

## a locus of localism.

Fulcrum spoke to the founders of the AA's Community Cluster, whose first public event begins today.

**Fulcrum:** *What is the "Community Cluster"?*

**Clementine Blakemore:** Essentially it's a platform for people who are interested in a more socially engaged architecture, whether relating to local communities, resources, or materials. We were interested in starting some sort of group, and came to realise a lot of work in this area was already going on in the school – through units, or completely outside of the school, or through research clusters. We wanted to bring it all together in order to better understand it.

**F:** *What do you hope to achieve?*

**CB:** We are going to begin with a series of lectures, the first of which features the young Norwegian architects *TYIN*, then there will be an open discussion as part of open week [Feb 8] where students who have been involved in small-scale design & build projects are going to share their work. It's a kind of peer-to-peer discussion... student-to-student. Eventually the ambition is to initiate our own projects, allowing students to use the cluster as a means to raise funds for their own work. We've already got a project in the works for next year located in India and we'll be raising funds for that over the next few months. It's really talking *and* doing as the ultimate aim.

**F:** *You must have strong views about participation in architecture.*

**Sophie Ramsbotham:** Yes, it's something Alex and I have been exploring through our Berwick Street stall this year. There's a large redevelopment of the market in progress, and it's coming from a very top-down approach. So we are using this stall as a means to start a discussion and work with the communities there to build a bottom-up proposal.

**Alexander Furones:** We have been working on how to use the existing knowledge *around the site* for the future of *the site*. There's so many inter-

## THE ROOM WITH CURVED WALLS, 33 BEDFORD SQUARE.

esting and amazing people there, the potential in working together with the existing community is really strong. Normally there is one architect who pushes one design, which makes the conversation about possibilities very poor, we are trying to reverse that.

**SR:** Architects aren't generally trained to work with the people – they are trained at the drawing board, in the studio and at their homes. In a way Community Clusters hopes to get architecture students accustomed and involved to working with local groups.

**AF:** Through this you can create something really meaningful and appropriate for a place.

**SR:** I think Alex's Philippines project is a beautiful example of that.

**F:** *What's that?*

**AF:** Last year we built a school in a slum community. It was for street children who had dropped out of the school system and involved their parents developing the school for their own kids. The mothers and the children mostly designed it, and the fathers then built it. The fathers gained experience, got a steady job, built something for their kids, and raised their employability (there's a lot of prejudice about the slum dwellers, so they get stuck in this circle: parents can't afford school, often barely food; the kids drop out and then can't get good jobs, which is why they end up remaining in the slum). Our role as architects was to enable a design and construction process so local people got exactly what they wanted, and were the source of change in their own environment. That said, the architect was a role that was still quite present.

**F:** *Do you think the contemporary role of the architect in modern, especially Western, societies is one that avoids social responsibility?*

**AF:** Absolutely. But we can't also forget the people who are using the buildings we architects design. Architecture is really only complete once it's built, and its success depends a great deal on who lives in it and takes responsibility for it. The rhetoric about environmental sustainability doesn't hold up unless the people using a building take an interest in its systems, and the principles behind them. So

you kind of need to start with the social aspect of architecture.

**SR:** How can a design intent keep its meaning past the moment when the architect hands over the keys? If the people who will ultimately use the building are the same as those who had a hand in its creation then the building becomes much more charged, and is likely to be well-cared for and respected for a much longer period of time.

**F:** *This isn't a mainstream attitude about the architect, who is generally still conceived of as an old white guy with rolled-up sleeves drawing barnaplan sketches. This seems like a complete inversion of that image.*

**CB:** It's really the architect-as-facilitator, who as it were *designs the design process*.

**AF:** But the architect doesn't lose the control of the design, they're not giving up the design role.

**CB:** I think your question raises the idea of what it means to operate in this way in London, as opposed to what it means to work in this way in the Philippines. It's unlikely you're going to meet someone in Berwick Street who can actually build – certainly not in anywhere near the same way the fathers in a slum community might do. And yet we're keen for what we're doing to be relevant to the West. People often assume these projects are always in the developing world, that these ideas aren't really applicable to contemporary cities, but we mean to show they can be.

**SR:** I think it's creating the space for people to express themselves. The market stall was in a very literal sense a physical platform for that purpose.

**F:** *I can't help but compare this approach to something like Wikipedia, where you're only providing a platform for a crowd-sourced public participation that constantly edits and evolves a particular project. Do you think this way of working is the way in which society in general is moving?*

**AF:** Well, let me tell you about the Localism Bill, which was recently passed in November. It says local communities now have the right to plan their own suburbs. They can establish their own neighbourhood forum and they can assign an architect or a de-

signer – whoever they decide as a community they want to work with – and together they can write a development proposal within the guidelines and goals that the council has for the area. It will, and should be, implemented.

**SR:** It's at a very interesting stage at the moment. It won't come into effect until in April, so this is a testing stage – and they've already certified 125 projects in the UK.

**CB:** It's not only about building and designing, it's about councils having control over how they spend money, and how people within that council have a role in that. Essentially decentralisation of government power.

**AF:** But it means that affects the architecture.

**F:** *This must be linked to the recession in some way.*

**CB:** And a right-wing government to a certain extent. It's not apolitical.

**F:** *I've been very aware recently of the debates going on over freedom on the Internet – and it seems that (mostly) Western societies are going through an intense period of transition, where the types of hierarchies that were prevalent in the twentieth century are being overturned in favour of dispersed or distributive networks without leaders. Or perhaps, with multiple leaders. One could even look at this in terms of global super powers. Within our own field I think it's very interesting the way the hierarchical models established by the Modernists are being equally overturned. How might you see your role within that? That is, how you are challenging the role of the architect in today's society?*

**CB:** I agree that the way information is distributed has certainly changed drastically in the last 20 years, but it also has something to do with the distinctions between disciplines becoming a little looser. Although the AA is known as a school that is keen to engage in interdisciplinary discussions, ultimately the term 'Architect' is still a very protected title. The type of collaborative architectural model that we are proposing has been happening here for some time, and the aim of the Community Cluster is really to visualise and vocalise this shift.

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