

3 September 2005

Rolling Inspiration

ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS – Spring 2005

Since my last column, I've seen and heard some wonderful things.

The main thrust of this series is to show that sound architectural principals will lead to healthy and beautiful environments that work on many levels.

I've been to Bilbao and Barcelona and Bloemfontein: in Bilbao I saw Santiago Calatrava and Frank Gehry ; in Barcelona it was Antoni Gaudi, and in Bloem I listened to Glen Murcutt. All of these are renowned architects, some still here and others long gone. All attempted to respond to the environments in which they worked, and that is really what one asks of the profession in regard to accessibility.

Even though accessibility is my main theme, I realize that it is partly because it is the most neglected area; like gunning for the loser. It is also paramount that no one cause should have to sacrifice for any other. So even though sustainability and energy efficiency are equally demanding goals, accessibility is just as important.

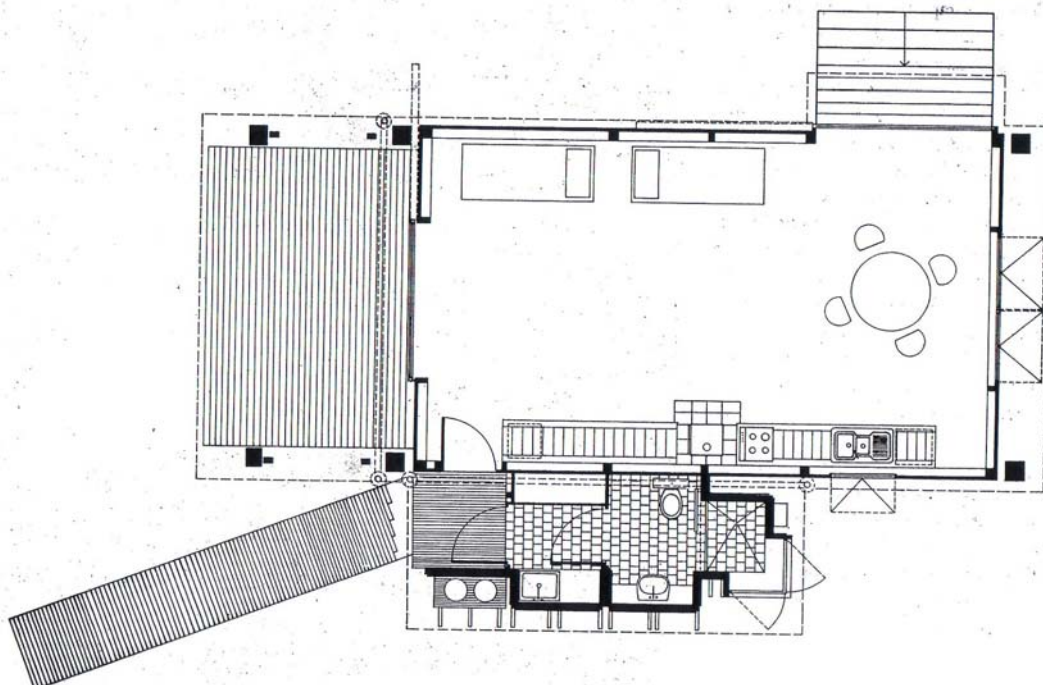
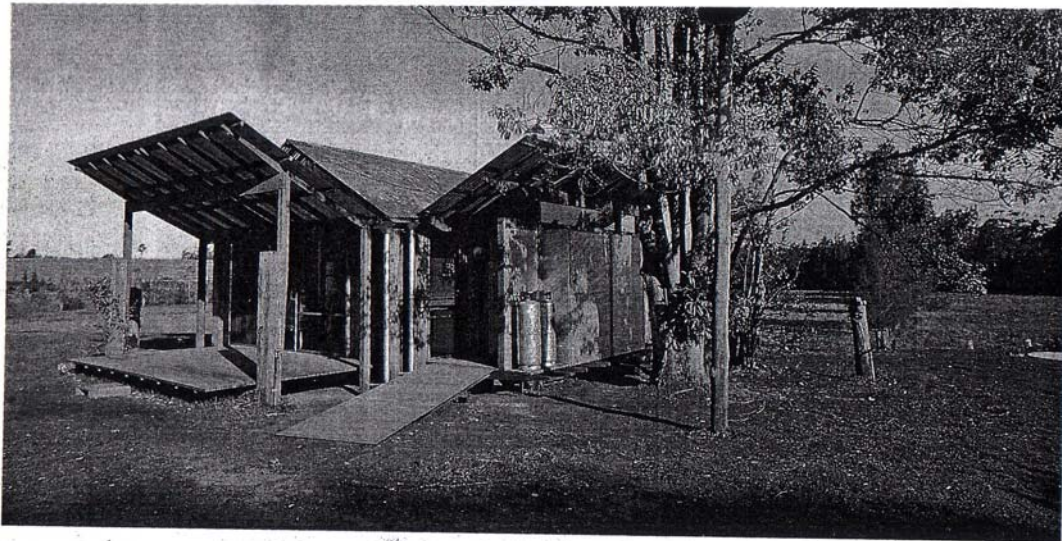
Gaudi and Murcutt both by chance seem to have tackled quite a large body of individual housing in their work, and worked (is working) on their own; so they had more control over each project. They worked 100 years apart.

The Gaudi building that I saw was already 30 years old when he worked on it: Casa Batilo; the owner thought it should be completely demolished, but Gaudi reworked the whole thing (good sustainability principles) and inserted a mezzanine and a loft room, and cut internal courtyards and light wells into it, as well as a lift! It's a delight of good ventilation, wonderful light and aesthetic originality. It still draws crowds. Good environments uplift those who inhabit them. It responds patently to the area in all senses.



Glen Murcutt is doing the same in Australia. He takes meticulous care of the prevailing winds, the sun's angles, and the indigenous planting and generally has many clients in the open countryside, but has done lots of inner city projects too including his own studio/house. His work responds deeply to the actual place and reuses all nature's forces to enhance the internal environments too.

His work is not ostensibly made out of local materials, but uses the traditional principles of layering, penetration of the sun in winter, and sheltering from it in the summer: prospect and refuge.



Now the reason for trying to analyze these things is that it is pointless to concentrate on making or mending buildings to become accessible, if these other basics are not also present. All buildings should be properly spaced, the correct spacing between, the right amount of insulation for draught protection so that the internal spaces are comfortable and not expensive to run, AS WELL AS CONVENIENT. All extra energy needs should be merely top-ups. This applies to the most modest to the high end buildings. In the highend of the market these are called intelligent buildings, and in addition to all the responsible stuff there is now a heavy move to embed high technology systems which are computerized to make the most incredible places which we only used to read about in comics! These systems are low energy users: Murcutt has only ever used airconditioning (high energy user) twice, and the one he still regrets!

Housing is the most fundamental of shelters from the beginning of built environment history, and it remains so. It is not mandatory in South Africa that housing should be accessible; in UK however it has just been included in the revised Part M of their Building Regulations. Housing Authorities like the City of London have bought into it, and do not develop except within the 16 rules of 'lifetime' homes, which are dimensioned ready for access and require the smallest of changes to enable occupation for life for all the houses. Other high profile Authorities are now more amenable to doing the same.

We are a long way in this country from achieving sustainable, energy efficient and accessible housing in the mainstream of the housing sector, for no good reason other than it is perceived as a social more than an environmental issue. If the professionals were used to conceptualize these things, they might work together to achieve our goals.

"Every compromise knowingly done is your next client" Glen Murcutt

Joan Seirlis Pr Arch
universaldesign.co.za