

# WHAT HAS IT GOT TO DO WITH ARCHITECTURE?

A PERSONAL VIEW BY JIM LEWIS

In November 1970 there occurred in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) the most colossal natural disaster the world has known since the annihilation of Atlantis. Half a million people lost their lives and millions have lost their homes and livelihoods. A few months before, Peru suffered earthquakes which set off huge mountain landslides in which whole towns and villages disappeared with their inhabitants, and since then there have been earthquakes in Nicaragua and Mexico, floods in West Pakistan and USA, drought in the Sahara and Ethiopia .....

A medium hurricane releases as much condensation heat energy in a day as the nuclear fusion energy of 400 twenty megaton hydrogen bombs, and the effect of these colossal forces on the human beings who die and those who are left alive to suffer the aftermath leave all of man's achievements to pale into insignificance. Achievements such as those which take him out of this world to the moon and achievements (can they still be called achievements?) in war which call for resources of planning and co-ordination of mobilization and logistic skills. Why then does it take so long to get relief assistance to stricken areas? Why when it does arrive do so many mistakes occur; blankets to the tropics, pork to Muslims, DDT powder taken for dried milk, and why are helicopters immediately available for news cameramen, but not for the distribution of food. Why was not adequate warning given in East Pakistan when the approaching cyclone was hovering in the Indian Ocean? Why does the overland expedition to the stricken coastal town in Peru arrive only to find that rescue has been carried out from the sea by a different relief force - wasted duplication of effort which should have been usefully directed. Is there not still a great deal to be done and do we have our priorities in the right order?

In 1970 it was the television screens in Hong Kong that showed me the outstretched hands of Pakistan imploring the cameramen in helicopters for food. Without the cameramen and pilots the world would have known less quickly about their plight but the irony was inescapable. Was not this the kind of co-ordination prob-

lem to which perhaps I had something to offer? Hong Kong also supplied experience of the worst typhoon there for ten years - ten years which I had spent in a co-ordinating capacity on three major construction projects in three different countries. Could at least my energies be put to better use? What was really worthwhile about shipping bricks half way around the world to a place which had excellent stone and masonry traditions, to satisfy an egotist whim? Why so much energy in arguing with one's own colleagues in interminable and grossly inefficient site meetings? Why do buildings express more of their architect than of their user? - usually with such self conscious results, rarely conscious and often completely out for whatever count. Can building still be the expression of a civilization any more? What do these architects contribute - monuments to themselves? Certainly not the entire profession - schools, universities, hospitals, housing, new towns - but there were questions there of the same and of different kinds and quite inadequate satisfactions.

So it is obviously a time for changing course and for taking the path 'less trodden by'. But, if planning had been less 'town and country' and more 'regional' and if 'ecology' had got going fifteen years ago perhaps they could have provided more satisfying answers. Perhaps the teaching system in the schools is at fault. Where does all that arrogance and egotism and self interest come from and where is the will to serve, but more sadly why given any training, is it so difficult to lay it aside to do something else or to re-write one's own label. Why could not the glorious practical logic that good design and construction epitomises be used in other ways. Why could not training developed over centuries in problem analysis, synthesis and administrative communication be diverted and exploited in other fields. Could it not be possible to combine this training and experience, travel in over thirty countries and distinction in earlier studies, regrettably long since dropped (the 'system' again) to produce an activity which seemed to hold the answers to so much of the job specification parameters I had set myself.

So 1970 produced the climate and the idea. In the three years since then the idea has moved and developed considerably as contacts have been

made and thoughts have been explored and studied. An even greater priority than relief co-ordination emerged in studies towards the pre-planning for disaster emergency. Here was an area where virtually nothing at all had been produced on ways in which to prepare in order to mitigate as far as possible the effect of disaster. The USA had done a lot for disasters within that country, but energy was lacking, 'Acts of God' went unchallenged even though 'God helps those who help themselves'! And although one or two international agencies are interested they are unable to spend their funds except for the purpose for which they are given, and most are given after-the-event for relief. It appears now that I may have gone some little way in filling a gap by producing a paper which describes a working method for pre-planning. The study has taken me to Washington, New York (the UN building is a very exciting place to be part of for two hours!) and Geneva and so far has been entirely unsponsored except by those who have facilitated the resurrection of a freelance practice.

The paper has been well received and there are now great hopes of consultancy assignments with two leading world organisations and of a University Senior Research Fellowship.

There is so much more to be done. Whilst there is work being undertaken by seismologists on the possible forecasting of earthquakes, by engineers on earthquake resisting structures, by architects and designers on temporary shelters, and by sociologists on the psychological effect of disaster and community response, there is no one organisation co-ordinating or monitoring this work and no organisation to provide a pre-planning service based on the results of research. Yet there is a wealth of material and as every man, woman and child knows, an ongoing series of catastrophes to combat and to mitigate.

An American commercial used to say 'Have you switched yet?' Well, I have tried and may succeed. What do you need to do it? The unfaltering support of a wife (our house and family have been enlarged during the same time) and at least one or two friends to believe in what you are doing because many will not, and above all the patience to attempt to answer all those who will ask 'What has it got to do with architecture'.