

# DWELLING

*It is time that TLIO paid tribute to IVAN ILLICH, who died in 2002, and we do so here by reprinting an essay on human habitation*

To dwell is human. Wild beasts have nests, cattle have stables, carriages fit into sheds and there are garages for automobiles. Only humans can dwell. To dwell is an art. Every spider is born with a compulsion to weave a web particular to its kind. Spiders, like all animals, are programmed by their genes. The human is the only animal who is an artist, and the art of dwelling is part of the art of living. A house is neither nest nor garage.

Most languages use living in the sense of dwelling. To put the question 'where do you live?' is to ask for the place where your daily existence gives shape to the world. Just tell me how you dwell and I will tell you who you are. This equation of dwelling and living goes back to time when the world was still habitable and humans were in-habitants. To dwell then meant to inhabit one's own traces, to let daily life write the webs and knots of one's biography into the landscape. The writing could be etched into stone by successive generations or sketched anew for each rainy season with a few reeds and leaves. Man's habitable traces were as ephemeral as their inhabitants. Dwellings were never completed before occupancy, in contrast to the contemporary commodity, which decays from the day it is ready to use.

A tent had to be mended daily, it had to be put up, stretched, pulled down. A home-stead waxes and wanes with the state of its members: you can often discern from a distant slope whether the children are married, whether the old ones have already died off. Building goes on from lifetime to lifetime; rituals mark its prominent stages: generations might have passed since the laying of the cornerstone until the cutting of the rafters. Nor is the quarter of a town ever completed; right into the eighteenth century the residents of popular quarters defended their own art of dwelling by rioting against the improvements that architects tried to foist upon them. Dwelling is part of that moral economy which E P Thompson has so well described.<sup>1</sup> It succumbed to the King's avenues, which in the name of order, cleanliness, security and decorum tore up the neighbourhoods. It succumbed to the police which in the nineteenth century named streets and numbered houses. It succumbed to the professionals who brought sewers and controls. It was almost extinguished by welfare, which exalted the right of each one to his own garage and TV.

Dwelling is an activity that lies beyond the reach of the architect not only because it is a popular art; not only because it goes on and on in waves that escape his control; not only because it is of a tender complexity outside of the horizon of mere biologists and system analysts; but above all because no two communities dwell alike.

Habit and *habitat* say almost

the same. Each vernacular architecture (to use the anthropologists' term) is as unique as vernacular speech. The art of living in its entirety — that is, the art of loving and dreaming, of suffering and dying — makes each lifestyle unique. And therefore this art is too complex to be taught by methods of a Comenius of Pestalozzi, by a schoolmaster or by TV. It is an art which can only be picked up. Each one becomes a vernacular builder and a vernacular speaker by growing up, by moving from one initiation to the next in becoming either a man or a woman inhabitant. Therefore the Cartesian, three-dimensional, homogeneous space into which the architect builds, and the vernacular space which dwelling brings into existence, constitute differing classes of space. Architects can do nothing but build. Vernacular dwellers generate the axioms of the spaces they inhabit.

The contemporary consumer of residence space lives topologically in another world. The co-ordinates of residential space within which he locates himself are the only world of which he has had experience. He finds it impossible to believe that the cattle-herding Peul and the cliff-hanging Dogon and the tilling Bobo live in heterogeneous spaces that fit into the very same landscape, as seen by most ecologists.<sup>2</sup> For the modern resident a mile is a mile, and after each mile there cannot be

another, because the world has no centre. For the dweller the centre of the world is the place where he lives, and ten miles up the river might be closer than one mile into the desert. According to many anthropologists, the dweller's culture distorts his vision. In fact it determines the characteristics of the space he inhabits.

The resident has lost much of his power to dwell. The necessity to sleep under a roof for him has been transmogrified into a culturally defined need. The liberty to dwell has become insignificant for him. He needs the right to claim a certain number of square feet in built-up space. He treasures entitlements to deliveries and the skills to use them. The art of living

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Mass housing in Costa Rica.



A modern hospital in Namibia

for him is forfeited: he has no need for the art of dwelling because he anyway needs an apartment; just as he has no need for the art of suffering because he counts on medical assistance and has probably never thought about the art of dying.

The resident lives in a world that has been made hard. He can no more beat his path on the highway than he can make a hole in a wall. He goes through life without leaving a trace. The marks he leaves are considered dents - wear and tear. What he does leave behind him will be removed as environment has been redefined as a resource. Housing provides cubicles in which residents are housed. Such housing is planned, built and equipped for them. To be allowed to dwell minimally in one's own housing constitutes a special privilege; only the rich may move a door or drive a nail into a wall. Thus the vernacular space of dwelling is replaced by the homogenous space of the Garage.

Settlements look the same from Taiwan to Ohio and from Lima to Peking. Everywhere you find the same garage for the human — shelves to store the working force overnight, handy to the means of its transportation. Inhabitants dwelling in spaces they fashion have been replaced by residents sheltered in buildings produced for them, duly registered as consumers of housing protected by the Tenants' or the Credit Receivers' Act.

To be put up in most societies is a sign of misery: the orphan is taken in, the pilgrim put up, the condemned man imprisoned, the slave locked up overnight and the soldier — but only since the eighteenth century — billeted in barracks. Before that even the army had to provide its own dwelling by camping. Industrial society is the only one which attempts to make every citizen into a resident who must be sheltered and thus is absolved from the duty of dwelling.

Those who insist now on the liberty to dwell on their own are either very well off or treated as deviants. This is true both for those whom so-called "development" has not yet untaught the desire to dwell, and for the unpluggers who seek new forms of dwelling that would make the industrial landscape inhabitable — at least in its cracks and in its weak spots. Both the non-modernized and the post-modern oppose society's ban on spacial self-assertion, and will have to reckon with police intervening against the nuisance they create. They will be branded as intruders, illegal occupants, anarchists and nuisances, depending on the circumstance under which they assert their liberty to dwell: as the Indians who break in and settle on fallow land in Lima; as *favellados* in Rio de Janeiro, who return to squat on the hillside from which they have just been driven — after 40 years occupancy — by the police; as students who dare to convert ruins in Berlin's Kreuzberg into their dwelling; as Puerto Ricans

who force their way back into the walled up and burnt buildings of the South Bronx. They will be removed, not so much because of the damage they do to the owner of the site, or because they threaten the health or peace of their neighbours, but because of the challenge to the social axiom that defines a citizen as a unit in need of a standard garage.

Both the Indian tribe that moves down from the Andes into the suburbs of Lima and the Chicago neighbourhood council that unplugs itself from the city housing authority challenge the now-prevalent model of the citizen as *homo castrensis*, billeted man. But with their challenges, the newcomer and the breakaway provoke opposite reactions. The indios can be treated like pagans who must be educated into an appreciation of the state's maternal care for their shelter. The unpluggers are much more dangerous; he gives testimony to the castrating effects of the city's maternal embrace. Unlike the pagan, this kind of heretic challenges the axiom of civic religion which underlies all current ideologies which on the surface are in opposition. According to this axiom, the citizen *Homo castrensis* needs the commodity called 'shelter'; his right to shelter is written into the law. This right the unpluggers does not oppose, but he does object to the concrete conditions under which the right to shelter is in conflict with the liberty to dwell. And for the unpluggers this liberty when in conflict is presumed to be of greater value than the commodity of shelter, which by definition is scarce.

The conflict between the vernacular and economic values is however not limited to the space on the inside of the threshold. It would be a mistake to limit the effects of dwelling to the shaping of the interiors; what lies outside one's front door is as much shaped by dwelling, albeit in a different way. Inhabited land lies on both sides of the threshold; the threshold is like the pivot of the space that dwelling creates. On this side lies home, and on the other lies the commons: the space that households inhabit is common; the dwelling of the community rather than that of its corporate members. Just as no two communities have the same style of dwelling, nor can they have the same commons. Custom rules who may and who may not use the commons and how and when and where, just as the home reflects in its shape the rhythm and the extent of family life, so the commons are the trace of the commonality. There can be no dwelling without its commons.

It takes time for the immigrant to recognize that highways are neither streets nor paths but resources reserved for transportation. I have seen many Puerto Ricans who arrived in New York and needed years to discover that sidewalks were not part of a plaza. All over Europe to the despair of German bureaucrats, Turks pull their chairs into the streets for a chat, for a bet, for some business, to be served coffee and to put up a stall. It takes time to forgo the commons, to recognize that traffic is as lethal to business as to gossip outside the doorway. The distinction between private and public space for the modern shelter consumer does not replace but does destroy the traditional distinction between the home and the commons articulated by the threshold. However what housing as a commodity has done to the environment has so far not been recognized by our ecologists. Ecology still acts as a subsidiary or twin to economics.

One demonstration of the destruction of commons is the degree to which our world has become uninhabitable. As the

number of people increases, paradoxically we render the environment uninhabitable. Just as more people need to dwell, the war against vernacular dwelling has entered its last stage and people are forced to seek housing which is scarce. A generation ago Jane Jacobs effectively argued that in traditional cities the art of dwelling and the aliveness of the commons increase both as cities expand and also as people move closer together.<sup>3</sup> And yet during the last 30 years almost everywhere in the world powerful means have been employed to rape the local community's art of dwelling and thereby create an increasingly acute sense of scarce living space.

This industrial rape of the commons is no less brutal than the poisoning of water. This invasion of the last enclaves of dwelling space by housing programmes is no less obnoxious than the creation of smog. This ever-repeated juristic prejudice in favour of the right to housing, whenever this claims conflict with the liberty to explore new ways of dwelling, is as repressive as the laws which enforce the lifestyle of the 'productive human' couple. However, it needs to be proclaimed. Air, water and alternative ways of cohabitation have found their proctors. Curricula offer them training and bureaucracies offer them jobs. The liberty to dwell and the protection of a habitable environment for the moment remain the concern of minority citizens' movements; and even these movements are all too often corrupted by architects who misinterpret their aims.

"Self-build"<sup>4</sup> is thought of as a mere hobby - or as a consolation for shanty towns. The return of rural life is dubbed romanticism. Inner-city fishponds and chicken co-ops are regarded as mere games. Neighbourhoods that "work" are flooded by highly paid sociologists until they stop. House-squatting is regarded as civil disobedience, restorative squatting as an outcry for better and more housing. And all this might be true to a degree. In the field of housing as much as in the field of education, medicine, transportation, or burial, those who unplug themselves are no purists. I know a family that herds a few goats in the Appalachians and in the evenings plays with battery-powered computer.

But neither ridicule nor psychiatric diagnosis will make the unpluggers go away. They have lost the conscience of the Calvinist hippies and grow their own brand of sarcasm and political skill. And increasingly they become more capable of putting into pithy gestures their rejection of the axioms about *Homo castrensis* on which industrial society partly rests.

And there are other considerations which make the recovery of dwelling space seem reasonable today. Modern methods, materials and machines, make self-build by citizens ever so much simpler and less tiresome than it was before. Growing unemployment takes the stigma of the asocial away from those who short-circuit the building unions. Increasingly, trained construction workers have to completely relearn their trade to ply it in a form of unemployment which is useful to them and their community. The gross inefficiency of buildings put up in the seventies makes previously unthinkable transformations seem less odious, and even reasonable, to neighbours who would have protested a few years ago. The experience of the Third World converges with the experience in the South Bronx.



Secondhand building materials yard for self-builders in Turkey

The president of Mexico, while campaigning for election, stated without ambiguity: the Mexican economy cannot now nor in the future provide housing units for most of its citizens. The only way in which all Mexicans will be agreeably housed will be via provision in laws and of materials that enable each Mexican community to house itself better than ever before. What is here

proposed is enormous: the unplugging of a nation from the world wide market in housing units. I do not believe that a third world country can do this. As long as a country considers itself as underdeveloped, it takes its models from the North be this the capitalist or the socialist cheek. I cannot believe that such a country could really unplug itself as a nation, from the ideology for which the world wide market in housing units is but a symbol — the ideology based on *Homo economicus*, whose needs as 'billeted man' are just one manifestation of his impotence. I believe that liberty to dwell, and the provision of the instruments — legal and material — to make this choice feasible, must be recognized first in the countries that are 'developed'. Here the unplugging can argue with much more conviction and precision why he places this liberty above the entitlement to a garage. Let him then look to Mexico to learn what adobe can do.

When the act of dwelling becomes a subject of politics, it comes inevitably to a parting of the ways. On the one side there will be concern for the "housing package" — how to entitle everyone to get their share of built cubage, well situated and well equipped. On this side the packaging of the poor with their housing unit will become a growth sector for social work when there is no more money left for the architects. On the other side there will be concern for the right of a community to form and accommodate itself according to its ability and art. In the pursuit of this goal it will appear to many that the fragmenting of the habitat and the loss of traditions has caused the right to a dwellable habitat to be forfeited. Young people who insist on housing themselves will look with envy southwards where space and tradition are still alive. This budding envy of the underdeveloped must be cured with courage and reflection. In the Third World survival itself depends upon the correct balance between a right to "build yourself" and the right to possess a piece of land and some things such as one's own roof rafters.

#### EDITORS NOTES

1. E P Thompson, *Customs in Common*, Penguin, 1991, pp. 184-351.
2. All these tribes live in the area around Burkina Faso, Mali and northern Nigeria. The Peul are more commonly known in the UK as the Fulani.
3. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*, Pelican.
4. Illich uses the term "build-yourself" but we have used the current idiom.

*We are not sure when and where this article was first published, but we took it from IDOC Internazionale 4/91. The second and third to last paragraphs in the original have been cut from our version. All photographs are taken from Dwellings: the Vernacular House Worldwide, by Paul Oliver, Phaidon, 2003.*