

# RIAS Quarterly

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## Are we okay?

## RIAS Awards 2023



# Of Design and Doughnuts and Development – A Woman in Architecture

This is the 50th anniversary year of the publication of *Small is Beautiful – economics as if people mattered* (Blond & Briggs) by the radical German-English economist Fritz Schumacher. It sets out his thoughts on, amongst other things, the limits to growth. It contains a thoroughly blistering critique of GDP as a measure of progress and a highly intelligent and articulate discussion around the nature of technology and “good work” in the 1973 energy crisis. My degree in Engineering Design & Appropriate Technology was strongly influenced by Schumacher and as I entered the workplace his ideas seemed normal, to me. I was surprised to find that in “the real world” they were largely unknown concepts. It enabled me to be very productive in bringing environmental and social concerns to the attention of built environment professionals who were perplexingly ignorant and to highlight that continuity and not change presented the real risk.

I then met Margrit Kennedy in 1995 in Cork when I was invited by Howard Liddell to my first Gaia International meeting. Margrit was a German architect, environmentalist and author with a Master's degree in Urban & Regional Planning, a doctorate in Public & International Affairs and Professorship of “Building Technology and Resource-Efficient Construction” at the University of Hanover (1991–2002). She was describing her soup. “Like little baby Jesus in velvet pants slipping into my tummy”. I was drawn, obviously.

We bonded over the recollection of this tale. Schumacher describes in *Good Work* (Abacus 1980) how on his first visit to Florence he deciphered the inscription on the statue opposite the magnificent Duomo. “This is Arnolfo, who, instructed by the municipality of Florence to build a cathedral of such

splendour that no human genius can ever surpass it ... proved equal to this gigantic task.” Schumacher then contrasts this outstanding architecture that was free of a cost benefit analysis with something contemporary to the 1960s. “This is R.W.Smith, member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, who, instructed by the Greater London Council to create an office block of such superlative cheapness that no human genius could ever underbid it... proved equal to this mean task.” Mean is such a good word.

Margrit, as I was soon to find out, had concluded after several decades in practice, pursuing environmental design, that being a truly ecological architect was impossible until the economic system changed and money served people rather than vice versa. It was, she claimed “virtually impossible to carry out sound ecological concepts, on the scale required today, without fundamentally altering the present money system or creating new complementary currencies.” (Kennedy M. 1987, *Interest and Inflation Free Money, Creating an Exchange Medium that Works for Everybody and Protects the Earth.*) She was the first influential and accomplished feminist architect I had met and she knew which way was up. It transpired that knowing which way was up was a Gaia International norm. This was a homecoming.

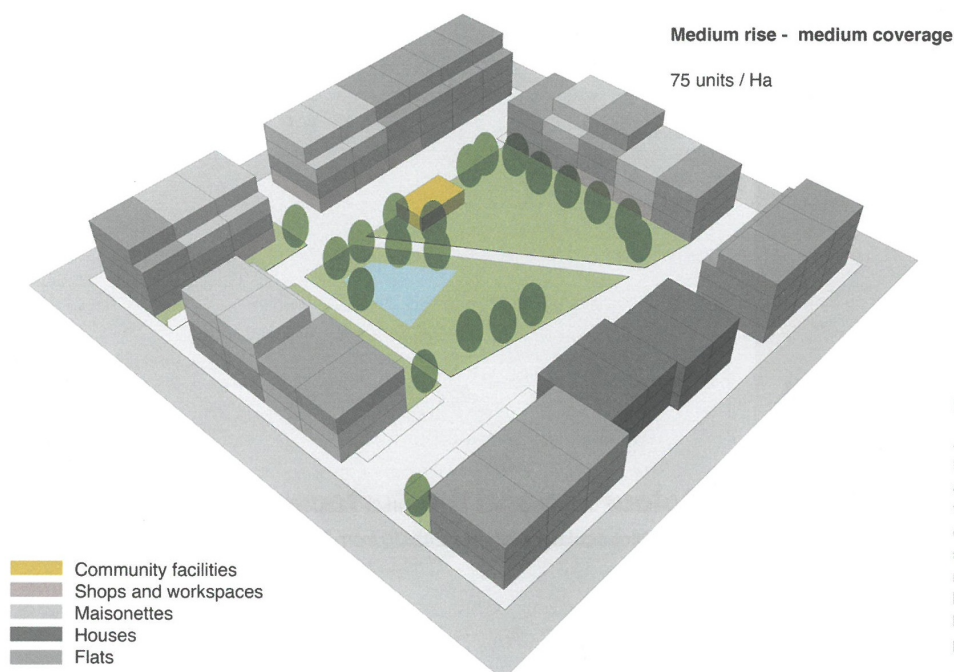
Margrit hadn't given up on architecture but she had directed her skills to where they were most effective. She had transcended the mundane battle with developers to do whatever they chose, eventually, regardless of our approval. “With you or against you” a startling metaphor for rape. She devoted much of the rest of her life (she died in 2013) to helping people overcome “economic illiteracy”. In 2011, she initiated the movement



Occupy Money to make the case for a stable and sustainable monetary system not one dedicated to speculative profit. Her path so clearly underpinned by Schumacher's critique of “growthism” was unique in architecture. It will remain unique until we teach this serious stuff, not just to students, but to the profession at large.

We also inevitably exchanged views on the male and female vernacular in urban design. Contrasting the skyscraper with the traditional city block. The former exemplified by New York and Frankfurt, the latter by Barcelona with its six-storey, 100-m deep blocks and 50m internal courtyards. Martin and March (*Urban Space and Structures* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1972) had demonstrated the importance of building at the periphery of a site. They showed that the whole of Manhattan could be put into six storeys if it was built at the perimeter providing better shelter and a





#### Left

A study of a high-rise scheme and alternatives. The same total floor area can be disposed on the same sites in courtyards rather than towers with better shelter and a better mix of private and public outdoor area.

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better mix of private and public outdoor area. To provide equivalent accommodation to the Barcelona plan would require a 36-storey erection in the centre of each courtyard.

We discussed the work of Joachim Eble Hon FRIAS who had applied this wisdom to Schafbrühl, which I believe is the first modern example of urban ecology. The development of 220 houses completed in 1985 on the outskirts of Tübingen in south Germany takes its aesthetics from a nearby traditional village. It was a break from the tendency to high-rise. Yet the four-storey, high-density scheme achieves the same density as the neighbouring 15-storey blocks, using low impact materials, with a sense of local vernacular architecture and with better amenity, resource economies, shop, space for biodiversity, offices, a community and a place where children and productive gardens take precedent over cars. It was an early move towards the 15-minute town. In 1995 it seemed there was still opportunity for generosity not meanness, education not dictat, development not growth, community not fragmentation and attention to what, where, how, what with and for whom we build. Yet today the majority of our housing design is at one end of the spectrum; suburban sprawl and tarmac taking its toll on

productive land or at the other, buildings reach higher and higher. Both increase reliance on unsustainable lifestyles.

In the intervening time the critique of GDP as a measure of progress has deepened and evolved. We are now in another energy crisis, this time with simultaneous biodiversity and climate crises. This inevitably sets up a conversation about change and a rising tide of interest in a circular economy, bio-regionalism, degrowth and alternatives to GDP. Katherine Treblink ("The Economics of Arriva, Policy Press 2019) and Kate Raworth (Doughnut Economics, Random House, 2017) cite the influence of Schumacher. The other discussion around the nature of technology and "good work" has fared less well. Tesla or bicycle, concrete or hempcrete, industrial agriculture or small-scale production? Alongside the Schumacher legacy on limits to growth, it deserves our attention. It is time that we set some limits on what is acceptable on a planet in multiple crisis.

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2018

Sandy is organising a conference for SEDA on The Life and The Legacy of Fritz Schumacher – Economics & Technology as if people & planet mattered. The Keynote address on The Legacy of E. F. Schumacher: Buddhist Economics and Economics of Wellbeing; In the Context of Small is Beautiful will be delivered by Satish Kumar founder and Director of Programmes of the Schumacher College international centre for ecological studies and Editor Emeritus of Resurgence and Ecologist magazine and there will be contributions on well being, doughnut economics and technology justice. Wednesday 3rd May 2023.

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