

**J.H. PRYNNE : A BRIEF COMMENT ON 'HARMONY' IN ARCHITECTURE  
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The Xi'an International Conference of Architecture and Technology is currently (September, 2006) being held at Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, P.R. China with the topic of 'Architecture in Harmony.' The background to this topic assumes to a greater or lesser extent a stable signification for this concept of *harmony*, even within a range of possible uses and senses of the term. It seems to have been allowed to assume a central, directive conceptual status as a focus for many issues in which it seems to play a decisive role. As a principle of method, major concepts should always be challenged by fundamental analysis, pursued without regard for assumed values or loyalties. 'Harmony' is certainly an influential idea that should be challenged, because many arguments that should be recognised as open and undecided will seem settled and clear through the application of its apparent force.

Some points can be advanced for confrontation at the start. The first point is that, if we exclude humanity, *harmony* is not part of nature. It can have no meaning to say that one tree is in harmony with another, or that summer is in harmony with winter, unless the meaning is man-made. Nor should we be ready to believe that if we use modern terms like 'environment' or 'eco-system' we are any closer to harmony as a principle of natural function. If we claim that nature operates within balances then this observes only that processes have normal functional parameters depending on constraints and limits, mostly of a material kind. We cannot invest such continuities and ruptures of process in nature with any kind of meaning or value unless we clearly recognise that such investment is man-made, not produced by nature or by some imaginary controlling spirit. To invoke spirits is the merest superstitious animism, and when this is done in a sophisticated human context it always conceals other motives, as if to protect them from rational analysis.

Such opinions are likely to provoke disagreement; that is the intention here. Let us consider some ancient traditional versions of the claims made about *harmony*. It is a deep feature of the Chinese world-view that man should live in harmony with nature. Now, this belief, which is of course invented by man, brings into man's concept of nature the apparently unifying concept of a potentially stable and meaningful relation between man and nature that is the way of harmony. The ancient sages and poets made claims like this. And yet because man is not a natural part of nature, the very attempt to mend the break and return to a 'natural' way must reveal that the break is fundamental and cannot be reversed. That we can try to return to nature, or wish to do so, reveals that it cannot be done.

Why then did the ancient sages and poets wish to do it? By this analysis, there must be other motives, which are concealed from clear analysis. We know, of course, that those who imagined and cherished these ideas belonged to a privileged, leisure class. because they did not have to struggle at a basic level for daily life, they could dream of a sweet balance with

nature; such conceptions represent the result of surplus value, transferred into a commodity given aesthetic (or spiritual) status by the displacement of desire. We should not be deceived by the idealised poverty of the recluse in ancient times: there was never a serious shortage of lunch.

What is being concealed by these habits of idealisation? Simply, the class advantage that produces and supports this underlying remission of hard work in the enjoyment of daily life. The leisure is produced by ensuring that the supportive work required to produce lunch is done by others, who lack the refinement to cultivate these ideals of harmony because they are excluded by class barriers: they are not gentry, not literati, not educated, not rich. At root, the division between man and nature is indicated by a stratified money economy, and harmony is reserved for those who can afford it. Harmony is not a principle of nature, it is a function of money, and all further discussion should begin here.

Does this mean that harmony in architecture is a false idea? Not necessarily so; but it does for sure mean that it cannot, may not, be assumed as a fundamental regulatory principle. This is because in most cases its use in argument and in decision-making discriminates in favour of a money-owning class: it is anti-democratic and resists the basic imperatives of social justice. Of course we must recognise that ideas like *democracy* and *social justice* must also be fully analysed before they can be put to productive use. But these terms at least have the advantage that they are an active part of the continuing argument about values and principles in human social function, whereas *harmony* is either a coded term for other implicit claims, or it is aesthetic and inert, a token of middle-class self-satisfaction.

Why is the pursuit of harmony, in architecture and many other forms of reified social structure, obstructive to the fuller realisation of social justice? Consider for a moment the current population distribution in modern China. The picture is changing very fast, but the large majority live in the impoverished countryside or in impoverished sectors of new urban China. They are getting poorer, as the rich are getting richer. Few of the benefits supposed to arise from the search for harmony will help them very much. Some projects, such as improved quality of rural water supply or better transport connections to market outlets, can improve rural life-styles; but it is fanciful to group such developments under the heading of 'harmony', just because it is a fashionable idea.

We can see clearly the distortion of social equity and fair distribution of benefit from China's new economic growth, in the rapid development of heritage conservation projects and the 'sensitive' renewal of prestige urban sites. Most of this work, however supposedly justified by a concern to maintain historical traditions and continuities, is overtly driven by the expanding tourist economy. Conservation town planning is blatantly adjunct to this economy. Where do the advantages flow, almost exclusively? Tourists are the classic example of a leisure class, exporting surplus value at beneficial rates of exchange to derive commodity satisfaction from the consumption of spectacle bringing little or no satisfaction to a local populace in any direct way. Some small side-value may be generated by secondary trading activities; but in the large-scale touristic industries such as hotels and transport, what

is the class distribution of benefit?

A new class of business entrepreneur and venture capital partnership is the emerging pattern here. There are large fortunes to be made. It may be imagined that some level of social benefit deriving from these activities will after some time 'trickle down' into lower parts of the class system. Such imagining, of deferred benefit for the future or 'jam tomorrow', has been a familiar feature of attempts to blunt social expectation, just as 'harmony' is nowadays an attempt to sweeten the effect of new urban enclaves visibly reserved for those who can afford to enter them and pay their inflated prices. By creating an old-style courtyard and putting in a lake or two we can produce a 'palace-garden' style of environment; with the clear historical remembrance of social exclusion and lavish over-consumption.

Thus the unquestioned concept of *harmony* can conceal from clear view many implicit reversions to a socially divided social process. Under the name of an apparently harmless aesthetic preference we re-introduce the advantage of money and the surplus value of leisure. Those who service the apparatus of such *harmony*--by for example working in hotels and restaurants--are humiliated by the wearing of meaningless and servile uniforms; while those who work in factories or in rural agriculture see very little harmony directed at them.

There will be many flaws to this argument and exceptions to the claims which it makes. But when there is conflict in determining the resolution of priorities, as there must be and should be, then the terms of argument should acknowledge conflict, and address it, rather than taking a bland view that conflict belongs to the past and that modern technology can resolve all in the name of a sweetly balanced tranquillity. 'Harmony' is the opiate of the modern planning debate, to be used for medicinal purposes only.