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Affordable housing

If you want an “affordable” house you must build it yourself.

When I was a young, idealistic and naïve architect I imagined that if I could build an “affordable” house almost everyone would want one. I thought that those on a limited income would follow me, and learn from what I had done. I discovered, to my dismay, that no one was interested. My scheme to change the world came to nothing.

My own “affordable” house was not extreme, apart from being completely independent of the economic system. It was a rather “normal” design, but I built it for nothing so that I would not need a mortgage or any of those other overheads which make houses so expensive. I found however that for those wanting to stay within the economic system, devoting the only life they will ever have to making money, this was a step too far.

What I failed to understand was that everyone hoped to make a profit out of an investment. No one was interested in simply providing a home for their family. Everyone wanted an expensive house which they could trade in the marketplace. It was just that they did not want to pay for it.

This is why the profit industry markets the cheapest possible expensive houses. In the confused world of real estate advertisements and architectural magazines it is important to remember that an “affordable” house is not the same as a cheap house. In the same way fast foods may be fast, but they are neither cheap nor “affordable”. Eating takeaways is a luxury which the poor cannot really afford.

Anyone seeking to build an “affordable” house needs to understand that an “affordable” meal is one which you cook yourself. Going out to a restaurant will always be more expensive. You not only need to pay someone else to cook your meal for you while you sit and wait for it to arrive. You also need to factor in significant restaurant overheads, staff salaries, waste, and even the possibility that no one might turn up at the restaurant on some nights. All these are all reasonable costs, but none of them apply when you cook a meal at home.

“Affordable” has nothing to do with quality. The best meals are always those cooked at home. Quite apart from the astonishing culinary skills of many ordinary people there are extra ingredients which even the best restaurants cannot afford. Love, for example, makes all the difference to a meal or a house. Expressing gratitude or friendship is beyond price. You cannot buy these things.

Beyond the joy of creativity is sensitivity which develops from involvement. Only great cooks can truly appreciate a restaurant meal, and only those who have built themselves an “affordable” home can appreciate great architecture. Design skills in cooking or building are as important as reading or writing for anyone who wants to lead a full life.

Every home-cooked meal, and every owner-built house, is unique and different. The resulting diversity and complexity bring both surprise and delight. Sharing your favourite dish becomes a symbol of sharing yourself. In the preparation or presentation of food we remember our love of other places and other cultures.

If you want an affordable house you need to build it yourself. This is not an impossible dream. Building a house is no more difficult than cooking a meal.

It is probably best to begin by helping someone else. This is a lot more fun than getting a university degree. In a perfect world the person you have helped might one day come along to help you. Begin with something simple. When you are having a shower in a bath-house a few leaks will hardly be noticed. A modular approach can be useful. You not only finish part of your building and get satisfaction before going back to the next lot of foundations. You also keep control of the process and set your own pace. Elegance and richness will arrive almost

unnoticed. As more “affordable” houses are built books on owner-building will become as common as recipe books in your local book-store.

Some systemic changes will need to be made. Returning power to people is an essential first move for any community interested in “affordable” housing. This means creating a democratic urban form. A city like Tokyo is very high density but low-rise. The result is a cellular pattern within which any cell can replace itself, just as the cells in our bodies do. Tokyo is a living, dynamic city, while the plans for Auckland or Christchurch are static, dead architectural dreams. In a living city no one would be forced to build an “affordable” house, but the option would always be there. The apartment blocks loved by planners and developers disempower people.

Unfortunately there comes, of course, a time when those who build “affordable” houses need to engage once more with the economic system. The rates they then pay each year can be more than the cost of the house. Our “building industry” penalises those who build “affordable” homes because they are seen as a threat to profit.

It is a mistake to assume that building “affordable” homes is an architectural or even a building question. As Einstein suggested you cannot solve a problem with the same thought process which created the problem.

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