

# Feeling Our Way to Shelter

By Peter Cowman

Something has changed. There's been a shift. I first thought that this change might just be in me, but I've checked around, and other people feel it too. No one can quite put their finger on what it is. Something is different. It's like it's in the air. There is no way to calibrate this sensation, to render it into facts and figures.

The change starts with how we think. Logical reasoning comes to us from the ancient Greeks. This mode of thought has fostered the development of science and technology, and it has shaped the way we see and experience the world. It is the brain's operating system, and it has led us to believe that the brain has a handle on everything, that it is in command and that it is responsible for our survival. However, we are starting to realise that nothing could be further from the truth.

In reality, it is the biological processes within our bodies that actually keep us alive. They carry out this work of keeping us alive with little fuss, night and day, only demanding attention when something goes wrong. We can tune in to these processes within ourselves and actually feel them working. It is through this 'feeling' that we experience our connection to the life of the planet and our own 'aliveness'. Thinking about something like sustainable living really misses the point. We have to feel it. Feeling it is an entirely different experience to thinking about it. If we start looking at sustainable living from the viewpoint of our feeling selves we encounter an entirely new range of responses compared to when we merely think about it. Such feelings are unbiased, which provide us with a remarkable tool in our quest to forge sustainable lives. The trouble is that this is scary. We have to feel how hazardous



photos - Peter Cowman

our situation has become and to endure the panic of not really knowing what to do about it. This touches on our deepest fear – the fear of death – and so it is natural to avoid such feelings whenever we can. When they do surface, the brain is accomplished at repressing them, filtering them out like so much spam, not letting them anywhere near our consciousness.

Human life has become dependent on gaining access to energy supplies. The consequences of the demands that we have placed on the world's resources have now triggered a natural response cycle within the planet. The force of the world's survival response will be sufficient to ensure that natural life prevails. However, if us humans are not in tune with this, our very existence as a species will come under threat.

If we allow ourselves to feel the risky position we are in rather than just thinking about it, we plunge into a frightening place. Without freely available energy we will not be able to commute back and forth to work, pay mortgages or shop in the supermarket. Neither will be able to heat our homes, cook, power our gadgets or travel in powered vehicles. Viewed from the standpoint of our feelings we can come

to see how the collapse of our known world in such a manner would be devastating. So, what can we do? We have to begin by looking at everything differently, to utilise feeling as an agent of change, coaxing the brain into a power-sharing agreement.



For a number of years, I have been teaching students how to apply *feeling* to the process of designing their own homes. It is interesting to observe the dynamics of what occurs when we are asked to apply *feeling* in this way. Generally, what first happens is that the rummage closets of our lives spill over. Fears, discontents, illusions, repressed emotions and hurts spill into an untidy pile at our feet. We feel disconcerted, appalled and a little bewildered. Then follows a period of relief. It is as if the unburdening allows the craft of our hope to ride higher in the water and to assume a forward motion. Next, an interesting phase commences. This manifests itself as an innate knowing, some form of internal compass that allows directions to be set and objectives to be pursued. I ascribe this experience to the action of the 'sheltermaking gene'. It is as if we already know, or innately feel, exactly how our homes should be made.

When we experience traditional sheltermaking, we feel the deep connection that it forges to life. We analyse this when we set about sheltering ourselves, and we consider the use of local materials and skills, careful siting and



simple forms. However, the wish to be connected to life cannot be stipulated in a building contract nor can such a connection be purchased online. It has to be lived. In living it you connect directly to the life force that unerringly guides you forward. The initial fear no longer holds you in its grip – it now galvanises you to action. Possibilities open like a fresh wind at your back.

Whether you are dealing with some of the existing housing stock or planning an entirely new home the direction is one and the same. Get your act together. Prepare. Plan. Relinquish as many ties to the debt economy as possible. Craft your shelter to allow you to work, rest, play and grow food. Build a cooking fire and a clay oven. Concentrate particularly on securing a reliable water supply and on how you are going to stay warm. How you will get around will also be important – as will forging meaningful and practical connections with neighbours and community.

This is what life is telling us, this is what we are feeling ourselves. When we think of this in facts and figures, it is somehow outside of us, someone else's job to do. But when we feel it, because it comes from inside of us, we know that it is the truth. It is this knowing which empowers us to change. Changing how we live might appear daunting but we have done it before. The last major shift in our way of life – the harnessing of the world's resources to create energy and power our lives – has now resulted in catastrophe. This is hard to face up to. But we all feel it. It is out of this feeling

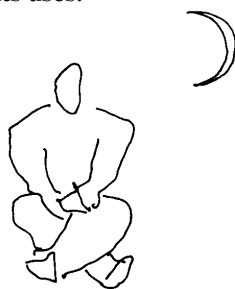


that the knowing and the motivation to act emerges.

The future lies in repossessing the sheltermaking imperative. Designing and building our own homes. This, along with local food production, forms the foundation of the new economy. For now, those of us who are focused on sheltermaking are outsiders in society. Rebels. Merchants of gloom. Idealists. Dreamers. So, I would exercise caution should you choose this way. The reassurances that we will need will come from each other. This is where we must begin, by making our honest declarations, forging bonds on the strength of our feelings. We must connect together in order to be effective.



None of this is painless. You have to pass beyond the comfort zone into uncharted waters. You will be afraid. You will fear being swamped or swept aside. Things will take time. You will meet obstacles deliberately placed in your path. However the strength of our feeling selves will be sufficient to negotiate all obstacles. Even the brain will have its uses.



This is the shift. It may even be the paradigm shift away from reason and towards the senses that has been espoused by contemporary philosophers. Here is the interface of change. Here is the future. Here is the bountiful supply of clean energy that so many had anticipated. It was inside of us all the time.



Peter Cowman is a writer, teacher, architect and founding director of the Living Architecture Centre. See separate feature on the LAC on page 15.

# SHELTER