

Books & the Arts.

The Colonist of Good Will

by THOMAS MEANEY

Toward the end of his recent memoir, Jean Daniel, the last surviving friend of Albert Camus and the most distinguished journalist in France, permits himself an anecdote. It's the summer of 1951, and Camus's book-length essay *The Rebel* will soon be published. The writer has taken his mother to a party with friends in Paris. After dancing with several women, Camus leans over and tells his mother that he's been invited to the presidential palace. She is nearly deaf, so he repeats: "Mother, I've been invited to the Elysée!" Madame Camus is silent for a long moment. Then she takes her son's ear and shouts: "Don't go, my boy! It's not for us! It's not for us!" Camus smiles and gives a shrug to the table. "He didn't say anything," recalls Daniel, "but he seemed proud of his mother." Camus never went to the Elysée, of course. The only palace this son of a cleaning woman ever entered was in Sweden to collect the Nobel Prize, and even then he went with reluctance.

For almost any other French intellectual, a humble background like Camus's might have been a handicap, but for him it was a source of pride. Born in Algeria into the lowest stratum of the *pièdes-noirs*—the French-speaking settlers who had lived on the land for more than a century—Camus was a pure product of the Third Republic. His family received a state pension after his father was killed fighting in World War I. He was a scholarship student educated by charismatic schoolmasters who had whisked him through the standard *lycée* curriculum. While the rest of the French intellectuals made a pastime of hating their bourgeois upbringing, Camus reveled in his hardscrabble origins. He was less prone to romanticizing the proletariat because he came from it: words like "exploitation" and "subsistence" were gleaned not from revolutionary brochures but from life itself. Whereas his great antagonist, Jean-Paul Sartre, grew up in a family that made him feel "indispensable to the universe," Camus described the world of his childhood as one of "gentle indifference." "I was not



Albert Camus photographed by Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris, circa 1945

poor enough to feel my desires as demands," Sartre declared in his autobiography. This was not a problem for Camus, whose passions often overwhelmed him.

But Camus's outsider status also narrowed his vision. Coming from one of the rougher quarters of Algiers, he found it hard to feel implicated in the long history of French colonial oppression: his family, too, had felt the heel of the *grands colons*. Camus could never see with the same icy clarity as Sartre that colonies are the truth of the metropole. For him, the version of national independence propagated by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), which was founded in 1954, spelled a catastrophe for France, Algeria and the rest of the West. It meant not only turning Algeria over to a group of terrorists and forcing the exodus of more than a million *pièdes-noirs*, but

also handing a victory to Egypt's "new Arab Imperialism" and the USSR's "anti-Western strategy." There was a deeper dimension to the analysis as well. As Camus and Sartre both understood, the Algerian Revolution was also a French revolution—one that would test the very foundation of the Republic. Could France finally embrace its Arab and Berber subjects with true equality, or would its universalist credo remain a cover for colonial interests? For Sartre, it was the latter; Camus thought the Republic still had a chance to redeem itself.

In the Anglo-American West, where Camus is often revered as a kind of French Orwell, his stand on Algeria is typically taken as the sole mark against him. He gets a score of two out of three: right about Vichy, right about Stalinism, wrong about Algerian independence. Yet, as the historian Tony Judt

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once argued, to reduce Camus's views to a score card is not very helpful if you want to understand his thinking. Judt admired Camus for opting out of the French intellectual obsession with taking an endless series of correct "positions" on every issue. In the fractious case of Algeria, where his views were complicated, and where the course of the war threatened to turn every statement into a weapon for the belligerent forces on all sides, Camus believed the most responsible move for an intellectual was, very often, to remain silent. It was this sort of moral stoicism and intolerance of illusions that Judt had in mind when he titled his book championing Camus *The Burden of Responsibility* (1998).

Yet his silences were never just that. Remaining silent was one of the many political positions that Camus chose to take. He was one of the fiercest, most partisan polemicists in the history of French journalism—a vocation, Daniel says, he rated "the most beautiful in the world." When intellectuals in favor of Third World liberation movements refrained from condemning the Soviet invasion of Hungary, Camus was as quick to call them out as they were to jab at his Algerian omissions. If Camus was something more than a generator of strong opinions, it was because, like so many of his generation, he excelled at casting his particular struggles as the struggles of humanity at large. In this sense, Camus also embodied the contradictions of the French nation-state, which stressed an exclusive, historically grounded identity for its citizens that it claimed was available to all its subjects. The crisis in Algeria, for him, did not stem from the fact of the French presence, but rather from the form it took.

As Alice Kaplan notes in her fine introduction to *Algerian Chronicles*, superbly translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Camus "believed that equality and justice would be enough to break the cycle of poverty and violence." These dispatches show that from the start, Camus was committed to a particular version of equality for Arabs and Berbers. *Chronicles*—which includes a selection of Camus's articles about Algeria, published between 1939 and 1958, as well as several lesser-known but revealing texts of his not included in the French editions of the book—also challenges the common explanation for Camus's failure to grasp the dynamics of decolonization: that he was too sentimentally attached to the region of his birth. The famous remark he once made to a reporter—"I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice"—is often

Books Discussed in This Essay

Avec Camus

Comment résister à l'air du temps.

By Jean Daniel.

Gallimard. 153 pp. Paper €11.70.

The Burden of Responsibility

Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century.

By Tony Judt.

Chicago. 196 pp. Paper \$17.50.

Algerian Chronicles

By Albert Camus.

Translated by Arthur Goldhammer.

Edited by Alice Kaplan.

Harvard. 224 pp. \$21.95.

The Invention of Decolonization

The Algerian War and the Remaking of France.

By Todd Shepard.

Cornell. 288 pp. Paper \$24.95.

taken as proof of his refractory nativism, his determination to protect the *pied-noir* community at all costs. But Camus's stubbornness seems more attributable to his faith in what has been called "colonial humanism." This was a new strategy of rule developed by France in the interwar years, when, as historian Gary Wilder writes, "care became a political instrument for the colonial state." Whereas France's longstanding *mission civilisatrice* had justified economic exploitation on racist grounds, colonial humanism defended its more subtle management of indigenous populations on the basis of providing native welfare and economic development. "The most obvious crisis afflicting Algeria is an economic one," Camus declared in 1945. Strikingly, it is on this question of economic justice—not the flashier debates over anti-totalitarianism and terrorism—that Camus and the postwar history of Algeria still have something to say to us.

Camus's early writings on Algeria have a curious double-edged quality. On one side are the hymns to the hedonistic culture of the *pieds-noirs*; on the other, the hard-bitten dispatches about the poverty, unemployment and famine that afflicted the *bled*. In 1938, when he was 25, Camus published one of the greatest essays ever devoted to a city, "Summer in Algiers," which celebrated the shameless vitality of the working-class neighborhoods. "Everything people do in Algiers reveals a distaste for stability and a lack of regard for the future,"

he wrote. "People are in a hurry to live, and if an art were born here it would conform to the hatred of permanence that led the Dorians to carve their first column out of wood." In these lyrical essays, the Arabs appear as background to the soccer matches, the cramped cinemas, the cool-limbed girls, the blue terraces overlooking the bay. Yet later in that same year, Camus began his career as a reporter on the *Alger Républicain*, the new left-leaning paper in the city. In his first signed piece, he boards a prison ship in the harbor of Algiers:

I see three Arabs hanging from a porthole, trying to catch a glimpse of Algiers. For their comrades, this is a foreign land in what has become a foreign world, but these three, peering through the rain, are still searching for a part of themselves. I am not proud of my presence in this place.

Here Camus confronts the dark corner of his *pied-noir* playground; he could be Marlow describing a slave steamer in *Heart of Darkness*. One of the prisoners asks him in Arabic for a cigarette. "I know that it's against the rules," Camus reports. "But what a ridiculous response that would be to a man who is simply asking for a sign of fellow-feeling, a human gesture. I do not answer." To pity the prisoners, he decides, would be childish. Camus can only knock his head against his own inadequacy: "The only purpose of this piece is to describe the singular and final fate of these prisoners, who have been stricken from the rolls of humanity."

Camus's most determined effort to take up the cause of Algerian Arabs and Berbers came the following year. Three years after Orwell set out for Wigan Pier, Camus lit out for the highlands of Kabylia in northeast Algeria, where he collected information for a series of blistering exposés of French policies. In towns like Tizi-Ouzou and Michelet, Camus found children fighting with dogs over scraps of garbage and families envying the diet of the horses stabled at the gendarmerie. Wages were fatally low, taxes predatory, labor laws went unenforced, and—most troubling for Camus—there was a scarcity of schools to transform Berbers into French republicans. It is remarkable to find the young Camus putting his lyricism on hold to provide detailed recommendations on how everything from grain distribution to the production of olive oil could be improved. Yet here, too, was a case of colonial humanism in action. Ten years before, in 1927, the legendary French colonial theorist Robert Delavignette had discovered that the best way to consolidate French rule in Upper Volta was not through direct force,

which only planted the seeds for future revolts, but by increasing peanut production.

Edward Said once criticized Orwell's and Camus's plain reportorial style for "coercing" knowledge and history into becoming "mere events being observed," the precursor to the "opinionless" political news offered by contemporary Western journalism. But the impassioned yet pragmatic bent of these articles hardly warrants such a judgment. The manner is far from Camus's later Algerian writings, which are orotund in tone but ambivalent in substance. Here, everything is concrete. Camus wanted to hold France accountable to its republican ideals, which he thought were particularly owed to the Kabyles, who had supported and, in many cases, died for France in World War I. The people of this outlying region needed to be brought closer to the metropole, Camus argued, but also granted enough regional autonomy to secure their dignity. The Kabyle custom he most admired was one that obligated all members of a village to attend a funeral, in order to ensure that a poor man's burial was no less impressive than a rich man's. Once more, the tensions of colonial humanism are on display: Camus wanted to leave the organic unity of the Kabyles intact while also committing France to the complete economic overhaul of their society. The problem for him, and for French colonialism at its root, was thus not one of bad faith—promising to provide for native populations but not delivering—but one of clashing expectations.

Camus's articles on Kabylia had an effect on French policy, but not the one he intended. The French administration in Algiers sent a governor to the province on a publicity tour, while a rival newspaper declared the young reporter had wildly exaggerated his claims. Ultimately, the pieces contributed to the shutting down of Camus's newspaper and to his blacklisting by the French government in Algeria. "For the rest of his life," Kaplan notes, "he believed he had risked everything for his anticolonial activism." In 1945, when Camus was established as a journalist in Paris, he was among the loudest voices warning that the Algerian uprising in Sétif was not instigated by "fascist *agents provocateurs*," as the French communist press claimed, but was the first stirring of a major revolt that, he insisted, had economic roots. By the 1950s, an I-told-you-so refrain had crept into his commentary on Algeria. Camus continued to believe up to his death in 1960 that a third way between colonial oppression and Algerian independence was possible. But in the following years, fewer and fewer Arabs and Berbers were convinced by the flimsy plans for a federal solution to

the problem of Algerian political representation. As Judd observed, Camus's sense of the Algerian crisis was formed in the 1930s, when there were still "moderates" on the Algerian side seeking compromise and accommodation. This was not a view of events that would wear well in the 1950s and '60s when, with the advent of decolonization, such solutions had faded away. To the surprise of many, it was Charles de Gaulle, who considered the very idea of Algerians becoming Frenchmen ridiculous, who turned out to be uniquely suited to the delicate task of brokering independence.

Today, it is difficult to see how the decolonization of the European empires could have been anything but an overdetermined process. After World War II, anticolonial nationalists became impatient with the elaborate timetables devised for securing independence; veterans returning to the colonies were intent on demanding even more from their metropolises than their predecessors had twenty-five years earlier; capitalists were no longer convinced that the colonial system was worth the cost; the United States and the Soviet Union spasmodically pressured European empires to prepare their territories for self-determination. Finally, there was the internal logic of decolonization itself: if one of the empires divested its colonies, it would be hard for the others not to follow suit. There was moral prestige to be won by whoever accomplished it first. In 1966, just four years after France had left Algeria, de Gaulle did not hesitate to shame the United States for not yet having quit Vietnam.

But for Europeans on the ground in the immediate postwar decades, full-scale decolonization appeared far from inevitable. In the 1950s, the vast majority of mainland French citizens supported keeping Algeria French; by the 1960s, almost none of them did. Algeria—which had never been defined as a French colony, but rather as an "overseas" province every bit as integral as Corsica—now had to be let go. The change of heart was sudden, and the doubts it cast on the entire republican project were quickly glossed over. As the historian Todd Shepard convincingly argues, the concept of "decolonization" had to be invented in the 1960s as a way for the French to believe that they had just presided over an orderly and historically necessary process of self-determination. Now that they had furnished themselves with an excuse to forget the Algerians, they could get on with the work of building a "European" republic. Shepard agrees with prominent historians of decolonization, including Wilder, that the specific form that

postwar decolonization took was not predetermined, but it remains hard to fathom how, considering all of the contributing factors, the outcome could have been dramatically different from what occurred: the rapid emergence of a series of nation-states, each jealous of its new sovereignty.

For Camus, there had always been an alternative to this fate—reform. It would have meant dealing with the declining number of "moderate" nationalists like Ferhat Abbas who had been seeking a greater voice in French politics since the 1920s. In 1936, Camus backed the Blum-Viollette proposal, which called for granting citizenship to a small number of educated Algerians, with the intention of widening the franchise in the future. In 1956, Camus flew to Algiers and in a powerful speech announced a "Civilian Truce": "French and Arab solidarity is inevitable, in death as in life, in destruction as in hope." In 1958, he backed the Lauriol Plan, which would have transformed Algeria into a federated state like Switzerland, with Arabs and Berbers having their separate legal jurisdictions and the right to vote on national measures that affected them. All of these plans were rejected out of hand by the *pièdes-noirs*; all of them were too little, too late for the Algerians. Camus was a "colonizer of good will," remarked the writer Albert Memmi.

By 1954, when war started in earnest, the Algerian moderates had either been routed or had joined the ranks of the FLN, which was demanding a completely independent state based on "Arab culture, Berber roots, and Islamic tradition." For Camus, there had never been any such thing as an Algerian "nation." "As far as Algeria is concerned," he wrote, "national independence is a formula driven by nothing other than passion." He believed that the FLN was no more than a band of totalitarian stooges who could not be negotiated with under any circumstances. (Incredibly, Paul Berman has recapitulated this view in *The New Republic*, seeing Camus as nothing less than himself *avant la lettre*, shrewdly anticipating the seedlings of an Islamist totalitarian empire.) But under the leadership of Ahmed Ben Bella and Saadi Yacef, the FLN proved extremely effective. Its violent tactics provoked even more savagery on the part of the French government, not to mention the *pièdes-noirs*' own homegrown terrorist group, which tried to assassinate de Gaulle and threatened France with a civil war within its mainland borders. At the same time, the FLN increasingly made use of the United Nations in what turned out to be a winning two-pronged strategy: terrorism in the streets of Algiers coupled with high-level diplomacy on the East Side.

The French intellectuals who served as house theorists for the FLN—Sartre and Frantz Fanon—saw their mission as nothing short of reinventing what it meant to have a revolution. It could be achieved, they argued, only through an overwhelming tide of redemptive violence, which would grant the Algerians a chance to exercise and feel their untapped powers as “new” men and women, no longer reliant on Europeans. Peasants were designated to lead the charge. “The starving peasant, outside the class system,” wrote Fanon, “is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays.” Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* was published in 1961, one year after Camus’s death, but Camus had anticipated some of its arguments. Early on, he recognized that the promises of revolutionary violence were a mirage. More likely, he believed, Algerian independence would result in just the sort of crude nationalism that had already turned Europe into a charnel house twice in the twentieth century. Surprisingly, this was the view shared by the young Jacques Derrida, who as a leftist French-Algerian Jew continued to distinguish between Algerian “autonomy” and “independence” for longer than one might have expected.

One critical element that separated Camus from his French intellectual peers was that he rejected anything resembling a philosophy of history. Sartre agreed with Camus that there was no organic unity that could be recognized as the Algerian “nation,” but that was precisely the point: national consciousness had been forged in the crucible of the colonial encounter. In the Sartrean dialectic, History had finished preparing the Algerian people, who were now ready for revolt. On the other side of the ideological divide, even Raymond Aron, the French intellectual most opposed to historical fatalism, argued that in the case of Algeria, the universal promise of French republicanism was historically exhausted, and it was time to accept that liberalism was the only ideology to which France could afford to subscribe now that colonialism had become a costly folly. Camus could not accept either argument—both reeked of different brands of nihilism. In the case of Aron, it meant giving up on Algeria for squalid economic reasons: the colony no longer paid its way. In the case of Sartre, it meant succumbing yet again to the lie of revolutionary violence, which was just as unforgivable in 1958 as it had been in 1793.

But in an important sense, Camus’s equal condemnations of the torture and violence practiced on both sides of the Algerian War concealed an undeniably imbalanced perspective. The violence of the French military was

simply of a different order of magnitude than that of the FLN: 150,000 Algerians were killed by French forces, compared with 2,700 French citizens killed by the FLN and its military wing, the ALN (both directed more firepower at their fellow Algerians, killing more than 15,000). The war was thus as dramatic a victory for the French militarily as it was a loss for France politically. Fanon was often wrong: violence was not self-actualizing; burqa-clad women were not vessels of national liberation; peasants did not make very good revolutionaries; the fashion of using daggers instead of “European” guns to carry out post-independence vendettas only lasted so long. But about the guiding principle of decolonization, Fanon was right: to receive independence is not the same as to take it. The quality of Algerian independence was markedly different from the kind secured by other anti-colonial movements in Africa, and its radiant pride and apparent success vaulted the nation into the vanguard of the Third World movement. In the 1960s, Algeria became a school for revolution, welcoming to its training camps everyone from Che Guevara to Eldridge Cleaver to Nelson Mandela.

The great drama of Algerian independence has overshadowed nearly everything that followed it. Yet in many ways the most significant parts of the story are what happened afterward, when the FLN retraced the steps of the original French revolutionaries with uncanny precision. Directly after he came to power in 1962, the new president, Ahmed Ben Bella, began a series of purges of the FLN leadership to purify it of elements he thought had been prepared to concede demands to the French in the negotiations over independence. This weakened the central government at a time when Morocco and Tunisia were attempting to wrest territory from the fledgling state. In the summer of 1965, the Napoleonic figure of Houari Boumediène, an ALN commander guarding the Algerian-Morocco border, swept into the capital and conducted a relatively bloodless coup. Bystanders on the scene mistook his tanks as props for the film *The Battle of Algiers*, which Gillo Pontecorvo was shooting in the city at the time.

For the next decade, Boumediène and his *nomenklatura* in effect ruled Algeria as a military oligarchy. Oil had been discovered in the Sahara in 1956, and Boumediène seized the opportunity to turn Algeria into the largest redistributive welfare state in Africa. He further solidified Algerian identity among the disparate ethnic groups—Kabyles, Tuaregs, Mozabites—by institutionalizing Arabic as the national language and carrying out the sort of development projects for schools and housing that Camus had called for thirty

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years before (Kabylia, then as now, continued to be the most recalcitrant territory for these efforts). By the 1970s, when much of the world was succumbing to the pressures of globalization, Algeria powered ahead with an economic program caught in amber: a 1930s-style protectionist national economy in a country whose bountiful natural resources allowed it to turn its back on foreign investment. But Boumediène preferred to buy what he needed from abroad instead of building up an industrial economy. The Algerian medical sector still shows the traces of Third World solidarity, with Cuban doctors stationed in the country. In the international arena, Boumediène challenged the West to rebalance global trade in favor of the Third World; he became one of the chief architects behind the 1973 OPEC oil price hikes that destabilized the Western monetary system. “If politics can divide [the Third World],” he declared, “then economics can unite us.” Boumediène’s regime was corrupt and many of his international efforts ended in failure, but for many years Algeria was a vital political laboratory for those wishing to study viable alternatives to liberal capitalist democracy. At a time when other countries in Africa are struggling to maintain or create state-run services, the idea of a national welfare state that guarantees a basic income remains in Algeria a visible, if vanishing, ideal.

Today, Algeria is a ghost of its former self. At a time when poorer countries in Africa are experimenting with new social programs and distributive politics, Algeria is no longer a guiding light. The country that was once the West’s most vituperative critic has become an ally. The nation that once fomented revolution in the region is now an enforcer of the status quo—going so far as to sign off on the recent French intervention in Mali, something unthinkable for Algeria even a few years ago. An unexpected twist of history accounts for this turn. In the 1990s, a large segment of the Algerian population, feeling disenfranchised and dispossessed by the FLN *pouvoir*, found a voice for its frustrations in an Islamist party that was so popular, so successful and so threatening that the military couldn’t resist cracking down on it, to the point of dragging the country into civil war. This proto-Algerian Spring transformed the military into formidable counterterrorism experts—which, when the time was ripe, made it seem an indispensable ally for Washington and London in the global “war on terror.”

At the same time, Algeria slowly opened itself to international markets, though this

mostly benefited the oligarchy. Real improvements and reforms take place through a byzantine process whereby Algerians protest enough to get their demands—for medical supplies, for new parking lots—into the newspapers, after which government officials attempt to placate them. As for the formal political process, the FLN has permitted the proliferation of new political parties on the condition that they serve mainly as democratic cover. (The Algerian blogger Patriots on Fire has joked that the party names seem to have been created simply by combining words like “freedom,” “front,” “youth” and “new” in different variations.) Meanwhile, the people’s aspirations for justice continued to mount. In 2011, Algeria started buying off its second Arab Spring *à la babreïnien*, increasing police pay and boosting housing development and small-business loans. But protests still break out sporadically every month in cities across the country. No one knows who will take the helm when Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the ailing president, finally exits the stage.

Camus would hardly know his way around Algiers today. His old neighborhood of Belcourt is, among other things, a former Salafist enclave. The wide avenues of the city teem with cars that run on some of the cheapest gas in the world. Indigents in downtown Algiers are either too proud or too inexperienced to ask what few tourists there are for money. A black market in currency flourishes directly outside the Palace of Justice. The memory

of Camus himself has been appropriated in unusual ways. His books outsell Fanon’s at the Librairie Tiers Monde on Abdel Kader Square. Jean Daniel recounts that President Bouteflika once told him: “You know how I can tell Camus was a child of Algeria? Because he said if his mother was attacked, he would prefer to defend her to justice. Well, that’s exactly what I would do, and I don’t see why he couldn’t say it.”

The strongman remembers as he pleases, but Daniel, himself a French-Algerian, also sees a tribal stubbornness in Camus that he attributes, impressionistically, to the Algerian people in general. He reminds us that in the 2006 World Cup, the great Kabyle footballer Zinedine Zidane preferred to avenge an insult to his sister’s honor by head-butting an opponent and getting ejected from the game rather than leading the French team in the final minutes of a hard-fought championship match. It might be a sign of hope for Algeria if this sort of pride were directed back at the *pouvoir*, who still rest on their 1960s laurels. But people are tired of unrest. The scenes from Libya, Syria and Egypt on television are reasons to stay home. Members of the younger generation tend to turn their gaze elsewhere: to Europe, to Turkey, to the prospect that Algeria will soon fully enter the global economy and never look back. Having declined the invitation to participate in Algeria’s political theater, the Algerians of this new generation echo Madame Camus rather than her son: “It’s not for us!” ■

Drawing the Line

by MICHAEL SORKIN

Architects have been tested immemorably by the question of where to draw the line, and the choices are not exclusively aesthetic. Because buildings have uses and frame and enable particular activities, their ethical aspect is inevitable by simple association. The connection can be fuzzy or clear. Bauhaus grads worked on the plans for Auschwitz, and someone thought hard about the ornamentation on the facade of the Lubyanka. This was unambiguously wrong. So too was the target of the first explicitly architectural demonstration I ever attended, which was organized by a group called the Architects’ Resistance. We marched in front of the headquarters of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, then at work designing a skyscraper in apartheid Johannesburg. The leaflet handed out suggested that somewhere upstairs was a draftsman designing two men’s

rooms—one black and one white.

Sometimes the argument is less clear-cut. What about a client who specifies endangered hardwoods in a project? What about using materials with high levels of embodied energy, like aluminum? What of working for gentrifiers, or designing buildings in countries where construction labor is cruelly exploited and forced to work in dangerous conditions? Building is rife with politics, and ideally an architect will always consider the ethical implications of what he or she designs. The scale, of course, can slide: there are presumably also those who will demur at working on an abortion clinic, a nuclear power station, even a mosque.

In this country, much of the leadership on the question of architectural ethics has been provided by Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), and since