

JOINT PLANNING LAW CONFERENCE

MAKING THE MOST OF OUR HERITAGE?

ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT:
CREATING THE NEW

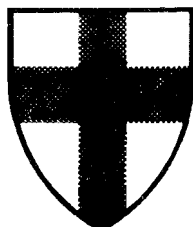
BY

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Architects, like lawyers, doctors and dentists, come in all shapes and sizes and of differing levels of competence. There are the good, the bad and the indifferent. I am frequently critical of the overall level of competence in my own profession, but I have no reason to believe that it is any better or worse than any other profession. To dwell on that thought is, for me, an unsettling, not to say nerve wracking, hair-raising and spine chilling business. If I extend it to include international statesmen, military strategists and the like - and I don't see why not - then apart from "Our Father which art in Heaven" other appropriate words don't come easily.

But I must not become mega-morbid. I must stick to my brief and develop my thoughts about the current state of architecture, urban design and the built environment which might, in microcosm, reflect the global totality of human aspirations, hopes, fears and neuroses.

We are living in an age of great change. In fact, all ages have been ages of change and the pace of change has been gradually speeding up through the centuries. Right now the acceleration in the rate of change - in available technology and in communication in all its forms - is breathtakingly rapid and is positively uncomfortable, even frightening, for many people. But it is a fact and I can see no reason to think that the rate of change is going to slow down. For good or for ill, the world is becoming a smaller and smaller place and for architecture and urban design, that basic truth is having a significant impact.

The traditional regional variations in architectural styles which were the natural and logical outcome of the regional availability of building materials and the regional economics of construction, have largely lost their *raison d'etre*. The black and white half-timbered domestic facades which used to signal Cheshire as opposed to the hard red brick of the industrial north; or the slate roofs of the North-West and Wales as opposed to the thatch of East Anglia; are all losing their regional significance. The loss of this sort of system of unchallenged references is understandably unsettling to many people. So are binary arithmetic and computers; so are organ transplants and neuro-surgery; so are supersonic aircraft and space technology.

Whether or not such manifestations of human progress - and I recognise that my use of that word is open to challenge by some - will be as discomfoting to today's schoolchildren when they grow up is another question, but I refuse to be anything but optimistic about that.

So good, bad and indifferent architects have to react in a society which includes a large segment of feeling and yearning for "the good old days" when life, as seen from today's perspective, was less frenetic and complex; when the Gentlemen and Players who put bat to ball knew their respective places and were so much less trouble than Ian Botham; when horse-manure on the streets of London was, somehow, a more acceptable form of urban pollution than the plastic detritus of MacDonalds; when the national self-confidence was bolstered by Empire and all those red patches on the world map and when atrocities deemed to be in the long-term interests of the natives were not beamed into our living rooms as they were actually happening. Oh, for the good old days!

Providing always, of course, that our life-span can continue to increase; the appalling infant mortality rate doesn't return; it is not necessary to send little boys up those romantic chimney stacks to sweep them; providing that our sophisticated sanitation and public health techniques can remain in place to remove the disease, squalor and stench from those lovely little alleyways where other people lived in picturesque fashion above their interesting, if totally unhealthy, little workplaces, bakeries and shops. And so on and so on.

Is all this over-cynical? I don't think so, but if it is then I can only be accused of a modicum of exaggeration to make a point.

The point is that there is a vociferous and influential sector of society which appears to wish, with a marked degree of fervour, that they were not living in the late twentieth century. The abuse they hurl at those who feel some frustration at the thought that they won't be around to see the wonders of the twenty-first century is almost unbounded. Stimulated by regal pronouncements about glass stumps and monstrous carbuncles, not to mention insensitive appraisals of the effectiveness of the Luftwaffe in World War 2, they bang on in a nostalgic 'let us stop the clock' attitude and demand an environment which could be provided efficiently by the promoters of Disneyworld.

The contemporary critical abuse is nothing new. Let me give you a few more examples.

"Uglier structures of the kind there may be many; yet scarcely any one that is more deficient in grandeur and nobleness of aspect."

(W H Leeds; Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London 1838 describing Buckingham Palace)

"Not one of our lately erected buildings has been the object of more general, unqualified, and invidious censure than this."

(W H Leeds 1838 - about the National Gallery).

"Nash's houses surrounding Regents Park are violent digressions from true taste."

(The Builder 1844)

"The most poisonous piece of architecture ever."

(W D Caroe 1895 about Tower Bridge)

St Paul's and Wren came in for their share as well. So did the Palace of Westminster. Would they get a planning permission now? Would all those spires breaking the skyline be acceptable?

For now let me just say this; I, for one - and I am not alone in the architectural urban design professions, and I hope that I am not alone in this conference - am prepared to listen seriously to contemporary criticism; even more I am prepared to try to understand the fundamental concerns which lie behind it; but I am not prepared to simply roll over and admit that I have got it all wrong. If I am to be fairly continually berated about the arrogance of modern architects I can only hope that the great debate, sooner rather than later, will settle down and be conducted in a more rational, constructive manner.

Almost any one of our beloved great cathedrals tells the story of the development of structural techniques during the centuries of its construction. Once the technique of the pointed arch was mastered, the massive semi-circular arches of the Normans were abandoned. Decisive changes of architectural style occur in the same great buildings, but they were made with skill and courtesy, manners and panache. But they were made.

The history of stone vaulting - from the great heavy vaults in the crypt of Durham through to the breath-taking elegance, poise and exuberance of King's College Chapel, is another story of technical innovation of the very highest order.

The Georgian window we all love so much was based on the largest size of glass that could be produced in quantity at the time. If the pane size could have been made larger, they would have been, but they would have been used with the same eye for proportion and composition.

The history of architecture is a history of change; the tradition of architecture is a tradition of innovation. Yet the somewhat bizarre band of experts who beat the path to Highgrove claim the word 'tradition' unto themselves. They extol the virtues of Victorian architecture on the one hand, but mock those who seek to work in the same daring, inventive spirit as Paxton, Brunel and Telford, on the other.

Royal decree will not halt creative innovation and the use of new materials and techniques of our time by good architects and designers. Nor will the Pavlovian responses of sycophantic hacks who have the audacity to claim to speak for the nation - a nation which by European standards is to a high degree visually illiterate.

Bad and indifferent architects are likely to do one of two things; they will attempt innovation recklessly and irresponsibly or will play historical stylistic games devoid of scholarship and true respect for the past. They will be aided and abetted by bad and indifferent clients, bad and indifferent financiers, and bad and indifferent planning officers. For the moment, at least, it is simply less trouble to do so.

Quantity at the expense of quality was the essential failure of the 1950's and '60's. Too much was done too quickly and certainly too cheaply. The architectural profession must accept its share of the blame for the environmental chickens which have now come home to roost, but not all the blame. Many other people were just as responsible and even more so - politicians at both national and local levels, economists, sociologists, industrialised system builders, planners and far too many geographers posing as development control officers, and so on.

Ronan Point was untouched by the hand of an architect; the internationally recognised success story of the British post-war school building programme was architect led. They still make television programmes about the horrors of the first; the achievements of the second are rarely mentioned - at least in this country.

That school building programme was an example par excellence of architects and engineers in the public sector, collaborating with progressive educationalists and re-examining the whole concept of school building. They involved industry in the development of their systems and called for and enjoyed new forms of craftsmanship. Innovative prefabrication techniques were used to meet the stringent demands of low cost and speed of construction and in the course of the decade or so the physical image of "school" was changed. It was nothing less than a revolution, that it was not founded on any cosmetic considerations of architectural style. It was founded on a relatively small, highly motivated, multi-disciplinary design team which researched and analysed the total problem from scratch, without stylistic preconceptions.

New problems and challenges demand new solutions and today the very nature of the work place, be it office or factory; the very nature of the work ethic and its relationship to recreation and leisure; the very nature of family life and its effect on the image of house and home; are all changing rapidly before our very eyes and are introducing a completely new range of societal problems to which mankind must adapt. At the same time we live in an age of unbelievable richness of technologies, inventive skills, new materials, communications and mobility.

Architecture and physical development can never alone solve all the problems but given enough will-power they can help. If the appropriate technology to overcome a new constructional problem lies in the Boeing production lines, the fabric of a Russian space suit, or a Japanese computerised robotic laboratory, why, for God's sake, can't they be rationally evaluated, tested and used. The resulting architectural aesthetic may be something new, and providing that it obeys the canons of composition, proportion, scale and good manners to its neighbours and its setting, why worry about that prematurely. It might even make a contribution to the heritage our own age will leave - one way or another - for future generations.

As a modern architect - and I do not qualify the adjective - I have, perhaps, over indulged myself and some of my frustration must be clear by now. Let me change dimension.

The design of individual buildings is important, but no more so than the organisation and design of spaces between buildings. Whose domain is this? Who is responsible for the functional and visual quality of urban spaces, large and small? Anybody? Where is the comprehensive discipline and concern for urban design?

I am nothing but depressed by the activities - or non-activity - of the great institutions in this area. The RIBA, RTPI, RICS, traffic engineers, services engineers, electrical engineers, landscapists and statutory undertakers, all stake out their parochial claims to one aspect or another of the total squalid urban mess. Of the need for creative, imaginative collaboration which crosses inter-professional boundaries, I see hardly a trace of recognition.

Please walk down any main street in London with your eyes wide open and look hard. Look at the state of the pavement; look at the cacophony of signs festooned on every vertical support; look at the street furniture, the municipal planting, the quality of the surface reinstatement of last week's hole in the road and the digging of the next one; etc. etc. Does anyone care or is it just an example of eyes that do not see and visual illiteracy?

I do not know the answers to some of these questions which bear upon one of the most important qualitative factors in our urban environment. Maybe they will provoke some discussion.

So, how do I feel as an architect about the future of architecture, urban design and environment in this time of confusion and noise?

I am optimistic.

I am grateful to Prince Charles for bringing architecture into the realm of vigorous public discussion. I do not quarrel with much of his diagnosis of what is wrong; I question many aspects of his prescription for a cure. I forgive him for his more pungent turns of phrase and propagandist over-exaggerations in the interests of getting the debate going. The debate is only in its early stages of nostalgia and sentiment, but it is no good screaming "stop the world, I want to get off!" - not even if you are a prince who might sincerely wish that he could get off. The great debate will go on and will hopefully swing away from the negative to the positive, at least amongst those people who truly want to debate the serious issues involved.

I am optimistic that several good British architects whose creative talents have largely had to be deployed abroad rather than at home are now receiving major commissions here. They are receiving them from clients who are interested in quality, who are socially responsible and who are commercially convinced that good design pays.

I am optimistic about the world becoming a smaller place syndrome. In 1992 the 19th century professional taboos will vanish and the best of European architects and urbanists will be amongst us. I welcome that in the same spirit that underlies the welcome that some of us have already received into Europe.

I am optimistic that television, international travel and environmental education programmes are slowly, but surely, producing a more visually attuned society which will become a more demanding society for whom some of the Mickey Mouse aesthetics of today will rapidly become worn out and inadequate.

Architecture and planning is all about people and, despite everything, I have a faith in people if they are fairly presented with all the options and possibilities to make the right judgements about their own and their children's futures.

But architects and urbanists cannot practice their art by themselves, unlike a painter or a sculptor. We need clients, more often than not the client needs funding, he needs legal advice, and the hoops and hurdles of the planning system are always there. So, if the quality of architecture and the built environment is to improve, it demands the confidence, courage and encouragement of many, many people. A lot of them are represented at this Conference.

[The talk will be followed by slides to illustrate the points made and to enlarge upon some of them].

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