expression', a sensitive modernist updating of 'Latin American town squares (*praças*) and promenades (*passeios*)'. This is questionable. When contrasted with Le Corbusier's 1945 plan for Saint-Dié in France, which is considered less satisfactory in terms of community planning, one finds in Sert's schemes the same sterile open plazas, manicured gardens and high-rise buildings on stilts, and any references to a Latin American vernacular are lost (Bacon 2008: 91, 94). His commitment to democracy in the design process was short lived as well. Sert convened a conference at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1968 and the keynote speaker, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, voiced the CIAM principles of top-down planning that Sert ultimately shared: the architect is society's 'arbiter of taste... beauty, no more than measles or syphilis, is to be entrusted to the uninstructed intellect' (Galbraith in Mumford 2008: 159; Marshall 2008: 131-32). The urban historian Lewis Mumford dismissed Sert's references to democratic planning, community and civic life as lip service at best and probably insincere. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the elements of an alternative approach were present in the thinking of Sert during these years.

Other examples offer a stronger case. In the 1940s the British journal *Architectural Review*, which was largely pro-CIAM in its editorial policy, began to publish on the need for a 'regional architecture in which form and materials would answer to local circumstances and conditions, and not just the abstract requirements of some international style'. This was in part a response to the so-called 'New Empiricism' of the Scandinavian modernists, who tended to produce work that was more detailed, curvaceous and humane in scale than their peers in other countries: 'It was difficult to settle down in the new houses', said the Swedish architect Sven Backström, 'because the "new" human beings were not so different from the older ones' (Backström in Bullock 2002: 46). Other issues championed by the *Architectural Review* included the demand for a 'new monumentality', which suggested an architecture that expressed ordinary human aspirations and even memories. The architecture historian Sigfried Giedion, a co-founder of CIAM who on this occasion seemed to depart from some its principles, wrote as follows:

The people want buildings representing the social, ceremonial and community life. They want their buildings to be more than a functional fulfilment. They seek the expression of their aspirations for joy, for luxury and for excitement... Every period has the impulse to create symbols in the form of monuments, which according to the Latin meaning, is 'something that reminds', something to be transmitted to later generations... They are intended to outlive the period which originated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations (Giedion in Bullock 2002: 50-51).

And this concern for nurturing community found its way also into the 'County of London Plan' of 1943 by J. H. Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, which looked to the mixed-uses approach being pioneered in some European communal housing and also in the 'neighbourhood unit' concept from America. These ideas were