

The Use and Ownership of Rudolf Steiner House

June 2022

Newsheet / Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain

As we move towards the centenary of the Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain, I would like to suggest we at least consider a return to square one – to when the Society used but did not own¹ its premises. Rudolf Steiner House in London was initially owned and made available via a small group of private individuals acting as the members and board of the Anthroposophical Association Ltd. Together with Montague Wheeler, the formal signatory to the lease of land, and all presumably acting, in their own minds at least, on behalf of anthroposophy, they created the first building in the world to carry Rudolf Steiner's name, prompting Albert Steffen to remark that, "before very long, the attention of many will be called to this leader of humanity."²

In the difference between use and ownership lies an important story, indeed mystery, dating back to Aristotle, who already misunderstood it. Failing to posit surplus value, he established the false or at least unnecessary dichotomy between use and exchange values that has lamed economics ever since. Not for nothing do modern businesses separate the ownership of real estate from the use made of it, therefore, ensuring these two very different functions are not conflated – each thereby dragging the other down. Conversely, they know that when this separation is permitted a crucial dynamic comes into play.

That is to speak at the level of pragmatic asset management. Many are the cases, in our own movement also, where the users of buildings, when on the owning board, starve the maintenance budget in favour of their remuneration, or, and perhaps more important, invest beyond the constraints of an external rent – which is why professionals insist on fully-repairing leases. All this is only aggravated when to the ownership of real estate is added serious funds management, a vital third element that ought not to be confused with real estate or cultural activity, and something that 'threeforders' especially ought to be sensitive to.³

But there are other considerations. When musicians should be in deep rehearsal, for example, or when on Thursday evenings Waldorf teachers should be case-conferencing their students, why should they occupy their time with property investment and site development? Those who manage such things professionally do so between nine and five, Mondays to Fridays, and often make their decisions alone and on the hoof; not bogged down in committees.

The distinction between use and ownership was initially the case on the Dornach hill, where the Johannes Bau Association had a board of seven compared to the Society's then membership of 12,000 (now 40,000 plus). To this day, the Goetheanum economy is hampered by its property portfolio, which is often underfunded and a continued expense. It also provides a cushion of saleable 'family silver', of course, but therein lies the rub – with such arrangements neither the 'core activity' of using nor that of owning a property can fulfil its potential.

Warned against by Steiner in that masterpiece of sociology, the Christmas Conference, such twin-hattedness has two immediate effects – one visible and direct, the other seldom rendered conscious. First, the skills, wits and competences that belong to conducting cultural activities are not those pertinent to property management and development (and vice versa). In addition, the funding of such activities ceases to be dependent on and so validated by fresh revenue, becoming all too easily reliant on capital injections instead. As Gandhi once observed,⁴ at that point, the need for a cultural activity becomes moot (other than in the minds of those who want to carry it out). Ultimately, one then conceives rather than perceives what is required of one, and of the times, and the risk arises that the egoism needed to take an initiative encounters Narcissus and drops into egotism instead.

¹ Ownership is understood here as shorthand for three things: a legal title, a beneficial interest and a duty of care.

² Partial source, Terry Goodfellow's 2010 booklet, *The Building of Rudolf Steiner House*.

³ It is well known that those who 'make' money often admit to being unable to distribute it. Few such people can render their financing methods conscious without losing their 'knack'. Isaac Newton, Maynard Keynes and George Soros are three rare examples of people who have managed to square this particular circle, albeit within the constraints of their particular world-views. One who famously did not was Lord Weinstock of General Electric.

⁴ *An Autobiography*, Penguin 1983, p. 188.

The second, invisible, dimension is that those (such as treasurers and financial directors) whose karma it is to manage assets – not for profit or their own gain, but in order to place economic life in service to free spiritual life – cannot and so do not put in an appearance. The presence of such people anyway tends to be discreet, providing a stage for others to appear on rather than themselves. Their role is to create enduring frameworks as a foil to the necessarily ephemeral nature of cultural life – much in the same way that Harold Nicholson designed the Nut Walk at Sissinghurst Garden in Kent wide enough so that, after Vita Sackville-West's florid planting had matured, there was still room for two people to walk side by side in conversation in the manner and tradition of peripatetic philosophers.

Some years back, Nick Thomas wrote a front-page article for the Newsletter about how property ownership is essential to freedom. In part, this was a response to a discussion in which I had said the opposite – namely, while that would be true in the Old Mysteries, it is not in the New.

It is not so much the differentiation between use and ownership that is at issue here, but the dynamic that occurs between them when they are kept separate. Like the synapse that allows a 'signal' to pass between the ends of one neuron and the next, it is in and through this gap that the gods speak, as it were. Just as they did or would have done in the mandorla or Vesica Piscis space between the two cupolas of the First Goetheanum, or, alluding again to the essential sociological nature of the Christmas Conference, in the equivalent social space that an Annual General Meeting represents – enabling a membership to affirm the initiatives of a council, provided of course that it is truly an 'initiative' council, i.e. not doing the bidding of the members or of a superior authority.⁵

I know that in the Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain we have become used to and comfortable with the present arrangement, whereby the members of the board of the Anthroposophical Association which owns Rudolf Steiner House are required by the Association's statutes to be the members of the council of the Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain.⁶ I think I understand why, at the start of the 1960s, this arrangement was made. But I remain deeply doubtful as to its wisdom today.

Modern economic life's addiction to over-capitalised real estate has a direct consequence from which no one is immune. In such an economy, spiritual life can never be free, no matter how much one meditates, so to speak, or how noble the owner's intentions might be thought to be. The reason Rudolf Steiner predicated his economics lectures on remedying so deep an illness, is because he knew its 'esoteric' effect. In my words, *if you want to make spiritual life unfree, give to those responsible for it capital sums to distribute and/or real estate to manage.*

At the end of the day, the relationship between the Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain and the Anthroposophical Association concerning Rudolf Steiner House is a precise example of this chronic and endemic worldwide malady. Unscramble this particular omelette in our own case and the wider world will not go unaffected, because, however low, confused or repudiated its profile may be, the Anthroposophical Society is a part of general history and how it behaves provides orientation for humanity at large. In our times, especially.

⁵ This topic is central to understanding the inner aspect of modern socio-economic life. See, for example, *Step into Another World! – Economic Life as a Medium for Modern Initiation*. Search <https://aebookstore.com/publications/associative-economics-worldwide/authors/christopher-houghton-budd/step-into-another-world/>

⁶ Clause 28: "The affairs of the Association shall be managed by a board [every member of which] shall also be a member of the Executive Council of the Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain..."