

# Adam's House Again

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The vision of a paradisaical and hypothetical hut has motivated many thinkers, reformers, and – yes, even architects – to give body and vigour to their proposals for a return to a natural, organic community, as well as to a way of building which might be its home.

A house as home: our demand for such an option has been questioned recently: "... since the Enlightenment we have no longer needed a universal house in order to find the world a place worthy of inhabiting. What suffices is a *unité d'habitation*, a stackable number of inhabitable cells ..." Here is a doctrine to encapsulate the individual in a world, not so much of the essentially sociable, even aspiringly communitarian Corbusier'ian *unités*, but in the manner of a high-tech or emirate-style conglomerate. Unlike a *unité*, such high and bulky buildings almost inevitably desertify their immediate surroundings. This doctrine therefore speaks of an environment which is designed to deny the inter-active nature of social space. Only the sports stadium can offer any shelter to sociality in such a world.

Public social space in a city so constituted is constantly eroded by private interest: any conspicuous building is expected to act as a carrier of advertising. Some buildings are effectively solidified advertisements, and a whole skyscraper might even be seen as a trade mark which will inevitably have to be fancifully and often arbitrarily shaped. Such buildings require no response from the passer-by beyond that of bewildered astonishment at their sheer height and bulk. And the force of their impinging on the public realm is only as effective as it is destructive of sociality.

The constant demand for ever higher high-rises intensifies the atrophy of the public realm that I mentioned earlier. In such palsied regions, works of art cannot solicit the visitor's attention, never mind appreciation. And indeed, such products, however defined, have in the last few decades of the twentieth century grown in bulk and changed in their nature. They may be: sectioned animals in huge formaldehyde tanks, dead children hung on trees, pneumatic canons shooting liquid wax, or even vapid acrylic still-lives painted on oversize, inflated canvases.

Such works, or for that matter the happenings which have to some extent replaced them in public attention, cannot be incorporated into the physical setting in which we pass our daily life. They require specialised spaces: great warehouses, disused factories and bus or train depots, where they can be isolated from the everyday social round; even the museums in which the older paintings and sculptures are displayed and conserved will not quite do. They are much too small for them. Some artists have even ensured that their whole production will be gathered together in an isolated location so that you need to make a pilgrimage to be able to experience them at all.

Their growing bulk corresponds to the exponential rise of commodity art-work prices. Like the buildings, they are all products which testify to a blind belief, which has already motivated society in the second half of the twentieth century, the belief in the dominion of the free market and the ever-growing benefits of its unlimited growth. The association between this kind of art and the buildings with which they are contemporary is exemplified by the nature of the public attention that is directed to them: they occupy as much – if not more – space in the real estate and financial pages of newspapers than as in the cultural ones.

Bulk aside, you may think that I take too solemn, too grave a view of those objects, many of which, as my description of them suggests, are playful emulations of Marcel Duchamp's irony. He memorably and mythically signed a urinal so as to exhibit it as a work of art (the art being in the act of choice, not in any quality of the object). He also bottled – and sold – his breath; while Piero Manzoni tinned his faeces and, guaranteeing their freedom from additives, sold the tins for their weight in gold.

With time, the irony has been turned against their originators. An 'artist's work' turned out to be to pee into Duchamp's urinal at an exhibition. He claimed that he was reversing Duchamp's choice by returning the urinal to its original use ... and when an art dealer used a can-opener on one of Manzoni's tins, he found it filled with dried plaster, not faeces. The relatively modest prices originally charged for such productions have been so inflated that their sale at auction for mind-blowing sums is considered by some later artists as a 'happening' in itself.

Irony has often been invoked in the discussion of twentieth-century art; artists like Damien Hirst or Maurizio Cattelan (I quote among the most expensive) have appealed to Duchamp as their forerunner. Yet when their graceless happenings involve tons of material and millions of dollars, then the sly smile of irony may turn to the snarl of sarcasm.

If there is power in symbolic coincidences, it might just be worth noting that the colossal auction sale, in which Damien Hirst acted as his own dealer, netting the sum of £111,000,000, the highest achieved in a single-artist sale, happened to coincide with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, one of those catastrophic failures to which we have become inured, but which then marked the opening of the great financial melt-down of 2008.

Whether the changed economic climate will alter the way we perceive our environment is not yet clear. Perhaps it will require a deeper social change than can be provoked by a mere fiscal crisis. But the dominant faith of the last half century in the self-regulating and wholly beneficent free market has been shaken. This can neither be forgotten nor repaired, though we have yet to come to terms with the chasm it has opened in our world.

It will, at some point, force us to set public authority above the operations of the economy. That, I suspect, will imply the erection of some visible and tangible index of the social good in our social realm. Some of you may be aware of straws in that wind. The vast and chaotic city of Sao Paulo, the largest in Brazil, has forbidden all advertising in its public spaces in 2007. Electric signs have been switched off, bill-boards and hoardings blanked out, even shop signs restricted. Paulistas, if their vocal reactions are to be believed, love their *cidade limpa*, their clean town, and some even hope that the mayor's modest proposal to reintroduce posters on bus stops and bollards will never be accepted.

When buildings are stripped of their motley, what will appear? Will we, once we have to face the stripped public space, demand that our buildings, our streets and squares take up some quite different organisational principle? It is too early to tell if the Sao Paulo precedent points to a trend which will be followed elsewhere, but it certainly does seem as if the model which has served for urban development in the free market has had its day.

If we now look to a notion of urban sociality in which the citizen takes freedom of assembly for granted, to a place of personal, face-to-face exchange quite different from that of the football stadium (and which therefore requires quite other considerations from those we have come to accept as a commonplace – a space that is the leftover of private development), we may be able to formulate one that will actually welcome the inhabitant on his daily round. But we will then also need to look again at the ways in which the public realm was created and occupied in the past.

It is worth recalling – and some of the speakers will surely remind us – that the Southern Pacific once offered seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travellers the spectacle of Adamic ease within a friendly physical environment, as well as a free sociality unwarped by the trammels of constricting civilisation. The thinkers of the Enlightenment were the most enthusiastic proponents of this vision, and however idealised their picture may have been, it seems again to exercise a new attraction in the twenty-first century. It may be, though, that the reported rise in the sales of the books of Karl Marx and Maynard Keynes provides no real demonstration of a cultural shift, and for that matter the demonising of bankers throughout the Anglo-Saxon world does not indicate anything more – as yet – than a glitch in the fortunes of the market, but the signs do seem to be pointing to a dissatisfaction with the shopping mall as the image of public space.

Can we believe, then, that the model which Adam's house and its elaborations once offered can become relevant again? It is not only as the family home but as a 'great house' that the Pacific offered Enlightenment thinkers a shelter for sociality and a community which they envied and wished to emulate, one which throughout the nineteenth century returned in the writings – and the designs – of political reformers and of utopians. Perhaps a close look at its variation throughout the region will help us to understand this fascination and indicate why we need to examine this model again in the light of our present condition.