Unit 3: Exercise 2

Read the information. Then skim read the article quickly. Put the topics in the order in which they appear in the article.

In the IELTS Reading test, there isn't a task that asks you to put information in the correct order. However, doing this is a useful way for you to practise quickly looking at the whole text to see what it is about *before* trying to answer the questions.

Architectural determinism

Back in the 1960s, the Welsh academic and town planner Maurice Broady came up with a new term in architectural speak: architectural determinism. This referred to what he saw as the practice of making unjustified claims that the built environment could somehow change people's behaviour in ways that could be predicted. It was a new term to describe what at the time was not uncommon. Although the idea of architectural determinism is now widely discredited, it had allowed the heroes of architecture to make all sorts of ridiculous claims in the past.

In the 1400s, one of the stars of the Italian Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti, claimed that the balanced classical forms of well-designed buildings would convince invaders to abandon their weapons and become calm, non-violent citizens.

In the early twentieth century, the British theorist and planner Ebenezer Howard developed the idea of garden cities. These were to be village-like housing schemes with substantial gardens and green areas, and were intended to provide working people with an alternative to living in 'crowded, unhealthy cities'. He envisaged a 'group of slumless, smokeless cities', in which employees, benefiting from better living and working conditions, would be more efficient.

Frank Lloyd Wright, designer of New York's Guggenheim Museum and many of the USA's most iconic houses, believed that appropriate architectural design could even save the USA from corruption and make people more virtuous.

The Swiss-born modernist architect Le Corbusier declared that one of the houses he designed outside Paris, the Villa Savoye, would heal the sick. But when it did exactly the opposite (its large windows made the house overheat, and its flat roofs let in the rain), the owners threatened legal action. Le Corbusier only managed to avoid court due to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The failings of modernist architecture are well documented, and many writers and theorists have made a living out of critiquing it. But the high point of this trend was the delight that many shared over the demolition of the disastrous Pruitt-Igoe urban housing complex in St Louis in the USA. It had been designed by architects George Hellmuth, Minoru Yamasaki and Joseph Leinweber, supposedly to create 'community gathering spaces and safe, enclosed play yards'. And yet for some reason, the community declined to gather and play safely in their enclosed yards. Instead, the complex became a hotspot for crime and poverty and was demolished in the 1970s.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

As with many of the modernist planning and design philosophies of the twentieth century, architectural determinism was appealing at first sight but ultimately misguided. It became unfashionable during the post-modern era and all but disappeared. One of the consequences of this loss of faith in the power of architecture is that architects are now left defenceless before the superior technical know-how of structural engineers, the restrictions placed on them by generations of planners and the calculations of project managers.

But was architectural determinism dismissed too soon? This is one question posed by Jan Golembiewski, a researcher in the environmental determinants of mental health at the University of Sydney and a consultant for Medical Architecture, a firm specialising in architectural psychology. Golembiewski's research has found that the healthier a person is, the more a well-designed environment will affect them positively, and the less a badly designed one will affect them negatively. Patients who are mentally ill react more negatively to bad environments, which means 'fewer smiles, less laughter and a reported drop in feeling the fun of life'.

Likewise, Charles Montgomery, author of Happy City: Transforming our Lives Through Urban Design, points out that some environments do affect our moods, and that they do so rather predictably. His central thesis is that urban sprawl – the unplanned spread of car-dependent, low-density development that accounts for most new housing in many parts of the world – makes us unhappy and isolated and drives teenagers to boredom. The drawbacks of urban sprawl aren't confined to psychological health; living amongst sprawl ages people by an extra four years, and there are four times as many fatal traffic accidents on suburban roads as on city streets, according to Montgomery's research.

Many progressive measures were implemented by Enrique Peñalosa during his tenure as mayor of Bogota in Colombia from 1998 to 2000. Bogota, now a city of 8 million people, had no underground rail system at that time and suffered from chronic congestion. Peñalosa's city model gave priority to children and people not using vehicles. He built hundreds of kilometres of cycle paths, pavements and parks, and set up traffic-free zones. He organised a car-free day in 2000 (now an annual event), took measures to address poverty and started a programme of urban improvement, with more than 100,000 trees being planted across the city. All of these are impressive accomplishments in themselves, but his most compelling legacy has to be the way that he transformed people's view of Bogota. Whereas previously, the city's troubles had been seen as an inevitable consequence of uncontrolled urban growth, people now began to see that they could influence change in Bogota for the better.

Clearly, there is now a resurgence in the belief that the built environment is a key factor in how we feel, and that buildings are central to influencing behaviour. Many of the journals adopting this stance, such as World Health Design and Environment and Behaviour, focus primarily on the design of healthcare facilities, as this is where quality design can potentially have life-and-death consequences. Schools of architecture need to focus on how their students might predict how their designs can impact the users of the buildings, and give thought to including calming areas and spaces, such as gardens, in order to affect our moods, behaviours and health in as positive a way as possible.

exaggerated claims made by architects about buildings

an abandoned belief about what architecture could do

the virtual disappearance of a belief about architecture

the positive influence of one politician on an environment

the similar findings of two writers

the reappearance and increased popularity of an idea

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