

# Peter and Alison Smithson, London

Architectural Education  
in Britain

History of architectural education  
in Britain. The Smithsons' approach  
to architectural education in Britain  
is a direct result of their own  
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# "We need to reverse our priorities"

## The Fragmentary Utopia

### Introduction

In practical terms an architect only begins to be effective within society when that picture of its ideal self which is distilled from the whole consciousness of society begins to take a concrete, generally accepted form.

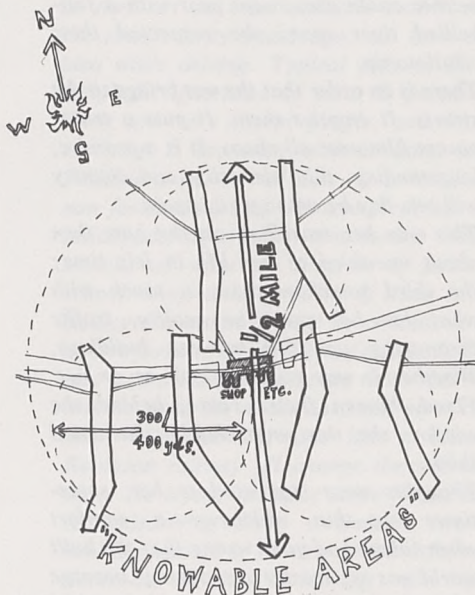
An architect may have built in advance of this picture and so have helped to formulate it, but, until the moment of acceptance—which happens quite suddenly—he builds for himself and for the few. His work is not accessible to the many.

I believe we have passed out of the probing—initiates only—phase in Eng-

land into the phase of the 'vision accepted'. The full participation phase.

Out of the experiences of living with our postwar building efforts in England there is, I believe, a 'vision accepted'. The last 'vision accepted' in England was that of the Garden City.

The experiences which formulated this 'vision accepted' can be separated out:



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20:5:68.

### Realization 1:

That 'infill' of new buildings into an existing town or city, or even total rebuilding on an 'infill' basis (i.e. separate building by separate building), only produces a characterless jumble, even when the standard of the individual buildings is high (this is as obvious in Berlin as it is in London or Birmingham).

### Realization 2:

That when areas of an existing city have been redeveloped with the deliberate intention of making a new pattern (of open space, movement, parking, and so on), even when that area is as small as 400 x 400 yards, the gain in the sense of quality, of life style acquired, is extraordinary, and that, provided a reasonably consistent form language is maintained, it is still something even when the standard of building (detailing, construction, finish) is low. And we have to accept that in England it is generally low. This can be observed in recent G.L.C. housing developments in London where the form language is maintained and compared with the *Stag Brewery* area where it is not.

### Realization 3:

That the outstanding buildings of the last twenty years have what can only be described as high intensity: in them the emotional commitment—of those involved in getting it built 'just right' according to some inner compulsion—communicates itself. This 'intensity' does not seem to result from one set of circumstances. Sometimes the will-to-get-it-right comes from a builder or developer (e.g. 'Wates Build') where the sense of

verve and commitment—of energy—can absorb flaws of design and building (as in Realization 1); sometimes it comes from the client; and sometimes from the architect. The client can be a public authority (i.e. British Rail, Eastern Region), or a private company (i.e. The Economist). *Somebody has to be committed to society as it is, and be prepared to act within it.*

### Realization 4:

That individual buildings, even those with high intensity, can easily be compromised and reduced almost to toys—made part of the usual jumble—if their specific space and connective needs are overrun by too high or too near new buildings. For a building's meaning (its true usefulness to society) to be able to survive, a whole context needs to be established. Established and then kept as inviolable as possible, both by legal covenant and by the arrangement itself making conflicting change difficult. Change of detail is not important, it is change which confuses the underlying system, and thus the meaning, of the building idea, which must be prevented.

To give the best-known example: when the *Unité* of Le Corbusier at Marseilles was new, it was possible to see the idea of a vertical Garden City. Subsequent development around it has turned it back into a building. The minimum operation to establish the idea was the four *Unités* east of the town centre in the St-Die plan (1945) maintained by tough legal protection of the open space and the connective pattern.

#### Realization 5:

That in a town or city what one is deeply aware of is quite small in area. We probably 'know' a number of small areas, and we transit between them in cars and public transport vehicles where our perception of that which we are passing is quite different (vide Alison Smithson, 'A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl'<sup>1</sup>).

These small areas we know are those we are prepared to walk within. If we are prepared to walk, say, one-quarter of a mile, within a radius of one-quarter mile, then the 'knowable areas' are probably themselves 300 to 400 yards across (which Realization tallies with Realization 2).

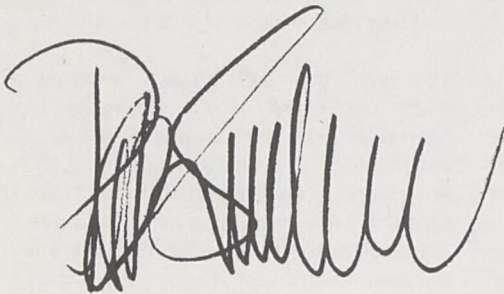
#### Realization 6:

That as these 'knowable areas' are the ones we are closest to, that affect us most deeply. They therefore should be the most carefully made, with the most love and money. They are the areas around the house and working-place. Our experience of the transit lines and facilities is by contrast short in time, and we feel quite unconnected.

At present it is the transit facilities (i.e. the new Scheepol and London Airports) that are having money poured into them. Yet we know they are already out of date. It is they that should be throw-away, cheaply made, casual and impermanent. We need to reverse our priorities.

These are the realizations arising out of the actual situation in England that are moulding the general consciousness:

- towards commitment above all;
- towards the making, or organizing of carefully and beautifully made, fairly large, inviolable living and work areas;
- towards more throw-away, more easily changed service areas.



<sup>1</sup> 1966, published by Chatto & Windus, London, pp. 98 and 99.

#### Verbal Illustrations of Transit Perception

p. 98-99

*She thought about it on the bus to the library in the morning but got distracted by something that often did this to her. In the middle of the sootiest bit of town—where there were actually some stone houses left—a 'Valet' Service was always catching her eye. Orange—the absolute contrast to soot dirt—jutting out at right angles to her going; it stuck out at the start of a side street untouchable by her because bus unstoppable. She liked the length of the roar of the six-wheeled diesel bus. A most comforting sound of her 'time', one she was in communication with—how am I riding?—nice and high too.*

*Another spot of colour on her route was in the junk shop among all the closed shops and derelict halls. It was a vicious yellow china stump column. One almost wanted to own it because of its imperviousness; to it all. The pollution could not touch it, neither could she, swept past with a full-bellied tiger roar; she respected their relationship.*

*There is an order that the wet brings to the streets. It empties them. It puts a transparent film over all chaos. It is a promise, longstanding, that cleansing and country will one day be amongst us again.*

*This was her travelling on the bus, then about one-third of her life in felt time; the third somehow most in touch with what for her must be reality, traffic thrumming up filth between buildings. Whether it was good to look at or not. Fixed, barren facts. There, behind the window she was untouchable, she could think.*

*Thoughts were suggested to her, sometimes not—but whichever—a comfort when things had gone wrong that the built world was apparently unchanging; because of the bulk of it to the eye unchangeable, even if you had pretty thoughts. She thought of what to do, and what made her angry, and it was action of a sort, the sort of action everyone took by complaining.*

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*Sometimes the headlight like a finger prods the air, the hedge, before seemingly finding the road in the black and white metal rain.*

Splashing through water in a VW, rrr, it goes, all of a sudden on the bottom and how snug and safe you feel underneath; it's such a nice car for a woman to be sitting in. The watery reflection on hedges off a flooded gutter line. Headlights on mown grass banks or close leaning clipped lanes, swishing secretly by—for you don't really see as if your attention was drawn by a small noise—serenely along in the blustery night, in this lovely little sealed can.

When she was at home the girl thought. 'A knock at the door can bring trouble. Or a man from the Water Board.' This was the man from the Liberal Party. 'I'll tell my husband. I'll give these to my husband. Thank you for calling.' She felt so sorry.

'Politicians are positively horse-drawn. Draw only from well-talked-about ideas, so they act on what someone said about the road twenty years ago, not have an idea while driving. Typical only in their delightful ignorance of what is possible. They are very literal people, you have to bang it in; men without antennae. Politicians are out of date, It is too late now for amateurism; the unskilled, just so inside, adoring of lovely amateurism which smacks of what we imagine is public-school doing-nothing-really. If there is to be any discussion it must be serious. It is a mere farce to be Minister of this for half a year and Minister of that the next—barely time to read the documents and meet the men—Whitehall's treated like a Heath Robinson railway all change these week-days. No trying to make sense for us the car misdriving down a Sunday street, honking instead of slowing at the children. Someone should be looking after us, taking pieces to make rules for real. They cannot keep up.

Do they think of the bus man, walking home afterwards? In a town walking all the way out to where my skylark used to live: instead of with sky and green and trees bringing an owl to the depot. Belongingness. Togetherness. It's only for American mags. Communications centre village—that could be played-up—early morning starting, night lights, men main-tenancing. You, there, like a spider at the

centre of a net, can go out, anywhere: places you've never been and haven't a picture of. I get a kick out of old transport ways, a kick as strong as the first man: a Roman road, a line of arches, I want the same now. I want in amongst it new. Flat on a bridge—because now we can build it up and it won't fall down, will it?—over canals and rivers that should be cleaned out and no reason why not. Wouldn't it be better to live there instead of turning my skylark out of his house and sky? I see the sunset colour the gable ends of the terraces stepping down the hills making the old condemned stone beautiful. Pull it down: although in the centre of my childhood it seems now a better way of living in a box than any I see built about me.

I need a break of some kind.'

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'And the boy held up his sewing and they laughed.' And I did too and I said no and my shame was lead and the car was moving so all I could do was look about and send my sorry winging back.

Often we are given a sort of repairing chance—we recognize it and question how to take it—as we think, it is gone. 'He walked to the edge of the road and knowing the road looked down on us on the hairpin below. And I grasping the construction of the topography chanced a look up: he did not smile. As he was left I wrung myself inside. It's simply that you cannot stop as soon as you think, once the car is moving. From my experience with cruelty at the unthinking hands of other people after my striving—I can imagine—I assure you I only laughed out of surprise although I must have sworn I never would not instantly really grasp how others felt. Now through you, poor soul, I can understandably forgive much what was done to me. I am sorry for us all. It is not that I in the car cannot understand anything of you peasant. I do know the child physical efforts involved in your life.'

p. 273–274

Blue lights of dash dial floating to upper left/upper right. The full reflection of dash alongside car as one leaves roundabout lights.

The licking ribbon of black oily surface ticking away the miles under one.

Tick tock the cats eyes of the English centre.

The dash dash dash.

'Long long road a winding—into the land?—I love.'

White bar/yellow bar/line.

'Bye-bye Dolly I must leave you tho' it breaks my heart to go.'

'No, I must keep my mind off the agony of leaving the kids.'

Long white road a winding

This in deeper voice—on to . . .

Keep right on round the bend

'Yes, Indeed.'

Root te too to Burgundy. Ro to ro to ro te to te to lower key ro to ro to and so to Burgundy.

Guillaume le Conqueror

Will the Conk

Our Willie of the Glasgow Herald is it?—anyway he ends sitting on an upturned bucket at the bottom of his page with his chin in his hand and a ruffled fed-up look. Paris traffic, cheering up a bit now.

Berlin.

Athens.

'Here I am, in agony, yet pleased as an idiot to be here happy as a Zandvoort in stinging fresh air scenery and my kind of people.'

Then back, back. To reality.

RRRr—French small town town.

To market to market and home again jiggity jig.

'This dreaming—this movement—hard to keep with it. 'My mind sways like a tart, like a car on English road. Shouldn't allow beige cars, at dusk they are not safe. And you don't know whether you're 400 yards behind US Ford or right up the bum of a prewar Renault.'

Alison M. Smithson