Streetsweeper On Being Savaged by a Wet Lettuce

As one of the authors of *Responsive Environments*, I spend a great deal of time preaching the virtues of joined-up streets, bordered by active building fronts, generating perimeter blocks, and housing as fine a grain of mixed land uses as can possibly be achieved. This is a contentious stance: widely supported, but widely criticised too.

Some of the criticism is thoughtful and well-founded: an intellectual pleasure to combat, and positive in pushing us to clarify and deepen the Responsive Environments paradigm itself. It is not all like this, however: the most common criticism we hear – and we hear it over and over again – has a cloying intellectual numbness. It wouldn't be worth the effort of response except that constant criticism, if not occasionally challenged, does eventually have the same debilitating impact as being savagely beaten with a wet lettuce.

In its most coherent form, the line of criticism I am thinking of goes something like this: 'because the Responsive Environments approach advocates joined-up streets, bordered by active building fronts, generating perimeter blocks, and housing as fine a grain of mixed uses as possible, and because this repertoire of built form has been around for a long time, it follows that this is a nostalgic approach to design, seeking a spurious comfort in some regressive golden age, and thereby beating a cowardly retreat from the challenges of the present day'.

Now if this argument was valid, it would in my opinion call the whole Responsive Environments approach severely into question, but it is not. It is certainly true that this approach *does* advocate a repertoire of built form which is indeed long-established, both in practice and in theory: the earliest attempt that I know of to theorise, at least in England and, is in Thomas More's *Utopia*; whilst the Feng Shui and Vaastu sages of the Far East were into it some millennia earlier. *Responsive Environments*, however, sees built form as a tool for opening up new choices and opportunities in people's lives, and only a fool would imagine that people who decide that it is best to use a long-established tool must *by that token* be guilty of

nostalgia. Notice, for example, that those who accuse people like me of nostalgia find themselves having to use the tool of some natural language or other – mostly English, in the versions I encounter – to make these accusations in the first place. Now English has been around in a form which most of us can understand today, since long before even Sir Thomas More. Does its continued use, with only relatively gradual change, imply nostalgia? Am I being nostalgic in using it here? Join in, dear reader: 'of course not!' I hear you cry (in English, of course). Or, if you want a more concretely physical example, consider the wheel: Moon buggies, Mars explorers and today's cutting-edge Formula One cars all use round wheels, first developed millenia ago. They do so because these are the best wheels around. Like joined-up streets, active building fronts and so forth, round wheels are *really cool*.

None of this, of course, is to deny the value of innovation: witness the hi-tech 'tyre war' between the Michelin and Bridgestone companies during the 2001 Grand Prix season. However, the wheels are still round. Whether one is involved in the racetrack, the pulpit or the politics of space, the best choice of tools is determined neither by novelty, nor by venerability either, but by considering who wins and who loses from their use.

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