DWELLINGS, A STATE OF MIND AND A SENSE OF PLACE

Niamh Ní Mhaoilir

DEGREE IN CRAFT DESIGN

— 1996 —

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN
Faculty of Design: Department of Craft

Dwellings a State of Mind and a Sense of Place

Niamh Ní Mhaoilir

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art & Design and Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Bachelor of Design 1996.

— ACKNOWLEDGEMENT —

I would like to thank Nicola Gordon Bowe

for all her help and encouragement.

— CONTENTS —

— LIST OF PLATES —

— INTRODUCTION —

In this thesis, I would like to try to share my fascination with the idea of a dwelling as a relationship with nature and the land, between man, his community and his environment. My interest in the idea of a dwelling is intensified by my own preoccupation with the land, the earth as our primal dwelling place.

In my first chapter I will discuss the significance of the dwelling in contemporary life and its significance in prehistory in relation to environment, the landscape and to ourselves. I will continue furthermore, to discuss the importance and symbolic aspects of the original dwelling.

In chapter two I will examine the earth as a building material while giving examples of its usage, and place emphasis on the validity of the partaking of heritage and tradition in contemporary life and design.

In my final chapter I will indicate how conceptual architectural art investigates architectural issues and discuss the interactive capacity of art with particular emphasis on ephemeral art in communicating with its public and environment. I will also discuss a way in which artists can contribute through their work to the society in which they live and the holistic values of interactive art. To illustrate these concerns I have selected the work of the American artist Charles Simonds.

— CHAPTER ONE —

ENVIRONMENT & THE DWELLING

'Too much architecture today is preoccupied with a self-reverential discourse and a self-conscious dialogue with high culture. It is cocktail-party architecture — noisy, posturing, trying to make an impression, to stand out to be talked about, to be desperately interesting. Such architecture is clever architecture, not wise architecture. It aggrandizes the designer and the client, but has lost touch with what architecture is all about: creating a vital humane habitat that artfully expresses the conditions of its time and place and the dreams of its people. Landscape was the original dwelling'. [1]

Everyone experiences architecture, it can impress alienating, disturbing and sometimes inspiring feelings upon a person. It can reflect society and convey values of that society. The modern movement around the nineteenth century, believed that the use of advanced technology would make buildings not only cheaper and quicker to build, but of a higher standard. The influence of the Modern movement in Ireland became apparent in the nineteen thirties. Today society is left with a huge bill for righting building failures either by repair, renovation or demolition. Governments faced with the problems of homelessness in the thirties and forties, as was the

government here in Ireland, wanted to erect buildings more quickly and so standards were cut and new techniques and materials wer e inadequately tested. A lot of these were harmful to health, for example, asbestos, high alumina cement, air conditioning, wood preservatives and many more. [2]

Unlike machines, buildings cannot be discarded and should be made to last in a material that is in no way health thr eatening or environmentally ugly. The Modern movement regarded decoration as irrelevant, but I don't agree with this; decoration covers joints between materials and enables buildings to weather gracefully. Absence of decoration does, I feel, result in a building being characterless, certainly neat, but an unsympathetic structure; for example, the office blocks in Wood Quay, Dublin that are in front of Christ Church Cathedral.

I'm not entirely opposed to the architecture of Modernism, I simply feel that much of it tends to depressingly dominate instead of illuminate its environment. Unfortunately in the race for progress appreciation of the longevity of a building, the environment and our traditional culture are often, it seems dismissed in design. Man's sense of place appears to have expanded in some ways for the worse. Urban suburbia has grown beyond control. Repetition in housing has resulted in mass, uniformed production. Individuality has been wiped out. Buildings like the Ballymun flats in Dublin are boring, oppressive even. A lot of suicides, violence and vandalism have taken place there. I feel that these human zoo-type buildings, borrowing the title of one of Desmond Morris's books, have something to do with such problems having taken place. Desmond Morris stated in his book that:-

'The human animal requires a spatial territory in which to live, that possesses unique features, surprises and architectural idiosyncrancies. Without them it can have little meaning.

The human being needs to express itself in some way and feel comfortable in its environment. I think this is difficult in neatly symmetrical, tall and featureless buildings that, yes, are useful in terms of mass production but lack the visual oddities that not only children but adults need too. Bland, stark, tall, boxed structures do nothing for an area such as Ballymun, or for the psychological health of the mind. They are not stimulating places for a child to grow up in. With reference to contemporary architecture it is vital to develop and cultivate our contemporary architectural design, but it should not be at the cost of the inhabitants of a building or the surrounding environment of a building. Architects seem to perceive the landscape as a visual setting for their own particular designs instead of for what it is, an evolving entity that changes with the processes of nature and culture. Traditional methods of building, whether it was the now almost extinct thatched stone cottages in Ireland, or Egyptian Nubian buildings had, I think, the right combination of imagination and an appreciation of place. I see no reason why old methods and contemporary ideas could not be combined to create new and exciting designs with respect to function and the environment, so that our country will not be spoilt.

The earth is our most valuable possession. We human beings are only a fragment of nature yet we often seem to be unaware of this. Society today chooses only to see the superficial niceties of nature, without realizing the constant, powerful presence

which determines our very existence. As humans, we co-exist both as inhabitants of the earth and as observers of nature. We use the earth, consume its produce, admire it and we are the destroyers of nature. Many twentieth century structures reflect this split from nature.

The contemporary ideology seems to be that nature and her resources are there primarily for human use. The intrinsic value of nature or the spirit of a place has no countenance in this kind of ideology. The preservation of nature has to do with the survival of the planet earth which is our only possible dwelling; that is why I think it important to respect our environment and work with it instead of trying to conquer it.

Dwelling is not just about inhabiting but taking care of and creating a space within an environment that comes into its own and prospers. Nature is, I think, an endless source of spiritual sustenance having promoted the creation of legends, myths, religions, poems, paintings, architecture and other artistic creations. People often have a landscape painting hanging in their homes not, I think, just for aesthetic pleasure. Could it be they feel they have a little of natural utopia in their lives and, through the painting, they feel a sense of connection to nature?

Nature is full of individual, beautiful, characteristic forms, and anyone moulding clay or marking it with their fingers in the sand naturally thinks of some object to give sense to the shapes that emerge under the hand of the maker. One of a child's first intuitions is discovery, a revelation of the real. Children playing with sand or

clay help to realize form through working with these manipulative mediums; they use the earth in an artistic process for discovery and what they make is a direct response to the land and a discovery of their environment. We find ourselves interpreting the results as human figures, faces flowers or familiar inanimate objects.

The earth is now associated with a sociological and biological determinism. We are the product of our environment, genes, gender, class, society, education and our occupations. People have not totally disregarded nature as evidenced by the growing interest and concern about ecological and social destruction seen in the existence of groups such as Earthwatch, Greenpeace and Gaia International, a group of designers who 'stand for the balance and integration of the built environment with ecosystems, towards a sustainable way of life for all species on this planet'. [4] Have we forgotten though why nature is important, how to work with it and how to look after it?

William Wordsworth felt the presence of nature and through that sense of presence obscurely felt as if he was in the presence of something supersensible:

> 'And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting sun
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects all thought,
> And rolls through all things. [5]
>
> William Wordsworth - Tintern Abbey

The necessity of a home is universal. 'Home is not a simple entity', [6] it can mean many things but at the centre is home as place. 'This has two primary traits, enclosure and multisensory texture. Homeplace is everywhere protected'. [7] Every home is different through shape, colour and sound. Everyone has a special attachment to their home place; hence the proverb, 'home is where the heart is'.

Everyone's homeplace is part of the environment and a result of the conditions in which it has been constructed. Each person on this earth is unique in form and thought; likewise their homeplace or dwellings in different cultures will be also. Despite this, all dwellings more or less relate back to a primal need, the physical needs of the body if not the symbolic needs of the mind. Thr oughout history man has moulded his environment to express or symbolize ideas like power, order, comfort and mystery. The methods for achieving these have varied in scale and composition but by 500,000 BC the concept of mysterious for ces behind all life was expressed almost universally through the worship of a mother goddess of fertility. [8] Whether animate or inanimate, all touchable objects were considered to possess a deity.

In nature we see the cycles of time, spring, summer, autumn, winter, life, birth and death. Water is in a constant state of metamorphosis and circulation. In religious mythology water is attributed with powers of both life and death: as the sour ce of life, holy water, baptismal water and then as the river of the dead, for example the Styx in Rome and the Boyne in Ir eland, which were believed to lead on to the next life. Rivers were also considered to be like veins in the earth's body. Rituals were

performed at springs and wells. The Irish rivers, the Boyne and the Shannon, originate from the goddesses names Bóinn and Sinainn,[9] the earth and water symbolizing the womb of Mother Earth show its special significance for birth.

The earth and its gods provided for all prehistoric man's physical and psychological needs. Man believed that these universal gods had created everything and so all things on earth were sacred and had symbolic significance. Man respected his environment and lived in harmony with it. trees and rocks were recognised as being dwellings for the earth spirits, as well as water. The American Indian prophet, Smoholla, expressed these ideas when the white man tried to turn his people into cultivators:-

> 'My young men shall never work. Men who work cannot dream, and wisdom comes to us in dreams. You ask me to plough the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's breast? Then when I die she shall not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone. Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter into her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it and be rich like white men. But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?' [10]

Stones are witness to the origins of the earth and her history. They also mark the beginning of man's cultural development, being used to build the first walls and tools. They contain fossils from another time, their weathering showing the effects of

time. Rough natural stones were often believed to be the dwellings of spirits or gods, and were used by our prehistoric ancestors as tombstones, boundary stones, or religious objects. Their use of stones, were in a way a kind of primeval form of sculpture in which they added their own expression to that of nature, for example at Newgrange, Co. Meath in Ireland.

The mandala is an important universal symbol in ar chitecture. It forms the gr ound plan of many sacred buildings in nearly all civilizations. [11] Many cultures built their homes and villages using a circular ground plan, such as the Tyuonyi Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and the North American Navajo, (12) because they believed it created a sacred site which would connect them to the 'other world' through the centre of the circular plan. Every building with a mandala ground plan is in a way a projection of an original image from within the human unconscious on to the outerworld. The circle, it would seem, is then the symbol of the psyche.

It is only when an object or pattern is used in human activities that it becomes a symbol; it is then perceived as having valuable qualities in itself, in virtue of its symbolic importance in the life of man because of what then meant for his safety, security, religious rituals and well being. Everything on the earth can assume a symbolic significance and this is expressed through religion and art. The art and religion of prehistoric man is a record that our ancestors have left of the symbols and forms that were meaningful to them.

The traditional dwellings of non-western societies, the third world and the respect prehistoric man had for the environment provide examples and inspiration, I feel, as to what we should be able to achieve in our own country, using our own traditional building techniques and materials. I am not saying we should live as our stone age ancestors did or copy non-western societies but just take their way of life and beliefs as an example for a better way of life that would benefit the earth and, in the process, us.

Most native societies around the world have three characteristics in common: 1) they have a close relationship with their environment 2) they are close protectors of their cultures 3) and they have a rich ceremonial and ritual life. North American Indians see 'their universe as a circle of energy in which the entire universe participates', [13] this energy being important in the relationship between man and animals and between society and nature. The longest inhabited place in North America is the Hopi village of Oraibi. [14] At certain times of the year, the Indians spend up to half their time in ritual activity.

If we are to have a feasible relationship with our environment, we will need to consider the wisdom of these other cultures. Their rituals and ceremonies involve highly developed sets of skills, refined through many centuries, that maintain a close and respectful relationship with the world around them; they are much more successful than we are in that our western european cultural seasonal festivals and rituals, such as the summer solstice and Mayday are not really acknowledged or felt as being special as much as they used to be. They are important because myths,

dance, art and games instill in us connections with our environment and ourselves. Ritual is the focussed way in which we both experience and express our respect for our religious beliefs, social connections and environmental connections. It is important for the quality of our dwellings to acquire a deeper understanding and greater knowledge of ourselves, our environment and of ourselves in relation to our environment.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER 1

(1) SPIRN WHISTON, Anne, **Landscape Architecture,** Vol. 80, No. 8, 1990, p.36.

(2) HELLMAN, Louis, **Architecture for Beginners,** New York, New York Writers and Readers, 1988.

(3) MORRIS, Desmond, **The Human Zoo,** Walker Brothers, 1991.

(4) LEECH, Paul, **Discussion at Design Yard**, Gaia International, Dublin, October, 1995.

(5) MARTIN, Augutine, **Soundings**, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan and the Educational Co. of Ireland, 1969, p. 104.

(6) (7) SALIM, Kemal, GASKELL **Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts,** Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 139.

(8) JELLICOSE, Susan and Geoffrey, **The Landscape of Man Shaping the Environment from Prehistory to Present Day**, Thames and Hudson, 1975.

(9) (10) MICHELL, John, **The Earth Spirit,** London, Thames and Hudson, p.4.

(11) JUNG, Carl, **Man and his Symbols,** London, Aldus Books, 1979.

(12) OLIVER, Paul, **Shelter Sign & Symbol,** London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1975.

(13) (14) DEVALL, Bill, Sessions, **Deep Ecology**, U.S.A., Gibbs, M. Smith, 1985.

Ballymun Flats, Dublin

CHAPTER TWO

HERITAGE AND CONSTRUCTION

> 'Every people that has produced architecture has evolved its own favourite forms, as peculiar to that people as its language, its dress, or its folklore. Until the collapse of cultural frontiers in the last century, there were all over the world distinctive local shapes and details in architecture, and the building of any locality were the beautiful children of a happy marriage between the imagination of the people and the demands of the countryside.[1]
>
> H. Fathy , 1973.

Our attitudes to our environment and dwellings are of the utmost importance, I believe, to our lives. Dwellings are necessary for our protection, the earth for our existence. The principle word people use when asked, 'Where is home'?, is the name of their country. Why?, because home and country are part of everyone's heritage, and where we are form. There is, I think, a sense within humanity these days that we are somehow separated from the world, that we have lost touch with the world around us and have, as a result, met with environmental problems. It may be that our determination to dominate nature and try to recreate and change the world into a huge monetary exchange has has at the same time also created some of the biggest

problems of modern man: stress, anxiety and insecurity. Modern society is slowly beginning to recognize such problems, and as a result a new relationship between man and his environment is, I believe, slowly emerging. It may be that the influence of non-Western societies' attitudes to life and the environment will become more important. An important and healthy beginning, I believe, in solving some of our modern problems would be to try and create buildings that creatively express their surroundings, their country's national heritage and take into account the functions of various buildings.

The earth has been the most important of building materials since the beginning of time. Unfired earth has been one of the principal materials, used at one stage on almost every continent. Man has built dwellings that have been sometimes modest, sometimes elaborate, built from earth, fibres and stone. Earth dwellings were simply sun dried. Knowledge of how to build dwellings was simply passed down through the generations and the know-how was simply acquired. Change came with the advent of the industrial revolution. Bricks of fired clay and mass-produced materials, such as cement, steel and glass gradually took place of the basic elements of traditional vernacular construction. Over one third of the world's population still lives in earth dwellings today.[2] Throughout Africa and Central and South America, the principal building material is mud. It has also been used extensively in Egypt, Europe and by the Indians of North America. The art of building in clay in Africa has long been a part of the tradition of most of her people, the Dogon and the Fali to name but a few.[3]

At least twenty different traditions of earth construction are known, but, there are two principal processes; the first being **'Pisé de terre'** an ancient method known by the Chinese for over three thousand years. This means constructing walls at least fifty cm thick by ramming earth between parallel frames that are then removed, leaving a completed section of hard earth wall. The second principal method is 'Adobe' an Arabic word brought by Spaniards to Latin America, where the method is applied to earth bricks shaped in moulds, dried in the sun and used to build walls and domes. The Adobe bricks are usually mixed with water and straw, to form a sticky mixture. The external walls of large, non-western buildings are often protected with a facing not only because of weather conditions but because they allow for decoration with stone or fired bricks embedded in the walls during construction. In desert-like areas, soils of broken rock, sand and red soils have resulted in interesting uses of earth for construction. These type of soils became hard and encrusted when exposed to air, which makes them good for building but not so good for agriculture. In its plastic state, mud is very flexible and can be moulded into many forms. (4) The clays and later laterite soils suitable for building with constitute seventy four percent of the earth and so could very possibly be successful in many ar eas of the world. [5] Earth brick could prove relatively inexpensive because the bricks would not have to be kiln-fired and if produced on site or locally would need very little, if any, transportation. Also earth buildings are cool in summer and warm in winter because, by their very nature, the thick earth walls provide protection against extremes of climate outside, creating natural thermal regulation. [6] So there would be a reduction in energy expenditure. Earth architecture has a quiet and sympathetic atmosphere about it, maybe because the same materials are used throughout the

construction and the architectural rhythms are influenced both by the materials used and the landscape from which they were taken.

So opposed to the box-like structures of modern architecture, where the emphasis is on the work of the individual architect, vernacular architecture is based upon the common heritage of a community and claims no particular designer. Changes of climate and the features of the land also influence the types of buildings made. The structures of these buildings are based upon forms most appropriate to the available materials and the functions for which they are to be used. Earth buildings are susceptible to water damage but, with modern technology, this no longer needs to be so. If the earth is mixed with small quantities of products such as bituminous residues or cement, a stabilized earth can be achieved which can improve impermeability. With the hydraulic machines we have now bricks could be mass produced. [7] It is sad that this type of ar chitecture is slowly disappearing under the technological influence of the modern world. The modern race for progress has in many ways proven irresponsible and seems to be leading to the destruction of traditions, especially in third world countries.

In 1980 Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India said:

> 'All the new houses are built for energy consumption. They are hot in simmer and cold in winter, whereas our old houses are not. So we have not only to have new technology, but look a bit to the old technology. There is much sense in what people have evolved over

> the years to suit their climate, their environment, their way of living. You cannot keep all of it, because our way of life has changed, but I think a lot of it can be adapted and made more efficient.' [8]

It seems to me that what Mrs. Gandhi said in 1980 still makes a lot of sense today . Most vernacular architecture is described as 'primitive' by the western world, a term which I feel unfairly equates non-western societies with the intelligence level of a child. Thee supposedly primitive people manage their lives with efficiency and creativity in an often barren and hostile environment. I agree with Claude Levi Strauss when he said:

> 'A primitive people is not a backward or retarded people; indeed it may possess, in one realm or another, genius for invention or action that leaves the achievements of civilised peoples far behind'. (9)

For example the North West African Dogon tribe of the upper Niger basin and the Fali tribe of Northern Cameroons are in my opinion a very gifted people. The Dogon and the Fali construct their dwellings and villages in a similarly anthropomorphic style, based on their cultural myths. Both tribes' myths of creation have close similarities. Both share the spiral as a symbol of cr eation. Their dwellings display a skillful and understanding relationship between their materials and environment. Architecture is for them an integral part of the ritual repetition of the myth of origin. Dwellings, field and village are all viewed as living entities still in cr eation and all equally important in life. Every object, ever building has for them a symbolic

function. Decisions, such as where to build a house, are made in consultation with village deities, ancestors and nature spirits. The means of communication with these deities varies from consulting the village oracle to the interpretation of dreams. Economic activity and ritual centre on the sacred places which influence their architectural activity, all of which are connected to features of the landscape. African architecture is modelled on the human body. The image and symbolism of the womb is often incorporated into west African granaries. The Dogon lineage house, **ginula,** represents in its various parts and chambers the image of the mythological first ancestors, **nommo.** Dogon village planning, being based on the human figure has the blacksmith's forge or the male house as the head, the chest often being the community's lineage houses; the hands as the women's menstrual houses, and the genitals and feet being represented in various community shrines. In the sculptural earth architecture of Africa, earth, the most fertile element of our planet, becomes a symbol of sexuality. [10]

The building work of the Dogon and Fali dwellings is the collective undertaking of the family. Men do the heavier work, women and children gather and transport the clay ad straw for the mud plaster. This mix of mud and straw is left for several days to cure. Later it is mixed with more water to a plastic consistency. The mud is then usually moulded into balls and pressed compactly in a spiral or circular sequence. each layer of mud is allowed to dry before the next is applied and the dwelling is built up in successive rings of mud, very like the techniques used in coiled pots. This method is called **banco**, which is a similar to **Adobe** except that the mud is not moulded into brick. Although mainly built with mud, a little stone is used for

support, flooring and sacred enclosures and wood for structure, all of which is then plastered over in mud. The buildings are annually waterproofed with more of a red type of local soil. [11] Some of the Fali buildings have a lot of black diamond shape designs. The sacred Dogen buildings are usually rectangular, with circular corner tower elements and many window-like openings. [12] The fronts of these buildings are often mask-like. The **sirige** mask is a symbol of authority and the hogon, the village elder, usually lives in it. Granaries are often decorated with the Ammala mask which represents the door of Amma, the Creator. Inspired by their own ancient mythology, the Dogon buildings are often richly decorated with carved motifs (3) Man r eflects his own ideas, conflicts and desires in his thinking about the world and often art forms a medium for the solution of unconscious conflicts. The dwellings of the Dogon and Fali are the expression of their tribal ideas on the world around them. Their dwellings involve a dir ect relationship with their materials since no complex instruments nor academic or technological knowledge are used. It is, I think, apparent that the religious ritual practices which accompany the architectural activities of non-western people express a different but by no means primitive attitude to the world around us. they are our contemporaries, the differences between us being our ways of looking at the world and the way we deal with our environment.

Le Corbusier's response to vernacular dwellings was that these were:-

'mud houses, moulded by hand and built with ef ficiency and a touching regard for the sensibilities of man'. [14]

Non-western man, he said, were:-

'Men in tune with fundamentals'. [15] The architecture of African tribes, such as the Dogon and the Fali, besides their obvious skills and techniques, has also a sense of life and is an expression of human beings who not only know their craft but also feel and see and can articulate those feelings in their materials, forms and decoration. The results they achieve are because they are dedicated and inspired by their culture and religion. There is no separation between life and their work. They make dwellings for their communal daily and religious needs.

Other societies, such as the Tyuoni Peublo of New Mexico, also build circular dwellings in natural materials. So too do the Navajo Indians of North America, who live traditionally in dwellings called **hogon.** These are circular earth lodges, with a window which acts as a vent. the lodge is covered in bark, over which a layer of earth is put. Navajos have a special cult lodge **hogon** where sand floor painting rituals and other ceremonies are held. [16] Navajo sand paintings can be seen in the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art at Santa Fé, New Mexico. thee are changed with every season. This museum gives visitors the chance to appreciate ancient sand paintings which traditionally represented the relationship between man and nature.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate non-western methods of building, ritual and myth is to regard them as an expression of the deepest beliefs of the people who made them. Every nation has its own heritage and traditional modes of building that have simply faded and ben hidden, I believe, behind the logical brain of modern

man because of the many distractions of modern life and the changes in human ways of life. From the beginning, heritage and tradition have influenced the quality of our lives until the present day. I hope we will remember this because I believe that the recognition of heritage and tradition can only be of value and enlightenment to our modern world.

Modern architectures influence began to appear in underdeveloped countries around the nineteen forties but the sort of modern design adopted was even at that time often in appropriate in these countries, such as Egypt. Governments despised their traditional building materials as symbolic of primitiveness, and so tried to adopt western methods. However, the imposition of foreign theories in design were an expensive undertaking for an industrially underdeveloped community where manual labour was depended upon for livelihood, especially since western technology reduces manual labour to a minimum. we are now so used to believing in the supremacy of modern architecture that we tend to overlook how traditional communities resolved without any man-made materials or problems encountered. Earth architecture usually conjures up condescending images of mud huts in squalor, but if we look beyond this bigotry the reality looks different.

During and after the second world war, industrial societies experienced serious economic crisis, especially since many of the factories that had produced building materials had been destroyed. This problem led to laboratory research and many experimental projects into earth construction and Adobe Revival. Architects like Le Corbusier in France, who adapted the traditional pisé, rammed earth construction

for his Murdndins projected and Albert Speer in Germany and Frank Lloyd Wright in America, all helped to promote earth projects between 1940 and 1945. One of the most interesting and influential revivalists was the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy. He launched his earth architecture campaign in 1946 in spite of the prejudices h faced from fellow countrymen. Fathy had witnessed the beginning of the industrial era in his country. Egypt has a history of foreign occupation and colonial exploitation and is an example of the negative effects of colonialization. Fathy devoted his life to the defence and revival of architectural forms based on the popular traditions in his country. The postwar also saw the birth of independence movements in european colonies and a rejection of western ways. Fathy emphatically opposed the importation of western stereotypes and urged the revival and modernization of traditional methods of building in unfired earth. In Egypt, Fathy came to the conclusion that concrete frame housing schemes were more likely to be expensive than traditional methods, in terms of materials, transport costs and salaries. Fathy studied architecture at Cairo University, which was modelled on the Ecole des Beau Arts in Paris. After his training, he made a study of vernacular Islamic ar chitecture and documented elements of it that he felt would be appr opriate for new, localised architecture. He designed plans for enclosed markets, university buildings, and for villages and cities. Architectural details like wind catchers, lattice screens and air passages were used in design for both decorative and climatic functional reasons. Fathy believed in the importance of tradition in design. As he said:-

> 'By praising tradition I do not suggest that we never change, because that would be an impossibility. We must find architectural elements

> that are as valid today as they were yesterday, because the forces that underlie the process of the creation of form may have altered due to a change in material or for socio-economic reasons, and elements must be transposed. Tradition is the social analogy of personal habit.' (17)

Fathy saw architecture as a natural extension of culture, and said it was a unique human response of man to his environment, in an effort to facilitate both physical and spiritual needs. In his book **Architecture for the Poor, an Experiment in Rural Egypt (1973),** Fathy proposed that labour-intensive construction methods using local materials were the obvious solution to the social pr oblems of the time. To put this idea into practice, he organized an experiment at New Gourna on the Nile in 1945. The idea was to get people working together to improve life, giving them at the same time self-esteem and pride in the constr uction of their own homes using tradition. He taught the people Nubian techniques in using mud brick vaults and domes. He also incorporated traditional device, such as the malgaf, the Egyptian wind scoop, and traditional methods of cooling by evaporation jars. These elements of Islamic tradition had proved through generations that they were well adjusted to the resources and climate of the region. By contrast, modern styles were often unfunctional and at odds with a particular environment. In most third world circumstances Fathy felt that the people of the region could build better for themselves. Unfortunately the New Gourna experiment was not completed due to constant hindrance by official interference and the outbreak of cholera. Despite this, the new Gourna experiment was a success in that it became an important, symbolic

architectural gesture, and as a result had a vast impact on not only Egyptian architects, but worldwide. Hassan Fathy has left thr ough his work and philosophy an important legacy for the future of architecture, and has contributed enormously to the development of a unified aspiration of architecture and landscape, inspiring many projects of self help groups in the third world.

The combination of traditional and modern techniques of building leads to a completely new approach, in which both can be used in a beneficial way more appropriate to our needs and as an enhancement to the landscape.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 2

(1) **CURTIS,** William J.R., **Modern Architecture Since 1900,** London, Phaidon Press, 1982. p. 356.

(2) DETHIER, Jean, **Down to Earth - Mud Architecture: An Old Idea, A New Future,** London, Thames and Hudson, 1982, p.7.

(3) GIUDONI, Enrico, **Primitive Architecture**, London, Faber and Faber, 1987.

(4) OLIVER, Paul, **Dwellings, the House Across the World**, London, Phaidon Press, 1987, p. 79.

(5) DETHIER, Jean, **Down to Earth - Mud Architecture: An Old Idea, A New Future,** London, Thames and Hudson, 1982, p.14.

(6) HELLMAN, Louis, **Architecture for Beginners,** New York, New York Writers and Readers, 1988.

(7) (8) DETHIER, Jean, **Down to Earth - Mud Architecture: An Old Idea, A New Future,** London, Thames and Hudson, 1982, p.10/12.

(9) STRAUSS, Claude Levi, **The Savage Mind** London, George and Nicholson, 1974.

(10) GUIDONI, Enrico, **Primitive Architecture**, London, Faber and Faber, 1987.

(11) OLIVER, Paul, **Dwellings, the House Across the World,** London, Phaidon Press, 1987, chapter 4.

(12) OLIVER, Paul, **Shelter, Sign and Symbol,** London, Barrie Jenkins, 1975.

(13) GUIDONI, Enrico, **Primitive Architecture**, London, Faber and Faber, 1987.

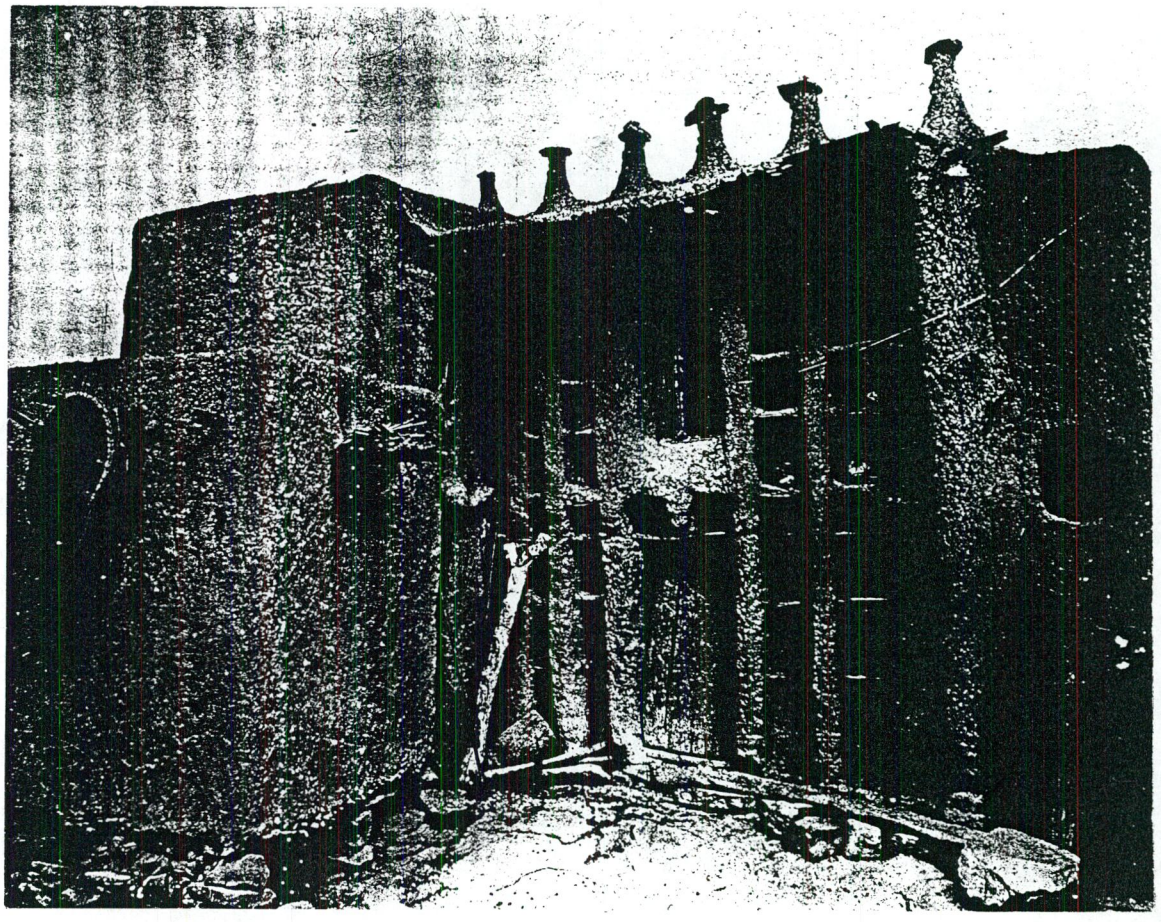
(14) (15) OLIVER, Paul, **Shelter & Society, London,** Barrie and Rockliff the Cresset, 1969 p.18.

(16) OLIVER, Paul, **Shelter, Sign and Symbol,** London, Barie Jenkins, 1975.

(17) STEELE, James, **Architectural Design, The New Traditionalist**, Vol. 59, No. 11-12, 989.

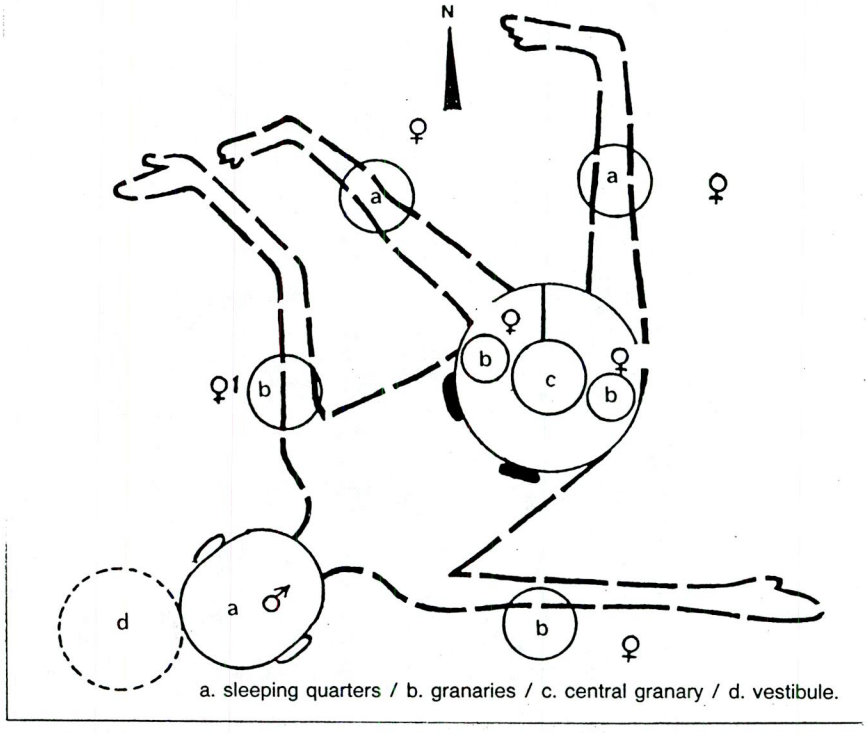
2.1

2.2



2.3

2·4

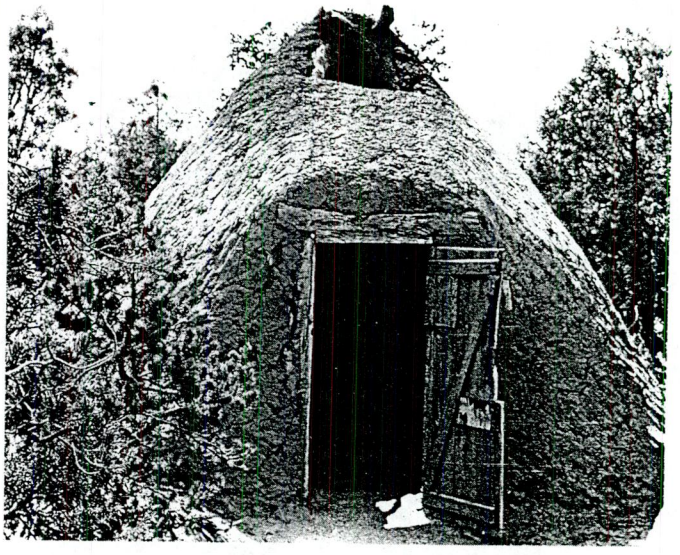

N
a
a
b
b
c
b
b
a
d
b
a. sleeping quarters / b. granaries / c. central granary / d. vestibule.

2.5

2.6

2.7

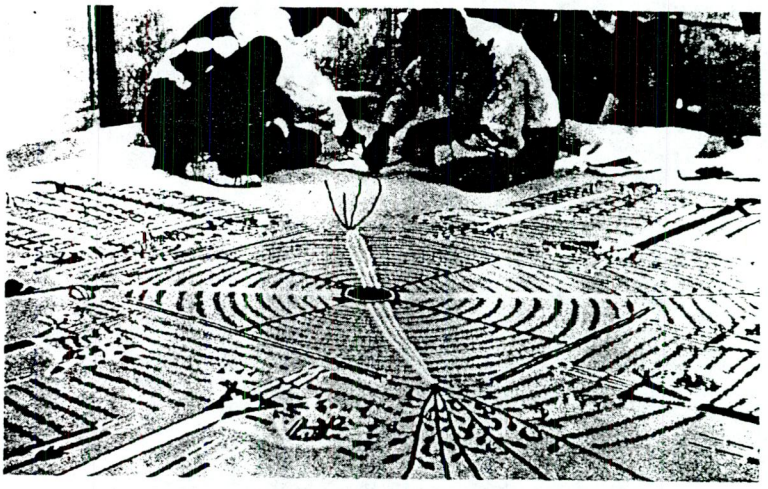
2·8



Navajo 'forked stick' *hogan*. A smoke hole above the fireplace is partially protected against rain. The entrance faces east. Near Betatakin, Arizona, USA.

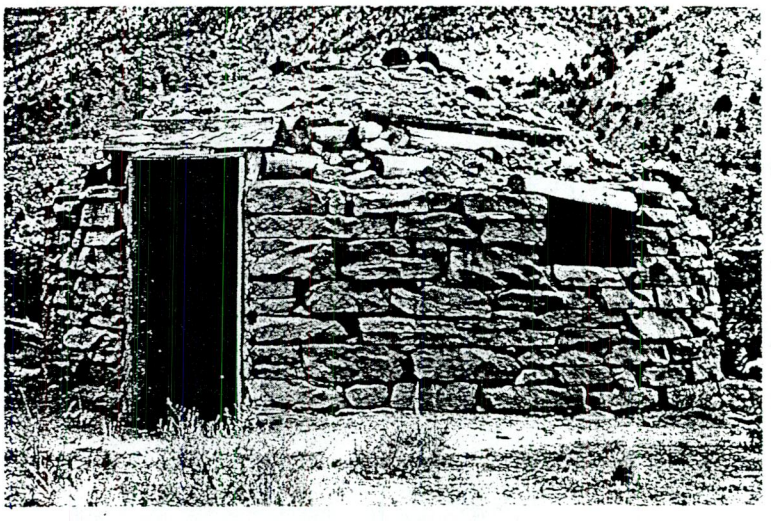
2.9

2.10



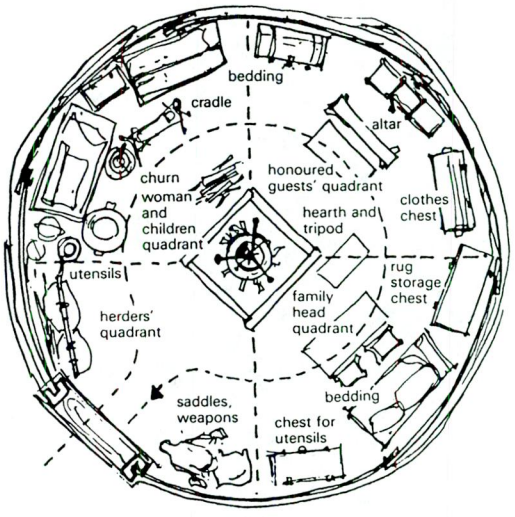
Navajo *hosteen* (medicine men) make a 'dry-painting' with coloured sands for a curing ceremony. The sick person will sit within it and absorb its power. *(Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford)*

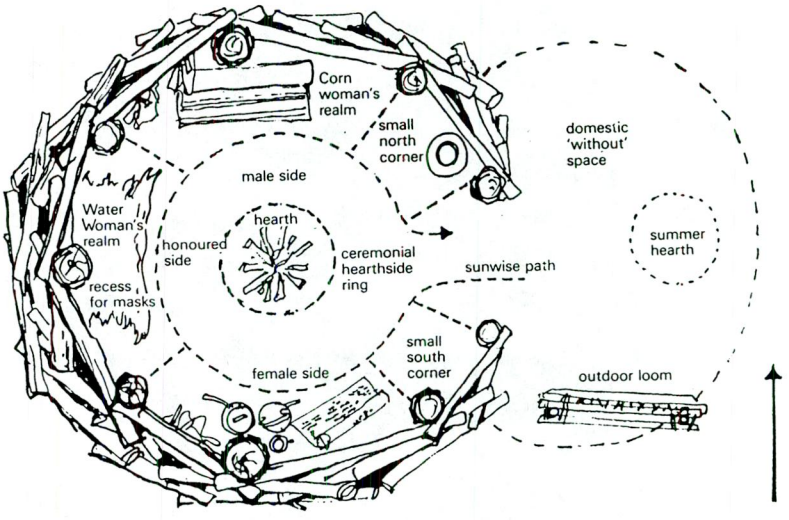
2·11



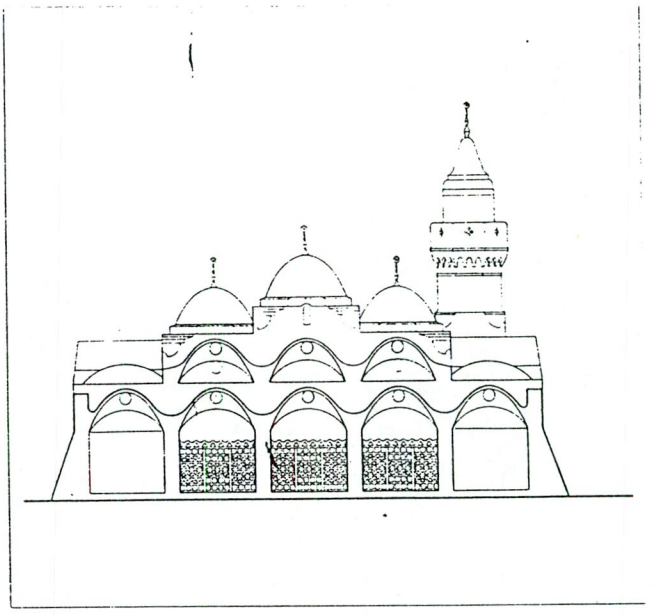
Hogans are built of any available materials. The roof of this stone hogan is of diagonally-placed logs, covered with earth. On the north side an opening has been made for the removal of the body of the deceased owner. Near Holbrook, Arizona.

2·12

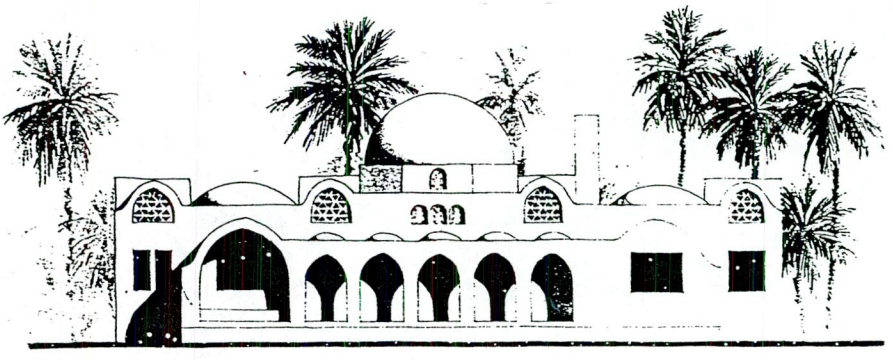




The spatial organization of the *hogan* and the *ger* compared. Differentiation by gender, symbolism of internal spaces, and movement around the central hearth have many points in common. Other arrangements have been recorded.



2.14



2.15

2.16

2.17

— CHAPTER THREE —

ART AND THE DWELLING

'Nature is the art of which we are part'

Restoring awareness of our symbiotic relationship with nature is, I believe, one of the most pressing spiritual and political needs of our time. The values of material site and transience have been sustained throughout history to the present day in the buildings of the Africans and American Indians. These have shown points of intersection with sculpture.

The art of environment is subject to the dictates of place, materials and process being as fundamental as concept. Often earth work artists have expr essed a nostalgia for the past which is reflected in the ancient forms of architecture they admire and have adopted in their work. The American artist Charles Simonds is one such artist. The complexities of a technological culture and the extravagance and waste in an era of diminishing natural resources have all contributed to artistic expressions of concern for nature and the environment. Sculpture is primarily an art of touch and relationship to space. It is a way of discovering our environment.

Some artists explore their relationship with the landscape by selecting a site for ritual moments which interact with the environment. Others deal with the earth and site in

a range of expressions, inspired by primitive structures and the contemporary urban house. When sculpture takes the form of earth works and environments, art and nature are joined through the ties the work has with its site and with perceptions of the work, which together combine into a total experience. Public sculpture, in order to continue a meaningful future, that is one that comes from a concern for the context of contemporary life and its r elation to the future of nature, must, like architecture and the planning of our cities, involve a modest r eintgration of holistic values into design, aesthetics and public life. Architectural art includes sculpture with architectural references and conceptual art that investigates issues.

Art that is concerned with life is, I know, not new, but what is important I think is for artists to deal with the environment in a reverential way, with a sense of purpose that involves issues of importance in life. Building a relationship with the environment is important in the understanding of ecology and in cr eating an architecture of place. Charles Simonds is an artist whose work, I feel, embodies all of these concerns. He is also concerned with peoples cultural and psycholbiological relationships to the earth. Often artists like Simonds are seen as being either romantic or idealistic, however at this stage, there is no longer room for that kind of perception since their kind of thought process can play a role in the protection of the earth from impending destruction we are imposing on it by the example of their art in society and through public participatory projects.

Simonds is interested in the vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous organic structures assembled in Bernard Rudofsky's book **Architecture Without**

Architects [2] and is inspired by life forms that grow, evolve and change according to need. Since 1970, Charles Simonds has been constructing miniature unfired clay brick dwellings to house his imaginary 'little people'. His work is usually small scale, unobtrusive, not imposing. Instead, it adapts to site, establishing a dialogue with place. The urban landscape of the city has always appealed to him. These transitory structures of structures of Simonds were initially made in New York but have also been made in many locations such as Paris, Berlin, Dublin, Venice, Shanghai and Guilin, China and, more recently, in 1994 in Carcelna.

Simonds sees his little people as a migratory tribe that live in gutters, on window ledges, in niches, in walls and in vacant lots. He then builds ritual places, ruins and settlements of tiny bricks. These tiny fantasy places are ephemeral. Like the Indians of North America, the Little People's lives centre around beliefs and attitudes towards nature and towards the land. They are mainly constructed with tweezers. He divides the little people into three groups, those who live in a line, those who build in a circle and those who build spirals. For him the little people embody primordial similarities between man and his dwellings, between man, dwelling and the earth. The little people are never visually in evidence, but evidence of their migrations are left in the structures Simonds builds, which portray their beliefs, rituals and how their architecture evolves according to its physical environment. By studying the social and architectural structures of the little people, Simonds causes us to be aware, by comparison, of the structure of our environments and lives. Simonds travels a lot, observing social conventions, architecture and how different societies' cultures have affected their environment. The Little Peoples' dwellings are

the result of his observations. These little environments also reflect on us symbolically because they are meant as a metaphor for the cyclical and temporal aspect of human existence.

Through his work Simonds has recreated the origin of man, of civilization, of the world of his Little People. His dwellings are you might say, born of the earth, made of its clay. Simond's structures are reminiscent of ancient archeological sites, of Egyptian and North American Indian forms and those of the Pueblo and Hopi tribes. Often they are organic in nature and sometimes erotic in form and content. Simonds sees clay as a sexual material both symbolically as the earth and physically because of the way it behaves, mythology being a central concern of his. In non-western societies the house is considered more of a shelter than a place to hide fr om nature, since they consider the land itself as home. Simonds sees a dwelling as a surr ogate body, an intermediary between the macrocosmic earth body and the microcosmic human body. The forms of his dwellings have evolved over the years gradually introducing the human figure and are often reminiscent of a breast or belly, the references being to dampness, nourishment and the womb, and sometimes phallic forms. simonds expressed his interest and idea of a dwelling when he said:-

> 'I am interested in the point at which a home becomes part of the conscious behaviour, a reflection of the mind of the owner, as opposed to being a simple shell or nest'. [3]

The colours, red symbolizing flesh, and grey symbolizing architecture or rock, are

also an important part of his work.

'The colour of the clay is important, but not pragmatic The red has a thousand moments. It's extraordinary for its fleshiness. For me its association with the body is inescapable. The grey suggests stone, blocks or rocks. It all has to do with how you use the clay, the history of what you remember it having being.' (4)

More important to Simonds than the permanence of his str uctures is the activity of making art for the street. The interaction between his dwellings, the life and decay of the city, the reaction and even participation of his audience, the creation of forms that are eventually altered by the environment are of greater importance to him than the disintegration of his work. The factors of chance and time and the phenomena of nature and the elements become integral parts of sculptural process. Most of the clays he uses are recycled from earlier street sculptures that have either disintegrated or are left over from installations.

Of the three groups of Little People, the spiral People are closest to our own civilization, because they believe in a world entir ely created by their own wills, in which nature's realities are of little concern; they abuse their natural resources, consume material goods and build higher and higher upward. Simonds's Little People uphold the Dogon belief that no matter what the size, the house is a small city and the city is a large house and both reflect the attitude of people toward the world. The Little People's dwellings also portray their history and community life, so each goes through a birth, life, death cycle before the eyes of spectators. Simonds's work

raises for his street audiences a political consciousness; partly by re-instating a sense of their past he allows them to identify their own places within the city, and to consider moulding their own futures. The message of the Little People seems to be that if they can build, survive, and live out their culture in such hostile surroundings so can we in ours.

In **Dwelling Long Island** New York 1975, the comparison between our dwellings and the Little People's, in how they r elate to their environment, is made clear. The Little People's dwellings cling to the landscape, while the city dwellings seem at random, tall with short, large impressions on the surface of the landscape.

simonds has often through the years been involved with community groups. Between 1973-1975 Simonds worked with the Lower East Side coalition for Human Housing in New york on a variety of community development projects. In 1973, simonds began working with the residents of the area on the creation of a space, both sculptural and playground, in a vacant lot which he called **Uphill-La Placita** which was really a small corner of vacant area of a housing complex. In Cleveland Ohio, in 1977 Simonds worked with r esidents of the Erie Squar e housing project to make a garden, ritual place, sculpture and community park. Both adults and children participated in the project. In a proposal for the **Stanley Tankel Memorial Hanging Gardens**, Simonds suggested that two abandoned high rise buildings should not be torn down at great expense but should instead be turned into hanging gardens, giving life where there was none and growth where there was decay and enhancing the natural recreation area. The reliance of society on nature and the metaphor of

architecture as life-giving was expressed in **Growth House (1975).** Planned as a seasonally renewable dwelling, **Growth House** was partially constructed in Artpark New York from large earth bricks filled with a variety of seeds. It consisted of a circular double wall enclosing a belly-like dome. Beginning as a closed dwelling place for winter, gradually destroyed in spring by the plants and producing food in summer, the circle would then end in harvested devastation. New bricks were to be made from what remained of the first **Growth House.** The earthen centre acted as a cosmological, biological clock. It sheltered seeds, nurturing them to growth, in the process destroying the house as mother. The idea was based on the cyclical rituals of the Little People. Simonds called his Growth House hermaphroditic because it combined construction, a male principle here with growth, a female principle.

Simonds sees no separation between his social work, which suggests environmental improvements, and his art which is his fantasy dwellings. Through his various projects and other work Simonds expresses a sense of place, how people live with it and what they believe about it. In a sense his art plays a part similar to that of religion in that it tells a story, animates minds and allows imaginative participation. His work has brought art to people, into everyday life through its participation in social situations. Simonds has stated:

'I've always thought of my work as trans-social transpolitical, transexual and transparental'. (5)

He believes in the possibilities of art in helping to create and promote a holistic

transformation of the world and that myth and modern science could both play an important part in this.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER 3

(1) GRANDE, John, K., **Balance Art and Nature,** Canada, Blackrose Books, 1994, p. 34.

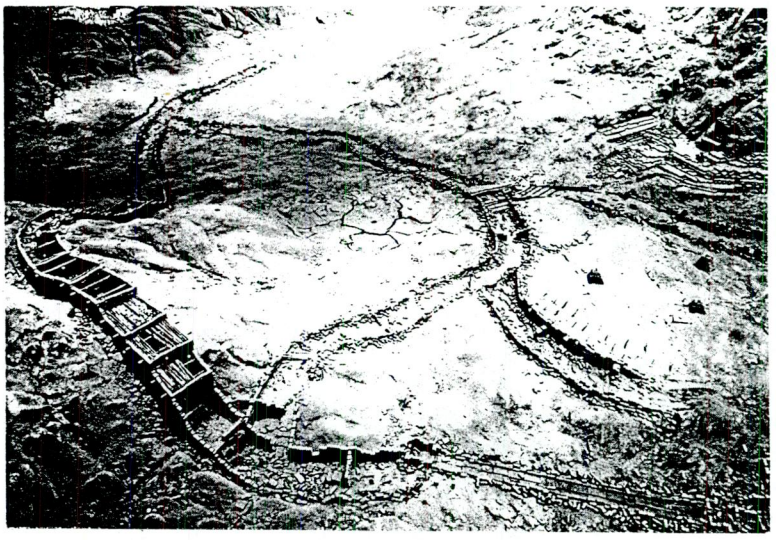
(2) NEFF, J.H., **Charles Simonds;** Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1982, p.18.

(3) FUNDACIO 'LA CAIXA', **Charles Simonds**, Barcelona, Fundació 'La Caixa', 1994, p. 129.

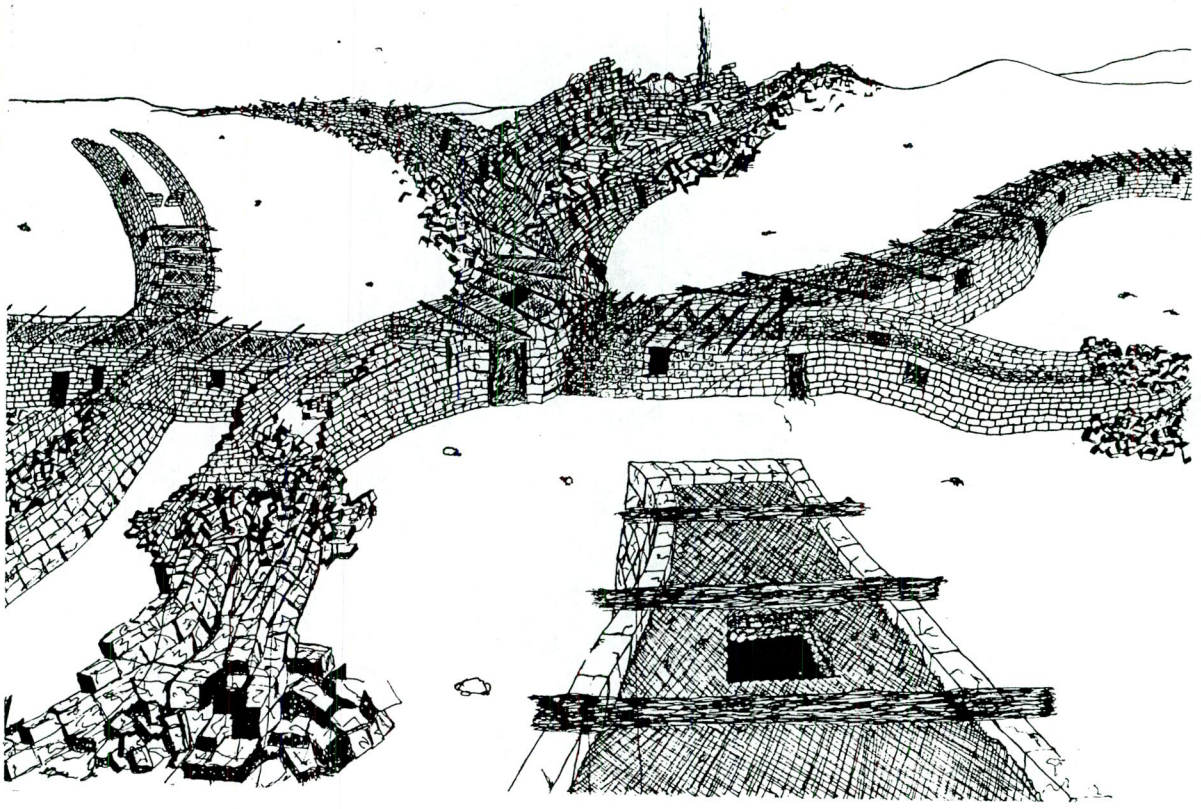
(4) FUNDACIO 'LA CAIXA', **Charles Simonds,** Barcelona, Fundació 'La Caixa', 1994, p. 129.

(5) NEFF, J.H. **Charles Simonds**; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1982 p.19.

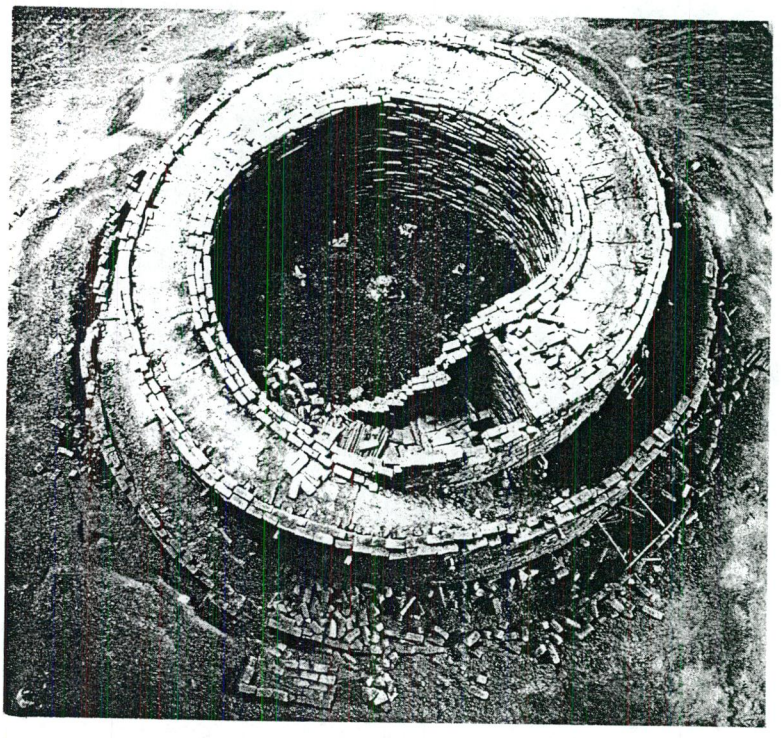
3.1



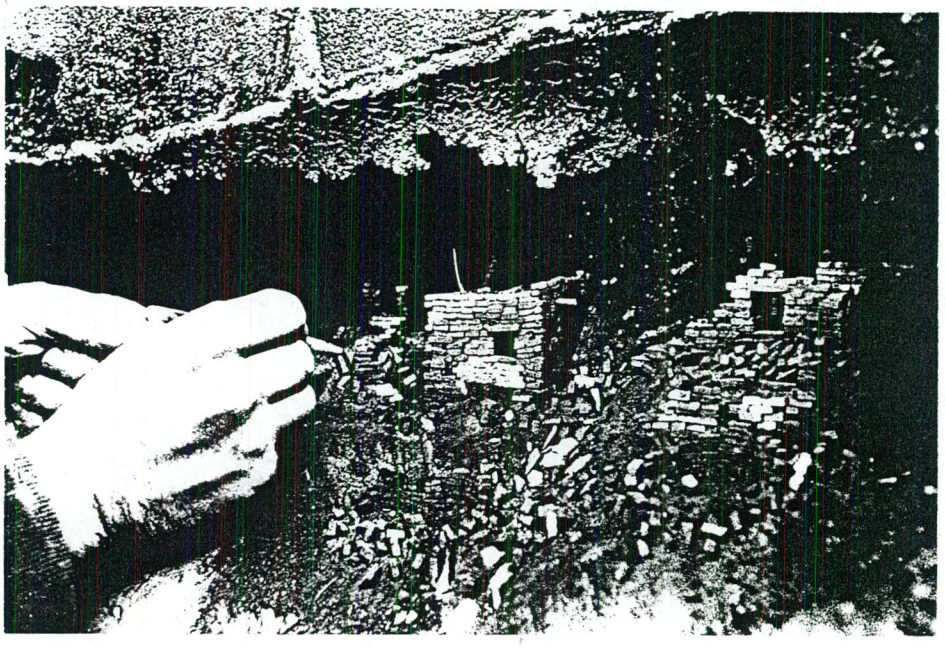
3.2



3.3



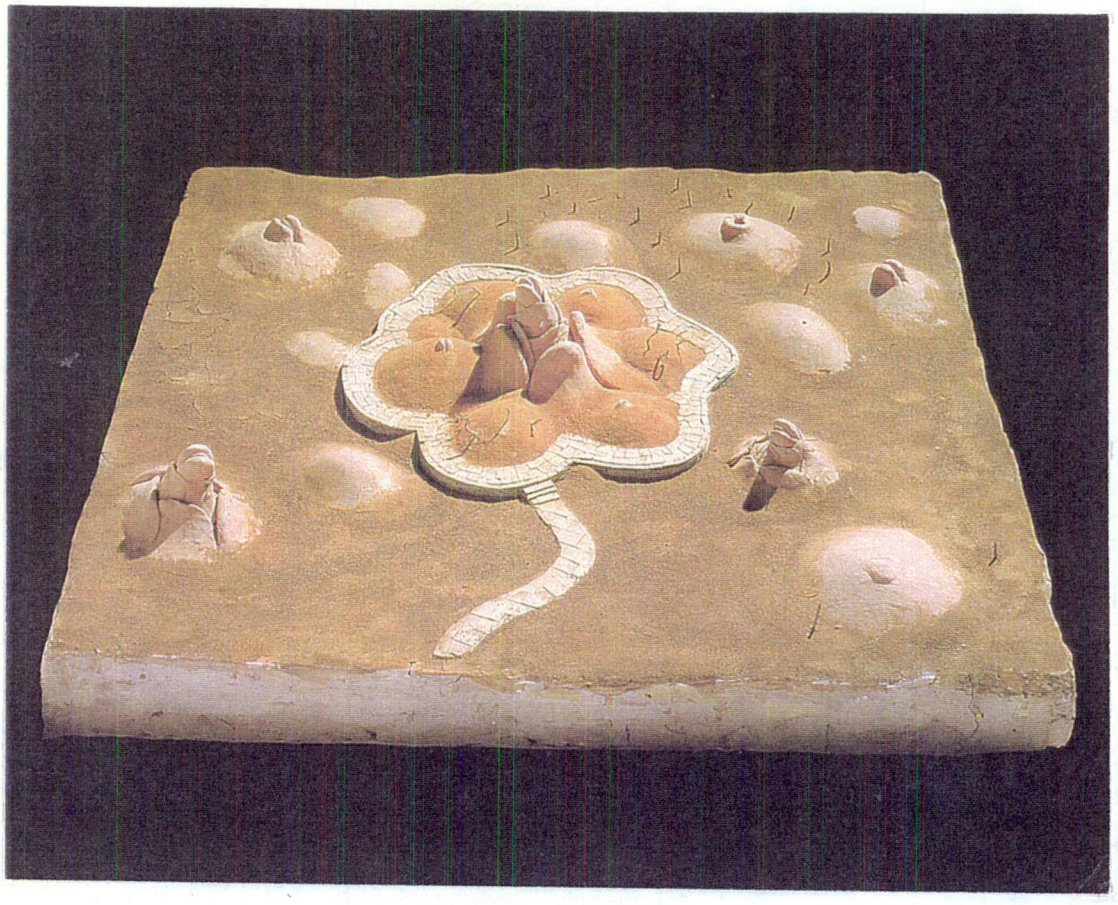
3·4



3·5

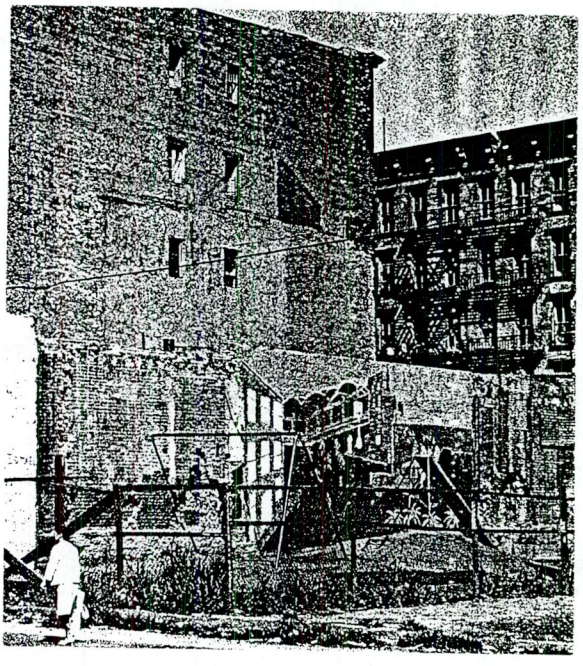
3.7

3.6

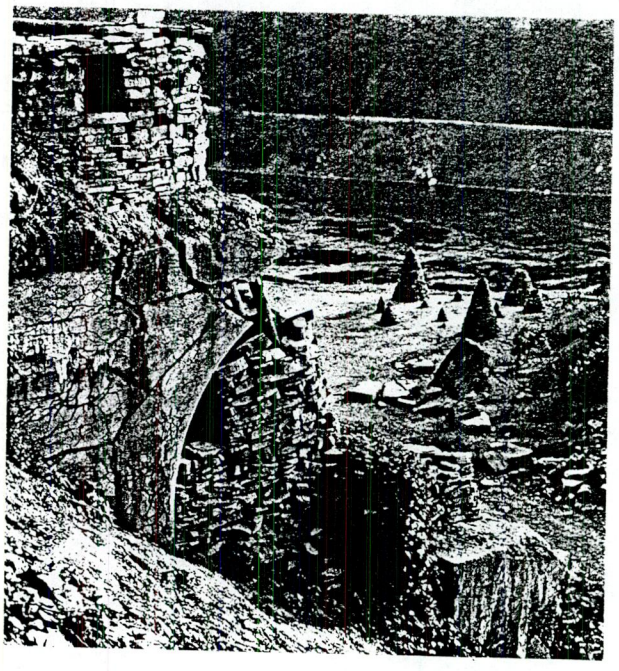


3·8

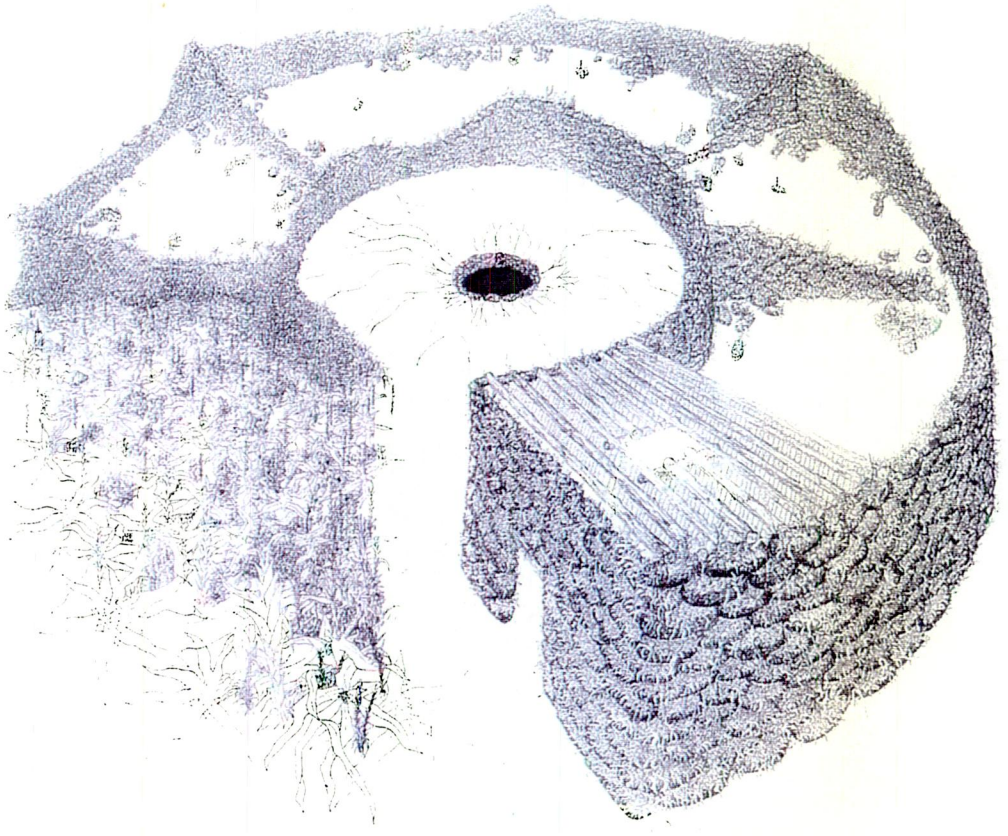
3.9



3.10



3.11



9. Drawing for 'Growth House', 1975

— CONCLUSION —

In this thesis I have attempted to discuss how man has worked and could work with nature. I have not focused in depth on the work of any one individual, but prefered instead to use what I considered to be important symbolic examples displaying mans relationship to the earth. In chapter one I have tried to express the symbolic importance of the dwelling. The twentieth century has seen technological advances in architecture unimaginable in the past but, as I have endeavoured to show in chapter two, it has also seen the loss of the accumulated knowledge of generations, and the demise of many building traditions.

The feasibility of construction in unbaked earth is, I believe, demonstrated in the dwellings of Hassan Fathy and non-western civilizations, which have progressed from ancient knowledge and survived through the centuries to the present day. In his book Architecture without Architects, which is really an exhibition of the work of anonymous builders, Bernard Rodofsky says that architects and their patrons have,

> 'obscured the talents and achievements of the anonymous builders, men whose concepts sometimes verge on the utopian, whose esthetics approach the sublime, the beauty of this architecture has long been dismissed as accidental, but today we should be able to recognise it as the result of rare good sense in the handling of practical problems. The shapes of the houses, sometimes transmitted through a hundred generations, seem eternally valid like those of their tools'.

The environment is not something which we have inherited and now own, it is something which we bequeath to our children. A major challenge of a new architecture could be that it combines the knowledge of the past with the present, and so would still be distinctly contemporary. Gaudi, in my opinion, is an architect who has succeeded in combining traditional aspects of building and contemporary design while still being responsive to the environment. Gaudi imitated in the surfaces of his buildings the texture of local rock formations so that his organic buildings would fit naturally into the landscape. He was innovative in his use of colour, pattern, form and structure, elements which I feel are sorely absent from most contemporary architectural design. The parabola appealed to Gaudi because it was largely unknown as an architectural element. What interested him in paraboloids was that they are ruled surfaces which can be easily reinforced by straight steel rods. Gaudi used the Catalon vaulting method extensively in his work. The columns of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia resemble trees not only because of the form, but by the rough stone texture which looks like the bark of a tree. His wonderful organic

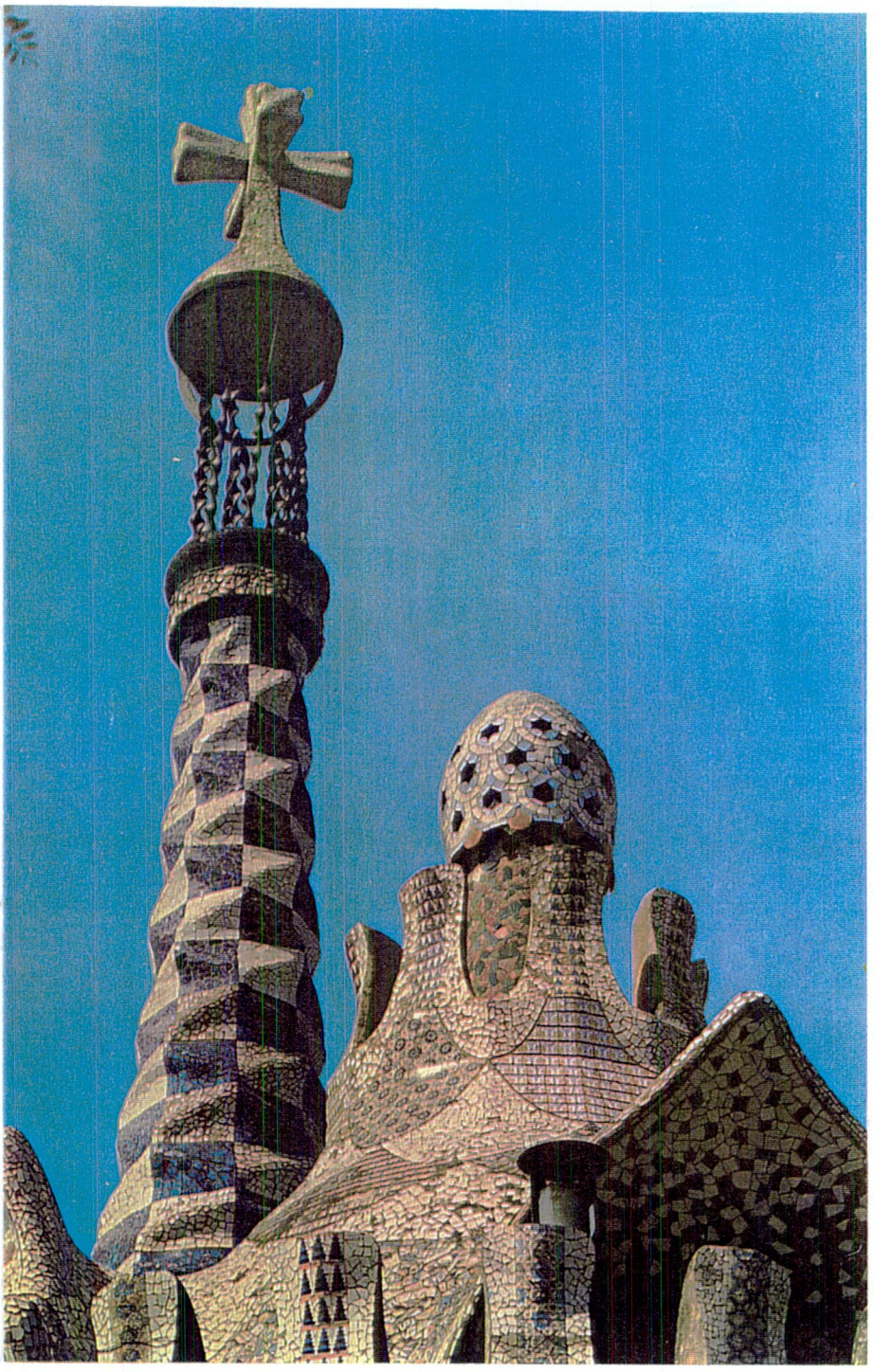
architecture brings to mind through all its curves and flowing forms, growth in nature. All design should, I believe, take into consideration the many features of the landscape and nature in both urban and rural areas, and so be responsive to its site, promoting a more holistic, ecological view of the environment.

In my final chapter I have examined the importance of the interactive capacity of art. It seems to me that the fusion of talents from both the artist and the architect could result in an holistic, yet experiential architecture. Buildings are meant to be functional, but architecture is also about providing the artistic enhancement of the community. Artists can help improve the social environment we live in by creating public participatory projects, helping to define our relation to space and time within a cultural context, like the projects Charles Simonds initiated in New York in 1974. His work communicates, at least to me, the important role that art can play in guiding our society towards a regenerative, intuitive vision of the world around us. All architecture should attempt to bridge the ever growing gap between the earth, nature and man.

Fig. 1

Gaudí, Sagrada Familia

Gaudí, Finca Güell. Roof.



Gaudí, Pavillon Cupola

— BIBLIOGRAPHY —

ANDERSON, R.L. **Art in Primitive Societies.** Prentice & Hall, 1979.

ALPERSON, Philip, T**he Philosophy of the Visual Arts,** U.S.A., Oxford University Press, 1992.

BLASER, Robin, DUNHAM, Robert, **Art & Reality a Case Book of Concern,** Vancouver, Taton Books, 1986.

CURTIS, William, J.R. **Modern Architecture Since 1900,** England, Phaidon Press Ltd., 1982.

COOTE, Jeromy, SHENTON, Anthony, **Anthropology Art and Aesthetics,** U.S.A. Oxford University Press, 1992.

CONTI, Flavio **Architecture as Environment,** Cassell, 1979.

DEVALL, Bill, SESSIONS, Geroge, **Deep Ecology,** U.S.A. Gibbs M. Smith Inc. Utah, 1985.

DIETER, Hans, **Landscape as Inspiration,** London, The Academy Group Ltd., 1994.

DETHIER, Jean, **Down to Earth: Mud Architecture an Old Idea, a New Future,** London Thames & Hudson, 1982.

GRANDE, John K. **Balance: Art & Nature,** Canada, Black Rose Books, 1994.

GIUDONI, **Enrico Primitive Architecture,** London, Faber & Faber, 1987.

HELLMAN, Louis, **Architecture for Beginners,** New York, Writers & Readers, 1988.

JOPLING, Carol F. **Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies, A Critical Anthology,** New York. E.P. Dutton, 1971.

JELLICO, Geoffery & Susan, **The Landscape of Man Shaping the Environment from Prehistory to Present Day**, London, Thames & Hudson, 1975.

JUNG, Carl, **Man and His Symbols**, London, Aldus Books, 1979.

KNEVITT, Charles, **Space on Earth,** Methuen, 1985.

LAYTON, Robert, **The Anthropology of Art 2nd Edition.,** U.S.A. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

LEECH, Paul, **Discussion at Design Yard**, Dublin, GAIA International, Oct. 1995.

MARTIN, Agustine, **Tintern Abbey** by William Wordsworth, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan and Educational Company, 1969.

MORRIS, Desmond, **The Human Zoo,** Walker Books, 1991.

MICHELL, John, **The Earth Spirit**, London, Thames & Hudson.

OLIVER, Paul, **Shelter Sign & Symbol,** London, Barrie & Jenkins Ltd., 1975.

OLIVER, Paul, **Shelter & Society,** London, Barry & Rockcliff the Cresset, 1969.

OLIVER, Paul, **Dwellings The House Across the World**, England, Phaidon Press, 1987.

RHODES, Colin, **Primitivism and Modern Art,** London, Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1994.

RUDOFSKY, Bernard, **Architecture Without Architects,** London, Academy Editions, 1964.

SONFIST, Alan, **Art in the Land a Critical Anthology of Environment Art,** 1983.

SALIM, Kemal, **Landscape Natural Beauty and the Arts,** Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

STRAUSS, Claude, Levi. **The Savage Mind,** London, George & Nicholson, 1974.

WREDE, Stuart, ADAMS, Howard, William **Landscape Architecture, Denatured**

Visions, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1994.

— CATALOGUES AND MAGAZINES —

FUNDACIO "LA CAIXA", **Charles Simonds,** Barcelona, Fundació 'La Caixa', 1994.

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, **Charles Simonds,** Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1982.

SPIRN WHISTON, Anne, Landscape Architecture, Vol. 80, No. 8, 1990.

STEELE, James, **Architectural Design, The New Traditionalist;** Vol. 59, No. 11-12, 1989.