

# Have architects lost their social purpose?

Ben Derbyshire believes architects can begin to envision a consumer driven social relevance that is a far cry from the idealistic societal engineering of the post-war years

**Last August** Peter Murray dragooned me from the back of the audience at the Architecture Club debate (where I had just sat down with moments to spare) as a last minute stand-in for an absent member of the team proposing the motion, 'Architecture in Britain today has lost its social purpose'. A daunting moment, and inevitably, in the time available, I was left with a feeling of not having quite done justice to the topic. So this is a welcome opportunity to give the subject a little more space.

Architecture may well have lost its way, and I'll explore its place in today's society later, but most architects in my experience have a very strong sense of social purpose. Indeed, I'd say that whether architects come with an artistic or technical bent, it is the wish to combine their talent with outcomes that contribute to social good that brings them to the profession.

I do not think however that architects are well served in this endeavour, either by their education, or by their professional body. Neither have managed to keep ahead of the dramatic changes that have taken place over the last two generations, let alone the step change that is happening right now with a combination of spending cuts, Coalition policy initiatives and technologies that radically alter the context in which architects can contribute to social well being.

Its worth reflecting on the scale of these changes since the heyday of the profession, when post war reconstruction, building the welfare state, the health service and social housing created a burgeoning sense of social purpose. This was a time when the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had an in-house research team, cities had their own architecture departments and RIBA conferences were an annual tribal gathering of vast hoards of earnest optimists sporting berets and goatees (thus Louis Hellman's lasting iconic caricature).

Richard Crossman's Diary (Minister for Housing and Local Government under Harold Wilson) records a cabinet committee in June 1966 discussing 500,000 housing starts, split equally between the public and private sector (contrast with barely 100,000 total in 2011). This era gave rise to movements in social architecture like Team 10, CIAM, and the search for 'a utopia of the present'; an heroic epoch that saw Chamberlin Powell & Bon's Golden Lane estate of 1952, Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens of 1972. Huge projects were conceived by young and idealistic teams in public and private practice, social experiments brought out the best and the worst, and of course there were spectacular failures; portents of trouble yet to come.

Then the RIBA lost its battle with the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in 1978 and the social compact that justified scale fees and a ban on advertising was gone forever. The Prince of Wales delivered his 'Carbuncle' attack in 1984. Penguin Books published Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt's



'Community Architecture' in 1987 at the height of the Thatcher years. It was a cross roads, as the reputation of architects and planners was challenged by the social and economic failure of much of the post war reconstruction - reported by Lord Scarman after inner city rioting of 1981.

This was a moment when the profession should have changed course, and redefined its relationship with the public, but it failed to do so. There were token gestures; a community architecture resource centre at the RIBA, Rod Hackney as president. But the establishment limped on with declining public patronage, a dwindling market share in the design of buildings and a disastrous business model, selling professional time at a mark up in an increasingly competitive market. Bizarrely the profession continued to encourage its members and its clients in the practice of a commercially suicidal and incompetently run competitions, which further devalued its status. And the profession was hobbled, then, as now, by the divisive split between RIBA and ARB which must be merged if ever we are to repair the damage.

There was a brief Indian summer in the New Labour era when design quality once again found political favour, CABE burgeoned and flourished, and, with others, published a plethora of good practice guidance and research which, with local architecture centres and design review panels created a space for a dialogue about good design. The trouble is, this edifice,

much like the economic policy that supported it, was not sufficiently embedded in a sound and growing private sector. Undermined by suspicions of conflicting interests, the 'mandarins of taste' became an unaffordable public expense, CABE was cut free and whole warehouses of guidance was pulped when the Coalition Government embarked on cutting the deficit.

Enough of the past. How is the responsible architect to find ways to fulfill aspirations of social purpose in the era of Localism - when the lay person is lined up to call the shots about design quality? What is the role of the professional institutes at a time of zero public spending, and how can architectural education help? I think the profession failed to seize the opportunity for change in the 1980s, was lulled into a sense of false security during the boom years of New Labour and if it fails to find a new paradigm for practice now, it will be - finally - a lost cause.

To find a new *raison d'être*, architects must embed themselves in the means of production - in the industrial complex of the development process - both planning and manufacture. And in this milieu, they must understand that it is the consumer of the development process who must benefit from the value added by design. To remain outside or above the process might once have been tolerated, but no more.

Now architects must roll up their sleeves and become

designers in industry. And as in all industrial processes, success will rest entirely upon whether the product design is perceived by consumers to add value. Is this socially purposeful, or merely cynically commercial? Surely architects cannot afford to be above the means of production? In my view designers are far more likely to add value to society if their contribution is tested in the marketplace, discarded if found wanting but flying off the shelves when we successfully chime with the popular imagination. The market mechanism self regulates and prevents the kind of expensive disaster that resulted in so much of the post war production being wastefully demolished, and the reputation of the profession disastrously damaged.

That's why the profession needs to get alongside, then inside, the producers. That's why it is absolutely no use the profession hurling ('shameful shoebox') invective at developers. What's required is a marketing job by means of which the profession and the educators prepare architects to meet the design needs of the producers, improving the design of the product from within. In the era of small government and industrial growth, we must infiltrate industry, and put dreams of government intervention behind us.

We should celebrate the contribution of the great designers in industry, with popular and iconic products that have changed the way we live - Gresley and the Mallard, Mitchell and the Spitfire, Issigonis and the Mini, Dyson and cyclonic

**THIS PAGE:**

Tower Hamlets Council has declared Robin Hood Gardens as a part of a larger regeneration area named Blackwall Reach. It plans to provide 1,600 new homes in this area along with improvements to the primary school, a new park and other community facilities. In April 2010, HTA were amongst shortlisted architects, housing associations and developers to undertake the £500 million project. The illustrated scheme, with clients L&Q and Telford Homes was runner up in the competition. The local community is being consulted on the winning proposal by Swan Housing Group and Countryside Properties.



Ben Derbyshire is managing director of HTA Architects

cleaners, Jonathan Ive and the iPod. These designers were only able to innovate in a way that has so captured the public imagination because they were immersed in the technology. Andre LeFebre, who designed the Citroen DS (so beloved of architects) started at Voisin (Corb's transport of choice) then Renault before he collaborated with Bertoni to make the world's most beautiful car, ever.

Complementing all of this, of course, is a new role for local people because politics in Britain has at last caught up with the appetite of consumers for choice in the provision of local services and for involvement in decisions about the built environment. The development industry and the planning regime that regulates it are playing catch-up. In the era of Localism, once radical experiments in advocacy and participation are now finding their way into mainstream policy and planning.

The pursuit of consumer influence has a legitimate place in the effort to improve our built environment. Indeed, the current round of deregulation could be the stimulus of a consumer led revolution in quality that will unfold as it's natural companion.

All that is required is a nudge to set us on the road towards a properly functioning market such that competitive pressure will improve the quality and value of the product over time. Best practice is already evident amongst some house builders and estate agents, for example, who advertise homes with accurate plans, floor area and energy performance. So it would be a small step for the industry to do so in a consistent way - a huge breakthrough in enabling choice and raising awareness of value for consumers.

Having established a basic mechanism for labelling, we need to see a consumer oriented quality rating system - like J.D. Power, a US based company which collates customer satisfaction research on quality, reliability and customer experience and publishes rankings. At that point, we will have a thorough-going consumer feedback mechanism for products and services in the built environment that will truly test the social acceptability of designers' contribution to planning and manufacture of the built environment.

Underpinning a new social purpose for architecture is the rapidly evolving world of information technology and social media allowing triangulation and validation on the open source Wiki principle. Neighbourhood planning and pre-application planning consultation portals are emerging to give designers access to real-time feedback at the planning stage. BIM and CAD/CAM create the possibility of choice and mass customisation of the product as never before. We can begin to envision a consumer driven social relevance that is a far cry from the idealistic social engineering of the post war years - a false utopia that, in hindsight, starts to look like a paternalistic professional conspiracy by comparison. ■

**THIS PAGE:**

**Robin Hood Gardens/Blackwall Reach, runner up master-planned by HTA**

*For the motion were Indy Johar, founder of Zero Zero, architect and regeneration consultant and Mark Swenarton, Stirling Professor at Liverpool University and author of 'Homes fit for Heroes'. Against were Simon Allford of partner of architects AHMM and Deborah Saunt of DSDHA.*

