



# laetus in praesens

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## Don Justo's Self-Built Cathedral

### metaphoric learnings for contemporary alternative initiatives

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### Introduction

Much may be learnt about the potential and frustrations of alternative initiatives from the undertaking of Justo Gallego Martínez (now well over 70). In 1961, at the age of 29, he laid the first stone in the construction of a "cathedral" that he has built virtually single handed since then on a plot of land 50 metres by 20 metres that he inherited from his parents. It has been rated by some as perhaps the strangest building in the world. His undertaking in giving form to a dream has been celebrated in several documentary films, by journalists, and treated as an inspiration by architects and religious groups.

This is no "model" cathedral and he is neither a qualified architect, nor engineer, nor bricklayer -- he is a farmer. "The plans have only ever existed in my head" and have evolved over time in response to opportunity and inspiration. Nor does he have formal planning permission from the authorities of Mejorada del Campo -- the town in which it is located (20 km from Madrid under the flight-path to the Barajas airport). Nor does he have the benediction or support of the Catholic Church. After eight years in a Trappist order -- and just prior to taking his vows -- he was obliged to leave, considerably weakened by tuberculosis and the monastic regime. His cathedral is dedicated to Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Madre de Jesús. He explains: "It's an act of faith." The cathedral has been bequeathed by him to the Bishopric of nearby Alcalá de Henares.

The shell of the building is complete -- covering the 20x50 metre plot [photos]. Some 8,000m<sup>2</sup> have been built -- or are underway. They include a complex ensemble of cloisters, offices, lodgings and a library. The cathedral already has a dome (modelled on St Peters) rising to some 40 metres, some 12 metres in diameter -- whose steel girders were raised with the aid of his six nephews using pulleys. He was unable to get the loan of a crane. In summer volunteers may lend a hand, but for the heavy work he hires a local assistant at his own expense. It is estimated that it may take another 15 to 20 years to complete -- although Don Justo does not know. He prefers not to speak about the future. How long he will still be physically able to continue working on it is uncertain.

The mayor of Mejorada del Campo declares that to date not one architect or builder has been prepared to take responsibility for this building. Questions are raised concerning its foundations and bracings, and nobody wants to be responsible for its structural integrity. Given its problematic status, the lack of official support, and the value of the land on which it is located, Don Justo is aware that there is every possibility that the cathedral may be razed to the ground immediately after his death.

He has financed his work by rent from some inherited farmland -- some of which he has already sold. Donations from supporters and visitors are welcomed. Most of the construction materials used are recycled (buckets, pieces of wood, plastic tubes, etc) -- occasionally obtained from business and construction companies with excess materials for a job. Progress on the cathedral is therefore visibly marked by the nature and quality of materials that he acquires in this way. The columns are moulded using old petrol drums, the window arches carry the marks of the tires they were moulded in and bicycle wheels have been used as pulleys. Strength is ensured by using extra quantities of cement. There has as yet been little time for finishing surfaces. The rose window is without glass -- but there is a long mosaic staircase leading to the main entrance.

### Model for understanding alternative initiatives

Comparison of models for understanding alternative initiatives		
	Don Justo's Cathedral	Alternative initiatives
	Monument to the human spirit and its capacity to transcend ordinary constraints and limitations in the	Many alternative initiatives can be usefully interpreted in the light of their symbolic significance,

Symbolism	most improbable way. Its symbolism is that much greater because it is the act of a very ordinary hero -- whose genius lay in his persistence.	as an inspiration to others in a world which "inspiration" is often only recognized because of its short-term economic or political significance. Such initiatives speak to the many who have their own dream of "constructing a cathedral"
Meaning	The meaning may lie above all in the intentionality and the process of implementation rather than in the end result (as with McLuhan, the undertaking is the message). In this sense the cathedral is already "complete", and will continue to "exist", whatever its fate	It is too easily forgotten that for those engaging in alternative initiatives, outside the mainstream, the value may lie in the process and the exploration of the dream rather than in the concrete result on which some others may choose to judge them.
Manifestation	The cathedral is above all a demonstration in how to implement a dream, however little wider support there is for doing so.	Officially much is now made of identifying "processes that work". Many alternatives survive, and take concrete form, through a kind of existential struggle that goes far beyond the technicalities of what appears in models and manuals.
Meaninglessness	Significantly his undertaking has been treated as meaningless both by those in his immediate community (who laughed at him as <i>'el loco de la iglesia'</i> ) and by the secular and religious authorities. But if Don Justo is to be framed as "loco", what price "sanity" in today's world?	Unfortunately alternatives to mainstream initiatives are of necessity perceived as meaningless -- and their proponents are typically framed as a laughing-stock. This is the strikingly dangerous weakness of mainstream thinking unable to see creatively beyond its own inherited patterns. This is ironic at a time when officialdom is increasingly being asked to come up with "new thinking" to meet intractable challenges. However it is unclear what criteria this thinking would be recognizable by those concerned? Perhaps a test should be developed for the capacity to recognize "new thinking"?
Surreal	In a world in which the mind is increasingly dominated by the soulless realities of urban planning and their organizational equivalents, the enterprise and what has been achieved are a celebration of surrealism worthy of the greatest exponents of that art form -- in the best Spanish tradition of Antoni Gaudi, Salvador Dali and Don Quichote. It is especially surreal, as with certain forms of art, in that construction continues despite its probable fate.	In exploring new realms of fundamental physics and cosmology a much cited quote recognizes that there may well be agreement on whether a new theory is crazy. The concern expressed is whether it is crazy enough to have a chance of being correct. When a great innovation appears, it will almost certainly be in a muddled, incomplete and confusing form. To the discoverer, himself, it will be only half understood; to everyone else, it will be a mystery. For any speculation which does not at first glance look crazy, there is no hope! (Brower)
Recognition	Don Justo's has achieved no official recognition, despite the attention accorded him by documentary film makers, journalists and tourists.	Failure to accord official recognition to alternative forms of social organization is typical of the strategic trap in which official institutions and initiatives find themselves in their desperate search for policies capable of responding to the challenges of society. It is curious how little such recognition would cost in comparison to the amounts expended on complex public relations exercises using media stars who in no way represent the insights and qualities of those who actually engage in giving form to alternative projects.
Publicity	There is a strange contrast to the world publicity surrounding brief sporting achievements (solo round-the-world yachting / ballooning, trekking to the poles, etc) from which people may have to be dramatically rescued at great expense. Why is it that Don Justo's cathedral does not appear in the <i>Guinness Book of Records</i> under a category "largest building constructed by a single individual"?	It is curious that the brief undertakings of those who engage in adventures against the elements appeal so much more to public opinion, the media and consequently their sponsors. And where there is an alternative media, the actions of isolated individuals like Don Justo are themselves perceived as "eccentric" and meaningless in comparison with those undertaking other kinds of "social" alternative initiative considered more appropriate -- replicating the selective pattern of the mainstream trap and failing to recognize what inspires the human spirit.
Secular authorities	The enterprise is clearly an administrative embarrassment to the civil authority of a very minor town that has no other attractions of national, regional or international significance. It is tolerated because action against it would arouse more embarrassment -- but support of any other kind is withheld. Delicate issues are presumably associated with Don Justo's social security status and medical coverage -- "I have never had an accident". One commentator indicated that he leaps along his wobbly scaffolding from section to section belying his age (in a way that would make any building inspector blanch)	How do local, national, regional and international authorities respond to alternative initiatives? Why do they have such difficulty in engaging with people who do not dialogue with them suitably dressed, over expense account restaurant meals, and in response to a program and budget framework established by the best expertise that money can buy in the light of realistic realistic political priorities? Is there no recognition that the failure of the projects that emerge from such processes calls for careful attention to others that may succeed despite such support? How can projects be supported when they are in defiance of safety and other regulations?
	The construction is clearly in defiance of any normal	Much is made by aid agencies of the formal planning

Planning authorities	planning procedure, but has successfully exploited a fragile window of opportunity -- prior to any attempt to use it as a building for wider public use. It awaits the planner's revenge! Typically planners have not been able to respond proactively to such initiatives -- especially when they are now surrounded by blocks of modern apartments.	and reporting procedures through which projects are evaluated, monitored and approved for funding. Such procedures may even be deliberately used to trap those engaging in alternative projects into wasting resources on completing them correctly -- in competition with others who specialize in procedurally-oriented projects.
Regulations	The construction has necessarily failed to seek to conform to the myriad basic building codes and regulations. Questions will necessarily be raised regarding its safety as a public building. Typically no efforts have been made to provide minimal assistance to ensure such conformity	It has become evident that developed countries function within what has increasingly become a regulatory "gated community" -- despite the manner in which those outside such a community are obliged (if they are to survive) to innovate in ways that infringe regulatory and safety codes. This is most evident in developing countries obliged to take risks in recycling and adapting scarce materials and equipment. It is liable to become more evident amongst the poor in industrialized countries without the resources to act in conformity with codes designed for those with resources.
Religious authorities	The work has not received the benediction of the Catholic hierarchy, despite its initiator's former affiliation through a Trappist order. The initiative is indeed an embarrassment -- increased by the fact that it will become Church property on the death of Don Justo. The bishopric claims "not to need a second cathedral" -- forgetting that people around the world will tend only to hear and be impressed by Don Justo's efforts outside the worn pattern of raising funds for religious edifices. Although it is indeed the case that a "cathedral" is the seat of the bishop -- so there cannot be two. It is probable that the Church will see the merit of razing the building -- after a suitable period of neglect -- and selling the lands in order to fund restoration of its other buildings. The Church has permitted only one mass to be celebrated therein in 40 years.	Typically religious authorities have the greatest of difficulty endorsing projects that do not emerge directly from their dogma or are not directly reinforcing of it. Their challenge, whatever their faith, is to recognize the variety of expressions and aspirations of the human spirit towards transcendental meaning -- beyond those associated with their own dogmatic frameworks. The challenge is most evident in providing authoritative recognition of "miracles". As with "new thinking", perhaps there is a similar challenge in recognizing "social miracles".
Aesthetics	From an architectural perspective, the cathedral has much to be admired as the work of a single artist -- and has been duly celebrated as such by both architects and artists. Yet it would appear that little assistance has been forthcoming from either profession. Don Justo has emulated the simplicities of the Romanesque style (Gothic being "too complicated" for his skills and Baroque "does not please me")	It is extraordinary that it is often artists and architects who are capable of seeing alternative initiatives with a new eye -- where others focus on functionality and other dimensions that do not necessarily sustain the human spirit in refreshing ways. At the Findhorn (Scotland) community it was the adaptation of a <a href="#">whisky vat</a> as a dwelling that struck the imagination of architects. And it was only official recognition of the the extensive aesthetic innovation that prevented the <a href="#">Damanhur</a> (Italy) temple complex from being destroyed by civil authorities enraged by the absence of planning permission. Perhaps a greater role should be sought from architects and artists in providing bridging legitimation for alternative projects to mainstream authorities.
Tourism	Despite official indifference, the cathedral has been noted in offbeat tourist guides -- and is spoken of with admiration by Madrid taxi drivers. It is a wonder that the local and national tourist authorities do not take active steps to exploit an enterprise of such intrinsic significance -- and so convenient to the airport. Such economic exploitation might usefully have been accompanied by small efforts to facilitate its completion.	Alternative initiatives increasingly provide a focus for jaded tourists over-exposed to sites of very modest comparative interest. This is the case with the Centre for Alternative Technology (Wales), Arcosanti (Arizona), Auroville (Pondicherry), etc. Perhaps tourist authorities (especially in areas of otherwise limited interest) should do more to identify and position such sites -- rather than wait hundreds of years for their significance to become apparent.
Funding	The construction has been undertaken with no official funding and with only incidental and voluntary donations of time and materials from well-wishers. This is most curious in a Europe that is proud of its cultural achievements and expends disproportionate amounts of official funding on events and monuments that are far from demonstrating the dedication and achievement of those such as Don Justo -- especially as an inspiration to young people. It is perhaps also curious that no device could be found to facilitate the process whereby others could provide financial assistance to the enterprise. However Don Justo's achievement is above all a demonstration of how much can be achieved without the kinds of funding typically considered as absolutely essential to any new	The manner in which alternative initiatives acquire funds is an embarrassment in a society that claims to favour empowering progressive and imaginative undertakings -- especially those that call for only modest support (possibly more in kind than in cash). Why is it that public funds, especially at the level of the European Community, are only effectively available for the kinds of project promoted by those already with funds -- and the patience to indulge in bureaucratic and political game-playing? Why do authorities not systematically seek out projects worthy of funding and help structure their funding requests -- as is done in by-passing procedures for projects specially favoured by those that control allocation of such funds? Is there not a case for

	initiative.	recognizing how projects can even be encouraged and sustained by minimum or "zero funding"? A Grameem Bank for alternative projects?
Politics	Ironically the cathedral is located in a commune with a communist mayor -- somewhat obliged to recognize the merits of such an enterprise. But the cathedral can be seen as a political statement that challenges the inflexibilities of prevailing authority -- making evident values that transcend those of the mundane world. It can be understood as a personal political statement -- through the switch in priorities of a minor local land owner.	Alternatives of any kind are typically perceived as a political threat by mainstream authorities -- a direct challenge to their authority and their comprehension of the strategic opportunities and priorities. There is a strong case for exploring such dysfunctional insecurity to enable the emergence of alternatives to be perceived in a new and more favourable light -- beyond the token recognition accorded to them.
Sustainable initiative	It is difficult to imagine a more concrete demonstration -- sustained over 40 years -- of the capacity to switch to an alternative livelihood, to use of recycled resources, and to change patterns of consumption. Although Don Justo is now taken more seriously he says: "From the very start I've known I could only depend on myself." Why would this initiative not attract the attention of those such as the <a href="#">Right Livelihood Foundation</a> ?	Few well-funded "sustainable initiatives" survive more than a few years. What does it take to engage in a long-term alternative initiative from within a community and without being dependent on public funds? How can the sustainability of alternative initiatives be ensured? How dependent are the evaluators of such possibilities on precedents to reassure them in their judgement? Does this imply that no truly original initiative can be supported -- if only as an experiment? Is there a sense in which sustainability has to be appropriately "authorized"?
Recycled resources	The cathedral is a transparent demonstration of the ability to make successful and creative use of recycled resources in ways that provide learnings for other initiatives -- both in Europe and in developing regions. Should it be a worthy nominee for the <a href="#">International Design Resource Award</a> ?	The recycling abilities, of which Don Justo is an exemplar, are likely to become of even greater significance in the future. An articulation of the relevant arguments is provided by Louis le Roy -- ironically with respect to his own long-term <a href="#">Eco-Cathedral</a> project (Mildam, Netherlands).
Sustainable lifestyle	Don Justo is in his own lifestyle a demonstration of the kind of modesty that is extolled in campaigns regarding alternative patterns of consumption -- if only in his vegetarianism. He condemns the superficiality of our time and its materialism -- and acts on his belief.	What is it that makes a sustainable lifestyle meaningful and sustainable as such? Why has it proven so difficult to communicate its attractiveness through official channels and to young people? How to respond to the temptation of second generation members of sustainable communities to move out into the wider unsustainable world? How many "Don Justos" does it take to transform the quality of a community?
Sustainable employment	Don Justo's lifestyle offers learnings with respect to alternative approaches to meaningful employment -- exemplifying the old adage with regard to whether one frames one's current activity as "laying bricks", "building a wall" or "building a cathedral". Over 40 years he developed a pattern of working for 10 hours a day without lunch -- a real challenge for the labour unions!	With the shifting nature of employment and the increasing proportion of "unemployment" or partial employment, what is to be learnt from the patterns of activity exemplified by Don Justo -- and his ability to find meaning in them?
Overstatement	Although Don Justo's achievement is magnificent from many perspectives, it is what it is. It would be easy to see it only as a poorly constructed edifice -- the folly of a lifetime -- for which the wider community has little need. The many aspects of its construction that can be criticized are also a reflection of weaknesses in its justification as an enterprise.	Claims made for the value and significance of alternative initiatives may often be seen as overstated. It may be argued that they fulfil many criteria of sustainability but their weaknesses are indeed only too easily neglected. Much that is appreciated may lie in the eye of the beholder -- as with their failings. But such may also be the case with what are extolled as the achievements of mainstream society.

## Conclusion

Given the following initiatives:

- Don Justo's initiative in constructing from recycled materials the Catedral de Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Madre de Jesús (Mejorada del Campo, Spain) without the benediction of the Catholic Church
- Construction of an "eco-cathedral" with a 50 metre nave by the Anglican Church of the Province of South Africa (Kokstad) [\[more\]](#)
- Creation in 2002 of a [Network of Earthkeeping Christian Communities in South Africa](#) (NECCSA) of which the first group member was the Dutch Reformed Church. The website of the group provides extensive documentation.
- Construction over a period of 30 years, by Lous Le Roy in Mildam (Netherlands), of an "eco-cathedral" -- with the collaboration of the municipality who provided 1500 truckloads of residual materials from road construction. Le Roy processed this material by hand (without any outside assistance) into assorted structures, low walls, pathways and towers that due to their ingenious construction could serve as purification plants for acid rain. [\[more; more; more; more; more; video\]](#)
- Recognition of the merit of Le Roy's approach in other countries of Europe, notably Germany and Switzerland
- Broader concerns by religious groups with the spiritual significance of the natural heritage and the Earth as a "church" or "temple" [\[more\]](#). These concerns extend into preoccupations with the Earth wisdom spirituality.
- Creation and clustering of ecosteries as "loved places where ecological values, knowledge and wisdom are learned, practiced and

shared" as sacred, respected and honored dwelling places. "Ecostery" is from "ecos," the ancient Greek word for household extended here to include home, neighborhood and ecological community. "Stery" comes from "monastery," a place where people live by rules of devotion and respect. Its members share the same values, and work together to live a complete, sacred life here and now. Ecostery principles and values are oriented toward harmony with nature [\[more\]](#)

- A much older tradition has ensured the construction of sacred gardens in association with temples (notably in India and Japan), with an estimated 25,000 sacred groves and other sanctified ecosystems in Rajasthan alone [\[more; more\]](#)

These disparate initiatives help in different ways to provide transcendental insight into the mundane processes of recycling in a material world. Perhaps there is a case for creating some form of "Global Eco-cathedral Network" to recognize and support such initiatives. Like the [Global Eco-village Network](#) (with which NECCSA is associated) it might help to support similar projects in developing countries where buildings become feasible to the extent that they can use recycled materials.

The challenge is whether any such initiative could bridge across the diversity of belief systems that inspire those that engage in them. Clearly the notion of "eco-cathedral" might already be considered a provocation to those of non-Christian persuasion, whereas "eco" is a provocation to those whose focus is on the spiritual and who consider that ecological and recycling issues are incidental. Those focused on natural ecosystems may have little interest in preoccupations with recycling, and vice versa. Any "network" relating them all would also need to be understood as a conceptual (or mind-map) network that could show the degree of relevance of one to the other -- and the distances between them.

But it is perhaps the long-term individual initiatives, such as those of Don Justo and Louis Le Roy, that is most striking in comparison with those of communities.

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