



THIS MONTH : REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

At one level, the thing that probably upsets me most about the built environment is litter. Yes, I realise litter doesn't restrict itself to the built environment, but as a by-product of people, its creation is intimately connected with the built environment because that's where we all live and work. I've yet to meet anyone who seriously believes litter is a good thing, but its ubiquity points up the gap from moment to moment between human thought and action.



Why do we have litter? In many cases I am sure littering is nothing more than a blind automatic action. But I often ask myself if those who create litter in the public realm treat their personal environments in the same way? Or if it is a form of critical marking of what they regard as the territory of others.

Many years ago we undertook some research into 'community' buildings and why some succeeded and others didn't. By far the biggest indicator of success was whether or not 'the community' felt a sense of ownership of the facility. I say facility rather than building because

buildings do not exist in isolation from their neighbours and surrounding environment. The creation of successful places is usually more important, and far more difficult, than designing buildings. Sadly, we found no universally guaranteed way of creating that sense of ownership in a community.

The distinction between good buildings and good places, and the greater contribution the latter make to communities, is something that, for half a century, the Civic Trust helped us to recognise. And now, just weeks after its 50th awards ceremony, the Civic Trust is no more, placed into administration because of cashflow problems. How very symbolic of our times.

Architects lucky enough to have been the recipients of a Civic Trust award, realised that in many respects this was a greater acknowledgement of the value of their work than architectural awards.

If we believe that global warming and the huge contribution that buildings make to it is the biggest threat we face at present, then we must be very careful if we hold onto the view that building designers can play a significant role in reducing carbon emissions. Bill Watts, senior partner with the leading services engineering consultancy Max Fordham Consulting Engineers, has been reported as remarking that the biggest step towards improving the environmental performance of nearly all buildings is good management. Not more insulation or photovoltaic assemblies. Just being aware of what you can do with what is available now to make things better - and doing it.

Will we see a reduction in litter as more people realise it is part of the same environmental problem as global warming? Or are we doomed to experience that same duality of attitude in both spheres? How do we engender a sense of ownership of the planet?

Not wishing to end on a downbeat note, because at One 17 we are fundamentally optimistic, I can report one genuinely uplifting development I came across this month. In parts of the world where litter and poor or non-existent sanitation can be truly life threatening, a new product is bringing hope: it is a little plastics bag that functions as a personal, portable loo. Each bag is for single use and contains a lining which breaks down pathogens in human waste, enabling it ultimately (if so wished) to be used as fertiliser. This cheap, simple, convenient innovation, requiring no water to use, could revolutionise – really revolutionise – life in many parts of the world. The product delights in the descriptive name of the Peepoo bag. To find out more visit www.peepoople.com

By the way, it was the brainchild of a Swedish professor of architecture.

