

BOOK REVIEWS

ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE

Earth to Spirit

David Pearson

Gaia Books, £11.99

THIS beautifully illustrated book argues that, in order to recover more of our humanity, we need to reintegrate our built structures with the natural environment.

David Pearson travelled extensively to capture traditional forms of habitations, to focus his camera on themes ranging from "ancestral archetypes" to "vernacular wisdom". Our search for cultural identity will respond to "healing architecture" and other designs that are sympathetic to both the natural habitat and the human condition, argues the author.

That we should return to our ancestral roots to derive a deeper understanding of the principles that shaped primitive structures is sensible. Our ancestors had a sense of time and place; so, naturally, their homes were landscaped into the environment, in "forms that linked earth to spirit".

MODERN styles of architecture are dismissed in scathing terms. The analysis, unfortunately, does not take us far. If we are to turn individual aspirations into reforms on a social scale, we need to know why much of our urban environment is "built out of the exploitation of the world's scarce resources, and/or polluting air, water, and land with their toxic wastes". This is description, not explanation.

Here we bump against a problem in much of the thinking of environmentalists. People who are worried that we have an ecological crisis on our hands tend not to penetrate to the source of the problem; they associate the problems

with industrial society, and presume that industrialism itself has caused the problems.

In fact, people have generated environmental crises for 3,000 years. What do these crises have in common? If ecologists penetrated the heart of the problem, they could define more precise solutions than those currently being canvassed. And the answers would also make it easier for architects to deliver designs that are sympathetic to human scale and spirit.

For example, Pearson urges the need for energy efficiency. He won't succeed in helping us to formulate general strategies for building energy efficiency into our designs, if he limits his analysis to the level of slogans. Of course we need energy efficiency: but why are we encouraged to waste energy? Industrialists are meticulous about their costings: they abhor waste - so why is energy wasted?

The answers are straightforward. The problem starts when one group in society comes to monopolise natural resources, a control that leads to its enrichment even as the general population, and the environment, is abused. Then, the problem is aggravated because society cannot effectively police the use of natural resources. The most effective method for policing the use of the environment is to make people pay for the benefits they receive. But the landowners have traditionally avoided that obligation: hence, the rot set in!

This kind of analysis tends to escape environmentalists. The result, in the case of architecture,

is that we are left with designs that are eccentric: self-indulgent examples of structures that the owners could afford to please themselves. But there is no generalised shift in this direction, because the obstacles are systemic, and therefore too great for most of us to overcome.

In our society, those obstacles are measured by the price of land. In Britain, today, the self-build sector of the residential market is suffering because people cannot afford to buy land at current prices. Eliminate that problem, and we could all devote more time and energy to thinking about aesthetically pleasing homes in which to live.

SOME architects do understand the connection between the land market/prices and the impact on architecture. One was Frank Lloyd Wright, whose work is included in Pearson's book. Wright accepted and advocated the economics in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, a book, alas, that is not on the reading lists of the academies that teach architecture.

A contemporary chronicler of architecture/town planning is Colin Ward, who in his recent *New Town, Home Town* (Caloust Gulbenkian Foundation, 1993) acknowledges that the land market seriously distorts our freedom to develop decent living environments. His book traces the history of the garden city in England - a concept developed by Ebenezer Howard, who was also influenced by Henry George. Ward briefly reviews the economic principles that would yield a qualitatively new society; one that met the aspirations of environmentalists.

David Pearson is to be congratulated on his book. But he now needs to acquire a telescopic lens so that he can focus on the processes that would liberate us all from exploitation.

PETER POOLE

DOUBLE ISSUE