



JONATHAN MEADES

*Museum
Without
Walls*

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Museum Without Walls

J o n a t h a n M e a d e s

unbound

To Robin Coates and his parents

INTRODUCTION

WE ARE SURROUNDED BY THE GREATEST OF FREE SHOWS. PLACES. Most of them made by man, remade by man. Deserted streets, seething boulevards, teeming beaches, empty steppes, black reservoirs, fields of agricultural scrap, cute villages and disappearing points which have an unparalleled capacity to promote hope (I am thinking of the aspect north up rue Paradis in Marseille).

This book is the product of an obsessive preoccupation with places, mainly British places, with their ingredients, with how and why they were made, with their power over us, with their capacity to illumine the societies that inhabit them and, above all, with the ideas that they foment.

Much of it evidently concerns buildings, the gaps between them, their serendipitous conjunctions and grotesque collisions. High architecture comes into it, but so too do inspired bricolage, plutocratic boasts, arid estates, mighty sprawl. The catastrophic cock-ups of grandiloquent visionaries are as grimly appealing as the imaginatively bereft efforts of volume builders. There is an emphasis on buildings which are overlooked or which, should they be noticed, are unthinkingly despised, just as there is on topographies which are routinely neglected: the banal is a thing of joy. Everything is fantastical if you stare at it for long enough, everything is interesting. There is no such thing as a boring place.

These lectures, essays, polemics, squibs and telly scripts are intended to entertain, to instruct, to inform and to question the orthodoxies of the architectural, heritage and construction industries, to draw attention to the rich oddness of what we take for granted. But before that they are written because I want to read them, to watch them. If that sounds selfish and immodest so be it. But it is surely more honest to write for an audience of one whose

peccadillos and limitations I understand than for an inchoate mass of opinionated individuals whose multiple and conflicting tastes I can only guess at and which I have, above everything else, to be indifferent to. Régis Jauffret got it right when he said that he was disgusted by writers who think of their readers.

This is a pretty basic point which the cretinocracy that has seized control of television cannot begin to understand. There is much that it cannot understand: the unknown, alien opinions, intelligence. And what it cannot understand it seeks to quash. One becomes inured to censorship by dolts: mocking the INLA can cause the impressionable to take up terrorism; Muslims must be treated with a respect that is not accorded to other delusionists (who are less sensitive, less heavily armed); the sight of dead rabbits may offend – who? Living rabbits? I am inured, too, to being accused of bigotry and bias by persons who are blind to their own bigotry and bias, which they perceive as unexceptionable opinions or even The Truth. The scripts collected here include a number of passages deemed unfit for human consumption as well as the omission of some half-witted health warnings to the effect that my observations do not concur with the BBC's *pensée unique*. That organisation is, incidentally, waiting for the French government to come round to its way of thinking.

In the name of populism or 'accessibility' the cretinocracy has all but destroyed a medium which was for thirty or so years an instrument of beneficent cultural diffusion. There exists among telly executives and managers a conviction that everyone is as crass as they are, that everyone is preoccupied by football and its moronic overpaid pundits. Still, I can't say I wasn't warned. When I started to do telly in the mid-'80s Richard Williams, now a celebrated sports writer, then features editor of *The Times*, told me: 'You're going to meet a lot of very stupid people.' And so I have. But the directors and crews with whom I have spent years

on the road in often questionable hotels are anything but stupid. Some of them are among my closest friends. One has to conclude that television is a medium in which it is the scum which rises inexorably to the top.

A priori the subjects here are: the cross-party tradition of governmental submission to the construction industry; architectural epiphanies - Marsh Court, Arc-et-Senans, l'Unité d'Habitation's roof; what to do with Anglican churches; Hadid and Legorreta; the folly of pedestrianisation; the hierarchy of land- and cityscapes; the hierarchy of building types; Birmingham's beauty; Bremen and the Hanseatic League; the futile vanity of 'landmark' buildings; why buildings are better unfinished; the congruence of the 1860s and 1960s; Letchworth's dreary legacy; the chasm between Hitler's architecture and Stalin's; the regeneration gravy train; the picturesque as an English disease; shopping malls; the Isle of Sheppey; the Isle of Rust; the Dome and domes; post-war churches; Pevsner and Nairn.

They're what I thought I was writing about. Revisiting them it is evident that I suffer recurrent devotions and, equally, a gamut of seldom submerged antipathies. Beaverbrook observed that his father taught him to hate, to hate. I enjoyed no such tuition. I've had to teach myself. It comes easily enough when one is presented with such objects as good taste, Georgian timidity and the nasty bland synthetic-modern 'legacy' of New Labour, made in the image of the grinning Tartuffish war criminal himself - but the happy Christmas Day will come when our Christian bomber and his gurning hag magically mutate into the Ceaucescus of Connaught Square. (The house has a basement.)

I guess that willing victims of Abrahamic systems of gross superstition may be offended by my mild mockery but these poor dupes surely have their 'faith' and their dietary

idiocies and their intolerant belligerent paedophiliac 'prophet' to fortify them.

Such systems come and go. Two thousand years is not a long time: after two thousand years in the grave a Sicilian hasn't even decided on the form his revenge will take. Physical structures outlast dangerously frivolous religious pathologies. Whatever Carnac, Callanish, Stonehenge stood for is forgotten. These sites may have had nothing anyway to do with cosy supernaturalism or worship of coarse fictions. Their material survives, just as words remain when shorn of didactic nagging. The valley of the shadow of death is a potent construction which signifies to me a specific place rather than a metaphor for our appraisal of mortality (and god's playful tendency to visit that state on us). One case for architecture rather than mere building, for art rather than utility, is that a structure's purpose is ultimately provisional: the mosque is turned and becomes a cathedral, the warehouse is transformed into a skating rink, the old abattoir is now a boathouse. What remains is creativity, resourcefulness, the impetus to make.

It is the fruit of that impetus which has delighted and fascinated and even succoured me for as many years as I have been sentient. No doubt the fact that the only object I've ever managed to carpenter was a wrist-watch stand (BRG, 1959) inflates my admiration for those who work in three dimensions, who work virtuously, energetically, aggressively: Vanbrugh and Pilkington, Butterfield and Gordon, and, above all, Anon and Unattrib, whose oeuvre is vast, diverse and massively appreciated. Their names are forgotten but their shacks and leets, their lean-tos and footbridges will live forever more. For a while yet anyway.

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FREE SHOW

Just Looking

HAMAS & KIBBUTZ

I'VE SPENT A LIFETIME WRITING ABOUT PLACE – AS IT'S NOW CALLED, with neither a definite nor an indefinite article – writing about it in different media and in different ways: polemically, analytically, essayistically, fictively. I have also written about and filmed architecture and buildings – which are no more than components of place: the distinction between what is architecture and what is building strikes me, incidentally, as absolutely bogus.

The fiction I've written has almost invariably been triggered by a fascination with particular technical devices, by incident, and by place – rather than by character or by one of those grim plonkers called abstract ideas. Thus: the Surrey speciality of the private estate where light entertainers' quaintly kitschy houses are set among rhododendrons, pines, broom and golf courses; the New Forest where my mother taught the children of inbred families who came to school in winter sewn into untreated rabbit furs; the Isle of Portland whose landscape of abandoned quarries, prisons, wide village streets and baroque churches so obsessed me that I had to find a way of making it the mute protagonist of a novella – the memory of an overheard bus queue conversation did the rest; the precipitous south-east London suburbs suggested a particular kind of life . . .

Places render me suggestible in a way that all dance, all musicals and most theatre don't. I was driving on the M27 when I looked up to Portsdown Hill and realised what was wrong with it: it didn't have a 200-metre-tall neon cross on its escarpment. Why would such a cross exist? That was how a novel began.

Of course, amending a landscape is an architectural rather than a writerly aspiration. The films I make are fictions without *dramatis personae*, plays without players.

They are, unequivocally, not about places but about the ideas that places foment. I have often written them having paid only the most cursory visit to the places in question. The directors I work with then conspire with me to create what may or may not be the truth, or a truth, about them. Ultimately they are expressions of an incurable topophilia, of a love of places – which are what you find when you're on the way to somewhere else.

The downlands of southern England have such a thin layer of topsoil that they are useless for cultivation of crops – all that grows is grass and blackthorns. But they are adequate for the grazing of sheep which used to be tended by necessarily solitary shepherds. In the valleys beneath the downs, meadows could be floated – i.e. irrigated by a system of narrow canals called leets and rudimentary sluices. The goal was to achieve maximum lushness which would in turn produce rich milk in the cows that fed off that pasture. On the downs one finds tiny isolated churches which are akin to hermitages and refuges, they speak of mysticism or, at least, of reflective contemplation. In the valleys nonconformism flourished in chapels where observance was collective and social rather than ritualistic. Two conjoining topographies, two different ways of life. The bleak downs are formed of chalk. The end product of the rich cow's milk in the populous valleys was cheese.

What we have here is comparative synecdoche: in each case a characteristic part stands for the whole – that, however, is merely incidental. What we have, more pertinently, is a rudimentary example of classification. It happens to serve also as an instance of that most potentially toxic of divisions, between them and us. Us here, in this village in the valley, we do our wibs with beech nuts and tallow. Them in the hamlets on the downs, them are two miles distant – foreign: they call it wibbing and they use acorns and horse fat. They're wrong – they should be doing it our way. We're as different as chalk and cheese.

Classification or taxonomy or pigeon-holing or whatever we may call it may not be as fundamental a trait as seeking shelter, food, sex and narcosis, but it's universal. And it's not one of those characteristics of which it can be said: it's what makes us human.

A buzzard, for instance, rides on thermals. It looks good, that lazy wind-blown life. But what it is actually doing is keeping on the *qui vive*. Which means classifying what it sees from up there. It distinguishes between quarry and non-quarry. Then makes further distinctions. Between quarry such as a mouse or a duckling – which are just snacks. And a rabbit – which is a proper sit-down meal. And between non-quarry that is unthreatening – cars, say; buzzards sit on their posts quite unfazed as cars hurry past – and non-quarry which is, possibly, hostile: human beings walking or combine harvesters. Is it a New Holland, a John Deere, a Claas or a Massey Ferguson which most incites buzzardly suspicion? We may never know. Were we, in the best of all possible worlds, to ask a buzzard, I suspect we would be disappointed. Not because of the buzzard's assumption that Claas are the most threatening combines due to their being multicoloured. We would be disappointed because of the buzzard's voice. Buzzards are astonishingly shrill, fluting, piping. There is a chasmic incongruity between the magnificence of the vaunting serial killer and the sound it emits. Chasmic and comic.

A buzzard is an avian analogue of the even squeakier David Beckham. I'd seen Beckham play, I'd even been at Old Trafford the day that the Spice Girls came on pitch to do a club lottery draw, that most historic of historic days when Becks met Posh. But I had never heard him speak. He can be classified in a variety of conventional ways: as a fine footballer with a marked resemblance to the 1970s Leeds winger Peter Lorimer, as a charming clothes-horse in the same box as Rupert Everett, as a former Adonis who goes on the same shelf as, say, Alain Delon? Or Terence Stamp?

As a man whose fame eclipsed his wife's - like Roger Moore? But when I did eventually hear him speak - well, he'll always be a wrong voice, a treble in a tenor's body. That for me is his defining characteristic. He is to be filed, ultimately, alongside Alan Ball and Emlyn Hughes in the Sportsmen Posing As Castrati category.

Two more instances from football after which I promise not to mention the game again, sorry - not to mention the *beautiful* game again, not to mention the *national* game again - if it is the national game how come we always lose? It would, of course, be discomfiting to win. Losing is what we are familiar with; we are thus reassured by loss as we are reassured by football's always being described in the same stunted vocabulary, with the same conventionalised thoughts - if thoughts is the word which it isn't: *criminal defending, great role model for any youngsters watching, there were twenty-one heroes out there but only one legend*. These brain-dead boobies are paid to maul language. But there is nothing so cosy as the third rate which we are already aware of, as the mediocre which we know so well that it's the sett we huddle into for mental hibernation.

Now, those two instances: I saw a game on telly in which the ones wearing blue played against the ones wearing a different colour. Can't remember what colour. And I don't know the name of the teams. Equally I don't know the score. Or who the players were. What I do know is that four of the blue players had ginger hair. That's 36.5 per cent of a team in a country where the ginger-haired constitute about 3 per cent of the population: even in Scotland where it's 12 per cent it would have been remarkable. It was both visually astonishing and uplifting; it was as though surrealism had at last found a way to leave its mark on soccer. It goes without saying that the commentators didn't see it that way, they didn't remark on the gross statistical anomaly or on the almost otherworldly sight it provided.

Even had they noticed it, to have done so would have been to trespass beyond the conventions of their hackneyed trade and to have looked at a game of football from a different angle, as a festival of genetically recessive pigmentation.

Second instance: again, an otherwise unremembered match, against unremembered opposition when a team whose name I do know, Sunderland, in red vertical stripes with an array of hair colours representational of the national norm, included nine players whose name was Steve. That's an 81 per cent Steve-ness. There were possibilities here. No, probabilities! And opportunity! This was nomenclatural comedy. But there was, all too predictably, a muteness on the part of robotically programmed commentators who failed to realise that our experiences are improved, enriched and made joyful by being considered outside their obvious and intended context, by being viewed tangentially with a louche gleg – that's to say, an oblique squint.

Even when broaching the most familiar subjects – *especially* when broaching the most familiar subjects – we have always to be looking to illumine them in ways that make them seem unfamiliar, fresh, in ways that make us believe we have not seen them before. This is akin to the actor's primary task. The actor must initially convince him- or herself, then the audience, that the words spoken are being spoken for the first time, that they are the issue of spontaneity rather than of honing, chamfering and perfecting in rehearsal. What acting shows us – the same goes in writing or musical composition or indeed any art – is that the only kind of spontaneity that's worthwhile is rehearsed spontaneity. What *improvised* acting shows us is that genuine spontaneity has humans grabbing at the familiar, resorting to the usual, consoling themselves with cliché.

Here are three dicta which are not quite as straightforward as they seem, they require that we shed our usual mindset.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS REVEL There are no styles, just talents.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV There is only one school of writing, the school of talent.

DUKE ELLINGTON The question is not whether it's jazz music or whether it's classical music but whether it's good music.

The essayist, the novelist and the composer are saying exactly the same thing. Look beyond aspiration to achievement. Do not judge by genre but by accomplishment. Indeed we should bear in mind that anything which is any good creates its own genre. It exists in the interstices of the already extant. We are not buzzards.

If we cannot act on these counsels and suppress our instinct for what might be termed prospective classification we can at least control it and, so to speak, do more than differentiate between the edible and the non-edible, the snack and the meal, the threatening and the harmless. We are capable of reclassifying classifications. The more specificities we heap into the mix the more we bury cliché, which is off-the-peg locution signifying off-the-peg thought – it is hardly surprising that religious faiths and ideological systems should be bolstered by clichés in the form of rote-repeated catechisms, mantras, easily memorised slogans and superstitious admonitions learnt by heart. These are forms of subjugation, and so, in a lesser way, is secular cliché itself.

There is a certain irony in the fact that cliché and idle classification can be deflected by what are almost set stratagems.

For instance:

1) *The simile* which is both accurate, and which lends the object described an entirely new facet. Craig Raine's

description of a leg of pork as *a poison bouquet*, is precise, and so visually acute that, once we are apprised of it, it is difficult to see a leg of pork otherwise.

2) *The neologism* or coinage which while not visually precise has a figurative or emotional potency: so let us call sexual congress . . . *rubbing offal*.

3) *Oxymoron*. Robert Browning wrote against classification itself using oxymoron, or something close to it.

*One's interest's on the dangerous edge of things,
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
Who loves and saves her soul in new French books -
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway: one step aside,
They're classed and done with.*

Classed meaning, of course, classified – whether they are characters of primary reality or of fiction they are done with because they are stripped of nuance, thus of interest.

A few lines later in the same monologue:

*Fool or knave?
Why needs a bishop be a fool or knave
When there's a thousand diamond weights between.*

4) *Invention*. When, over half a century ago, Alain Robbe-Grillet was in Paris writing *Le Voyeur*, which is set on an island, presumably Ouessant, off the Brittany coast, he was attempting with difficulty to capture a seagull's flight. He thought he'd take the opportunity of a visit to his parents who lived in the port of Brest to study that flight. He sat in his car and watched seagulls. They disappointed him. The seagulls let him down. They simply didn't fly as he wanted them to. He reasoned, then, that since it was *his* book the gulls in it were his too and they could be made to behave

any way he decreed. So he invested seagulls with properties they don't possess but which he convinced the reader they do possess - so the reader detects those properties when he or she next watches a seagull flying. So a real seagull seems to mimic an imagined seagull. Seagulls may not be transformed by art but our perception of them is. And if seagulls, why not the physical world?

The very word cliché originally signified the metal plate which a printer used to transfer a woodblock to paper, to transfer it repetitively, over and over again. Cliché is thus as much visual as it is verbal. Visual cliché is all around us. Product design - that mobile, this door handle; the colours of cars, the cut of clothes, of course, advertising's idioms, typefaces, spectacles, buildings - most especially buildings. There is no area of creative endeavour which is as clichéd, as enslaved to fashion, as prone to plagiarism, as the built environment.

Plagiarism derives from a Latin word for kidnapping. Architects may not be kidnappers but they have, let us say, an enthusiastically flock-like mentality. For every goat there are 10,000 profoundly dependent sheep, gratefully filching mannerisms, ripping off devices, stealing shapes, clinging parasitically to those goats, those rare goats and committing grand larceny in public - architecture is incontestably very public.

In Belgium between the two World Wars a number of suits were prosecuted for what would now be called theft of intellectual property. It must be a great relief to the sheep that this never happened elsewhere. There is a very evident lack of *cunning* at work here. They must surely realise that they can hardly fail to be had bang to rights even if they are unlikely to suffer sanctions. Perhaps being an architect means having no shame, no pride. But then the financial stakes are high. Those for most artists are low going on nonexistent. Reputation is its own reward.

Eliot famously wrote that:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.

He less famously added:

A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.

In other words a good poet is one who doesn't get caught out. A good poet is sly enough to draw on recondite sources – that's sources, plural – which may not be recognised. Not quite the perfect crime perhaps but, equally, one that is unlikely to be discovered.

This is Robert Frost's *Of a Winter Evening* published in 1958:

*The winter owl banked just in time to pass
And save herself from breaking window glass
And her wide wings, stretched suddenly at spread,
Caught colour from the last of evening red
In a display of underdown and quill
To glassed-in children at the window sill*

And this is Nabokov again, the first two couplets of *Pale Fire* published in 1962:

*I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the window pane
I was the smudge of ashen fluff and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.*

The congruence between the two verses or, at least, between the two avian images was pointed out by the American scholar Abraham Socher. There is no copying, no plagiarism: it's more a question of taking on the baton of inspiration. Frost's owl survives. Nabokov's waxwing does too – but only provisionally, in some sort of afterlife entered

through the de facto mirror of a window. What can also be discerned here is the allusion to the parallel life of Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Nabokov had been Lewis Carroll's first Russian translator and his oeuvre is haunted by Carroll.

The point is: to draw on one source is plagiarism, to draw on two or more sources is research – and, possibly, to attempt to begin to make something new. Through exogamy, admixtures, métissage, mongrelism, alloys. Above all not through purity – which must be shunned.

Architecture astonishingly doesn't do this. Astonishingly, because every building which is not prefabricated has the potential to be a one-off. It could be unique. But architects fail to see that the self-congratulatory admission that they are Miesian or Corbusian or Hadidian or Koolhaasian is actually an admission of intellectual and aesthetic barrenness, that they are merely admitting joining up to one or other flock. It strikes me that architects are seldom told this. No one bothers. Architecture can be – and indeed is – represented in a multitude of ways.

This most public of endeavours is practised by people who inhabit a smugly hermetic milieu which is cultish. If this sounds far-fetched just consider the way that initiates of this cult describe outsiders as the *lay* public, *lay* writers and so on: it's the language of the priesthood. And like all cults its primary interest is its own interests, that is to say its survival, and in the triumph of its values – which means building. Architects, architectural critics, architectural theorists, the architectural press (which is little more than a deferential PR machine operated by sycophants whose tongue can injure a duodenum) – the entire quasi-cult is cosily conjoined by mutual dependence and by an ingrown, verruca-like jargon which derives from the more dubious end of American academe. For instance:

Emerging from the now-concluding work on single-surface organisations, animated form, data-scapes, and box-in-box organisations are investigations into the critical consequences of complex vector networks of movement and specularity . . .

There is incidentally no such word as specularity: but so what, nothing wrong in devising a new word – what *is* wrong is the dishonesty of the coinage, the way it is designed to con the reader into believing that this guff is the product of scrupulous research, of laboratory endeavours, when what is being referred to are merely methods of making buildings or thinking about making buildings. This is the dangerous cant of pseudo-science – self-referential, self-important, inelegant, obfuscatingly exclusive, occluded: it attempts to elevate architecture yet makes a mockery of it.

The boorish half-wit who wrote those words is the author of several monographs on big-name American architects which are far from critical – indeed they are often undertaken in collaboration with their subjects. They belong not to the history of reasoned analysis but to the history of vanity publishing, self-advertisement and over-produced calling cards. The product is intended to validate the supposed subject's oeuvre with a gloss of objectivity that fools no one. No one save, paradoxically, those in the know, those who subscribe to the architectural cult. Any sentient human, any despised lay person, will recognise that the prose is treacly jargon with all the rigour of copywriting and that the photography is mendacious.

From very early on in its history, photography was adopted by architects as a means of idealising their buildings. As beautiful and heroic, as tokens of their ingenuity and mankind's progress, et cetera. This debased tradition evidently continues to thrive. At its core lies the imperative to show the building out of context, as a monument. To represent it as pristine, untouched by its immediate surroundings unless those surroundings are

part of the composition, more usually to separate it from streetscape, from awkward neighbours, from untidiness, to persuade the spectator of its stand-alone perfection. A vast institutional lie is being told in the pages of architectural magazines the world over, in the pages of newspapers and in countless television films. It's also being told on the web – which is significant, and depressing, for it demonstrates how thoroughly the conventions of professional architectural photography, that is of architectural propaganda, have seeped into the collective, how they are imitated, how we have learned to look at buildings through those biased deceiving eyes, just as we have learned to look at cute villagescapes through the eyes of postcard photographers.

The mediation of buildings, as of anything else, can never be neutral. The mediation has to a degree suppressed its subject. As long ago as the 1930s Harry Goodhart-Rendel observed that: *The modern architectural drawing is interesting, the photograph is magnificent, the building is an unfortunate but necessary stage between the two.* Goodhart-Rendel was an architect who belonged to no school, could not be pigeonholed and is thus regarded as peripheral. He was also a writer. A rare combination of talents. One can think of any number of teachers, soldiers, lawyers, actors, scientists, priests and layabouts who have excelled as writers, and as for doctors – Schiller, Keats, Chekhov, Conan Doyle, Maugham, Celine, William Carlos Williams, Dannie Abse. But architects . . . Vanbrugh was a good playwright who became a great if not the greatest of British architects. Sergei Eisenstein began to train as an architect at his father's insistence but gave it up. Thomas Hardy, to judge from Max Gate, the house he designed for himself in Dorchester, made the right choice when he elected to abandon architecture in favour of writing. Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo, another artist who belonged to no school, also abandoned architecture in favour of writing.

He composed utopian tracts, among them 'The Human Hive', advising that human society should model itself on the beehive.

The two activities seem antithetical. There may be a neuro-psychological explanation: you know, the left hemisphere is verbal, sequential, linear while the right is pictorial, spatial, three-dimensional. The atypically high incidence of dyslexia and left-handedness among architects is always cited at this point. There are equally probable cultural explanations for the peculiarly straitened paucity of writing inside the architectural cult. Habit, custom, tradition – those practices which are passed down from one generation to the next. Jargon is after all only the coded slang of a particular professional group. And this group, this cult, is further characterised by its cosmopolitan complexion. English is its lingua franca. People whose first language is Urdu or Italian or Portuguese or Tagalog learn the language of architectural discourse in architectural schools and architectural practices without realising how debased it is: that may account for its perpetuation. For them *it is English*, an English stripped of its richness and infinite capacity for mood, nuance, prosaic extravagance and poetic ordinariness.

But there's also, as I say, the matter of exclusivity – perhaps *exclusion* is more apt. Architecture, the cult, talks about architecture as though it is disconnected from all other endeavours, it treats architecture as an autonomous discipline which is an end in itself, something watertight, something which can be understood only by architects and their acolytes: any criticism from without is invalid. Now it would be acceptable to discuss opera or sawmill technology or athletics or numismatics or the refinement of lard in such a way. They can be justifiably isolated for they don't impinge on anyone outside, say, the lard community – the notoriously factional lard community. To isolate architecture is blindness and an abjuration of responsibility.

If we want to understand the physical environment we should not ask architects about it. After all if we want to understand charcuterie we don't seek the opinion of pigs. We must ignore what architects say even if we can't ignore what they do. They make the error of confusing that physical environment with what they impose on it. Wrong. What is going on around us is the product of innumerable forces – some are, of course, created by design, in both senses of that word. But they are the exceptions. Accidents – chance juxtapositions, fortuitous collisions – some happy, some not – clashes of scale and material, harmonious elisions of contrasting idioms, stylistic hostilities, municipal idiocies and corporate boasts, the whimsical expressions of individuality made by the patronisingly named *ordinary man in the street* or by Jane Doe or by Anon – these are some of the more salient determinants of our urban and suburban and extra-urban environments – they are accidents. Buildings are, of course, the major component of these environments. Some of those buildings will be the work of architects. But with the exception of those places where they have been granted the licence to do they what they yearn to do – that is, to start from zero – architects have less influence than they believe. Their works are frequently compromised by the accidents I've just mentioned. It is as though a new orchestral work cannot be heard without tango music coming from next door, a military band playing upstairs and zydeco in the back yard.

The places where those accidents don't occur are salutary. The places where architects indeed had the opportunity to start from zero. Where architecture has enjoyed the sort of primacy it believes it deserves. Where a vision has been realised. A sort of homogeneity anyway. We think of Tourny's creation beside the Garonne of which Victor Hugo said: *Prenez Versailles, mêlez-y Anvers, vous avez Bordeaux.* (Take Versailles, mix with Antwerp and you get Bordeaux.) We think of Bath's crescents and circuses,

of the successive Edinburgh new towns, of the exiled Polish court's rebuilding of Nancy. Of course, we also remind ourselves that an appealing facet of Bath is its closeness to Bristol just as Nancy is close to Metz; and the Edinburgh new towns are a walk away from the Old Town and the extravagantly Victorian southern suburbs. At a higher level Ledoux's Arc-et-Senans and Le Corbusier's l'Unité d'Habitation both instruct us in what genius is. Indeed the roof of l'Unité is a transcendent work: it is as though Odysseus is beside you. In a few gestures it summons the entirety of the Mediterranean's mythic history. It is exhilarating and humbling, it occasions aesthetic bliss. It demonstrates the beatific power of great art, great architecture. Even so it is unlikely to persuade us of the probity of Le Corbusier's Parisian wheeze – knock down the city and replace it with tower blocks – which he quaintly believed were immune to aerial attack.

L'Unité is absolutely atypical. So are the other places I mention. They are the exceptions to the rule that planned towns, tied towns, new towns, garden cities, garden villages, cottage estates, communist utopias, national socialist utopias, socialist utopias, one-nation utopias, comprehensive developments and wholesale regenerations lurch between the mediocre and the disastrous *irrespective of the style adopted*. From Letchworth to Marne la Vallée, from New Lanark to Welwyn – the first provincial town in Britain, incidentally, to develop a serious smack habit – from the Aylesbury Estate in south London to Seaside, Florida, from Possilpark in north Glasgow to Celebration, Florida, from Thamesmead to La Murette, from Canberra to Port Sunlight, from Peterlee to Poundbury, from cuteness to high modernism, from concrete to tile-hanging, from beaux arts to new urbanism. It doesn't matter what *idiom* is essayed – we all know that the flock will jump on any passing bandwagon – it is the business of attempting to create places rather than create buildings, which are just a

component of place, that defeats architects. Architects – or rather architecture – cannot make places. Architects cannot devise analogues for what has developed over centuries, for the strata of collective imprints, for generation upon generation of amendments. They cannot understand the appeal of untidiness and randomness and even if they could they wouldn't know how to replicate it. The notion of planning the unplanned has been mooted since the 1960s; so too has planning to allow for the unplanned which isn't quite the same. But planning is planning even if it is intended to result in its antithesis. And we are all products of our time, even those – perhaps most especially those – who try to swim against the tide and deny current fashion. Whatever an architect designs is bound by definition to be new, of its age. Today's restoration of a medieval cathedral, today's Georgian mansion or Gothic folly, a lavishly bogus Los Angeleno Bavarian schloss – these are just as new as a synthetic modern IT hub or an IKEA modern R&D trepan. When the gorgeously named Blunden Shadbolt made houses in the 1920s from the remnants of demolished Jacobean mansions, Tudor manors and yeoman farmhouses, the bricolaged results belonged nonetheless to the Jazz Age. Borges's Pierre Menard copies *Don Quixote* word for word and in so doing composes a brand-new fiction because he is writing in the mid-1930s, not over 300 years previously. The fact that it's kidnapping doesn't mitigate its newness. Borges might equally have conceived of Pierre Menard architect of the Parthenon – but then his paradox would have been less fresh for the western world was already littered with replicas of the Parthenon.

They are the easy bit. New buildings are simple: imagination and engineering. New places are not. Indeed it seems impossible to achieve by artifice the parts with no name, to mimic the bits in between, the pavement's warts and the avenue's lesions, the physical consequences of

changed uses, the waste ground, the apparently purposeless plots, the tracts without name. It shouldn't be impossible. One cause of this failure is architects' lack of empathy, their failure to cast themselves as non-architects: Yona Friedman long ago observed that architecture entirely forgets those who use its products. Another cause of failure is their bent towards aesthetic totalitarianism – a trait Pevsner approved of incidentally. There was no work he more admired than St Catherine's College, Oxford: *a perfect piece of architecture*. And it is indeed impressive in an understated way. But it is equally an example of nothing less than micro-level totalitarianism. Arne Jacobson designed not only the building but every piece of furniture and every item of cutlery that would be used in the refectory. There is no escape from the will of the god of the drawing board. At macro-level a so-called master planner will attend to the details of countless streets, closes, avenues, drop-in centres, houses, offices, bridges. The master planner is almost certainly an architect. Even though planning and architecture are contrasting disciplines. There are evidently countless differences between a suburb and, say, a shopping mall in that suburb. We are all familiar with the hubristic pomp that often results when actors direct themselves. Appointing architects to conceive places rather than just sticking to buildings is like appointing foxes to advise on chicken security, like getting Hamas to babysit a kibbutz.

The architectural ideal is to fabricate topographical perfection: the immaculate, that is unstained, conception, a creation untroubled by context, by anything so messy as life, by what is already there – hence the covert enthusiasm for gated communities, which, of course, are not communities but civilian fortresses, expressions of separateness. Hence too the enthusiasm for demolition – which does not destroy just buildings, it destroys the sentiments we attach to buildings, it destroys a little bit of

us. There is often a good aesthetic case for demolition. Ricardo Bofil declared in the early 1980s that he would only enter the competition for the National Gallery extension in London on condition that he could pull down the Wilkins building and start from scratch: we might, of course, have got a building preferable to Venturi's offensively apologetic aberration, but that's hardly the point. What was at stake was Trafalgar Square – and even if Wilkins's gallery is thoroughly feeble – it is not high enough to dominate the square as it should – it is nonetheless an integral part of the square, an integral part of our conception of London. Bofil – never falsely modest; he is after all an architect – then announced that he would only work in Britain if he could build an entire city – and even petitioned the government to this end.

The human, as opposed to architectural, ideal is to revel in urbanistic richness, in layers of *imperfection*, in the flesh that is attached to the architectural skeleton. I got sick of Rome when I worked there: too much perfection, too constant a diet of masterpieces – the lumbering sod-you-ness of Basil Spence's British Embassy was peculiarly attractive. The only town in the Cotswolds that attracts me is Stroud where the tyranny of oolitic limestone is ruptured by brick and slate.

Utopia is boring. Skeletons are lifeless. Place is composed of more than an armature and good intentions. It must do what architects are disinclined to do – that is to leave space for those who frequent place, or places. I'm not referring to polluters equipped with spray cans or lorryloads of York stone cladding who are the visual equivalent of reeking burger joint operatives. And I'm not referring to space in the sense that architects and urbanists use it: private space, public space and so on – physical volumes and voids. I mean mental space. The space that a creator leaves for his spectator or reader or audience to imagine in. Place, like art, affects us through a

private compact, a conspiracy of insinuation. The avoidance of explicit meaning allows the spectator to become complicit, almost to enter into the creative process: the words on a page, the buildings in a street, the marks on a canvas are – if they're any good – electric triggers, synapse prods. They speak to a combination of faculties: brain, ears, eyes, spine. The most technically accomplished, intellectually appealing and well-meant work is bereft unless it provokes joy or grated nerves, unless it is delightful – or emotionally harrowing.

Now, the failure to make place is surely allied to the way in which place is represented – that is, how it is first seen and then shown. The likelihood, as I've said, is that the sine qua non of architectural prowess is the ability to imagine in three dimensions, to conceive of a space by means of planar, isometric, dimetric, trimetric, parallel and orthographic projections. By means of axonometrics. These tools or devices, rendered infinitely more potent by computing, have gradually become ends rather than the mere means: method and product coalesce. Virtual buildings – developer willing – mutate into real buildings. I appreciate that we should always put quotes round *real* but you know what I mean: physical constructs composed of glass, poured concrete, Corten, breeze-block, steel, brick and, in special cases, mafiosi chunks. Certain of these metamorphoses from the virtual to the real will succeed, others won't.

They will be enclosed interior spaces. They will be confining and limiting. Although we move through them and are moved through them by lifts, escalators, walkways, and although they may be very large – superstores, airports, stadia, corporate HQs – we experience them as finite entities. Our movements, too, are finite. We are within them. We are at the mercy of the architectural disposition of space and of routes predetermined by utility. Buildings regulate our behaviour. For instance: baggage

reclaim, passports, customs – or is it customs, passports? – shopping mall, smart signage which is also dysfunctional signage, rank of disobliging ashtrays called taxis. We are constantly aware of a building's purpose. We are, usually, within it as a result of that purpose. We do not go to a dentist's surgery for a coffee. We do not go to a café to get our teeth fixed. We are controlled by buildings. The majority of them are curtailments. They are monolithic. Provisional gaols.

Places are, on the other hand, heterogeneous and multipartite. Liberating. Places are feasts for the spirit. Or can be, should be. They resist classification. I was standing across the street from Richard Rogers's law courts in Bordeaux the other day – you know, award-winning, sustainable, *gesticulatoire*, *un bâtiment phare*, gestural engineering, an icon, a – yes – iconic landmark that is so achingly iconic that it hurts. But despite all that . . . it is a remarkable work and is a pleasure to behold: it fulfils its responsibility to the street, to the people who pass by it and never enter it, who use it, if that's the word, as a backdrop to their daily itineraries. I noticed a man a few metres from me. He was dressed in a touchingly desperate attempt at smartness. Tie, frayed shirt, threadbare but dapper suit, polished cracked shoes. He was grasping a suitcase whose covering of Naugahyde was so worn the cardboard showed though like the skin of a dog with mange. He was staring into a hairdressers called Colette Guy. He then walked a few paces along the street and stopped in front of the window of an adjoining house which is a barristers' chambers. He put down the suitcase. He reached into his pocket and clutched something. He leant forward towards close to the window unfurtively, not a voyeur. He lifted his hand to his face. He was holding a pair of nail scissors. Using the window as a mirror he trimmed his moustache, patiently, precisely, with deliberation. He tilted his head to scrutinise himself in a manner that made me wonder if he

wasn't a former soldier down on his luck. There was no vanity in his gestures. It was as though he was adjusting his moustache to conform to a remembered ordinance of length and shape. Maybe he was going to a job interview. This tableau combined with the pod-shaped courtrooms which though they suggest a distillery are improbably allusions to the insobriety of judges, and with the cowls above them which recall penitents' hoods. And with the extraordinarily graceful undulating roof. And with the light-sensitive shutters painted the handsome navy blue which is the colour of the French establishment. For me, though I guess not for the man with the scissors, it was an affirmation of the freedom that is granted by streets. This was a complex interplay. An intimate private act performed in an animated public space before the eyes of justice and before my eyes – he can hardly have been unaware of my gaping. The decor included a sleek tram on Line A, two near-identical loden coats so engrossed in conversation that though they almost brushed against our man they didn't notice him, a wobbly board advertising a restaurant's *prix fixe* menu, an area bounded by the courts' entrance, by a section of ancient city walls, and by the magistrates' school's extension. This is a city of very grand, very stately, very boastful set-pieces. Here, in contrast, there is a kind of ragged harmony which is almost picturesque.

Given the unavoidable fashionability of narrative in every discipline from psychotherapy to ethnology, and given architecture's thralldom to the fashionable, it might be reckoned surprising that narrative forms little part of architecture. But that would be to forget the crude division between the linear and the static, the sequential and the three-dimensional. Places are read serially. And to a degree they are *created* serially: some cities can be interpreted almost dendrologically. The medieval walled core, the century-by-century expansion of rings beyond the walls yet still clinging to them, the burbs which tried to escape the