

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

**A discussion involving Richard MacCormac  
with Robert Adam, Ian Davidson, Paul Hyett & Richard Murphy**

**As part of the special report 'Them & Us' published January 10th 2003, Building Design asked two very different groups of people what they expect of architects in 2003. Five big name architects in design and professional politics gathered to examine "what next?"**

### **Building Design: In 2003 will architects at last engage in mass housing developments and if not, why not?**

**Richard MacCormac:** I am optimistic about the housing situation in general. There is a growing need for housing that caters for small units and the new housing being built reflects this change in expectation to a very large group which includes single people, the young and retired.

**Richard Murphy:** Well, it's true that there is very interesting housing being built in our cities, but suburbia is a much more difficult nut to crack... There's a rule book which is followed simply because it always has been. We need someone like Terence Conran who against all market advice, will break the mould. Then the herd will follow.

**Robert Adam:** If people are going to show discretion in what they buy, they've got to have choice and you can't get that if there is a housing shortage.

**Ian Davidson:** The challenge is affordable housing. Every town and city in Britain is unable to provide housing for its key workers. Thankfully, there are signs that this is being tackled - prefabrication is under consideration and there has been early work on componentising.

**Robert Adam:** But it doesn't matter how cheap you make the actual building... It's the land price that is important.

**Paul Hyett:** The problem is our socio-political economic system. We gobble up vast acres of land and build very low density housing on it that is sparsely used.

**Robert Adam:** You almost sound like the square metre commissar who after revolution turned people out of their apartments saying we've got to take these square metres away from you.

**Building Design:** So what we have is this big, complex picture of economics and demographics to which architects can not do very much apart from respond?

**Robert Adam:** Well, we have a very conventional town planning attitude to density. We cap it at maximum, whereas it ought to be capped the other way round. At the moment we have a situation where people who can, buy space, privacy and mobility.

**Richard Murphy:** Yes, how many times have you heard the term "overdevelopment"?

**Paul Hyett:** What we need to do is to change public perception of what good living is. People are still locked into the idea that property is investment and aren't open to the idea of public transport.

**Ian Davidson:** What we as a profession have to do is to engage in research. It is something we completely undervalue, adopting, instead, the position that we know best. Research gives you the authority to make decisions, to challenge the myths - and density is one of them. We need to create and promote our own opportunities.

**Richard Murphy:** Why? Are we really missing lots of lifestyles or something?

**Paul Hyett:** Well, one thing is sure - we haven't changed the housing model one iota in response to women's changing roles and work patterns. I would say there was a good case for a new kind of accommodation for the high-achieving professional woman - some sort of serviced housing in which they share some facilities.

**Robert Adam:** What we certainly ought to be doing is assisting those who sell accommodation. We don't pay to build it, we don't pay to buy it, but we ought to be participating in the market in some way, persuading people (developers) to try out new ideas.

**Richard Murphy:** We architects are full of good ideas, the problem is we're up against a herd mentality.

### **Building Design: Is there anything to suggest that public sector design is going to improve in 2003?**

**Paul Hyett:** There is every reason to suppose it will. We are seeing extremely good builder/servicing/agent consortiums coming together under the dreaded PFI. I think they are very sophisticated and will get very much better. Their difficulty is with the client agencies.

**Richard Murphy:** I take the opposite view, I am very pessimistic. Scotland is very behind England in this area. For a start we have no CABE and we get situations where the worst architects are chosen. There is no genuine dialogue between the client and architect and there is this absurd rush to build. We're beginning to see the first bunch of PFI schools emerge and they're terrible.

**Richard MacCormac:** Well, while public sector buildings are driven by the desire to provide space easily for political objectives, design is likely to take a back seat unless the government makes it a significant issue.

**Ian Davidson:** I am very optimistic about the future of public sector design - all the agencies show a will for it to improve. Plus, there's been a real increase in civic pride - 10 years ago there wasn't any.

**Richard MacCormac:** What I would like to see is schools and hospitals becoming real iconic buildings for their constituencies, just in the way that structures like the Angel of the North are. I am not critical of the principle of the PFI, just of the process. It needs to be an aspirational one.

### **Building Design: In 2003, how should architects improve their engagement with the general public? [At the time of the discussion, Will Alsop had just won the Fourth Grace competition despite being the least popular scheme according to a survey of 15,000 residents].**

**Paul Hyett:** We do need to maintain the rigours of quality criticism and somebody ought to stand up and say "the emperor's got no clothes, I've never seen such nonsense in my life", and I think I would place that comment fair and square at what Alsop calls a "blob in Liverpool". Will at his best can be brilliant. Will at his worst can be ridiculous. My main job is to raise the median quality of architecture. That requires an informed consumer, an informed electorate. That is a matter of equipping people so they can understand how to assess and criticise architecture and what kind of conditions are necessary for the process of good delivery to exist.

**Richard Murphy:** I am rather resistant to the community architecture approach. If you are designing a building you consult as wide as possible anyway. The image of architects is improving. Twenty years ago at a party we would keep quiet about what we were doing. People are rather enjoying architecture and can see there is a future now as well as a past. It is also important to talk about the level of sophistication of architectural debate among the people who really matter... and that's where we have got a real problem.

**Richard MacCormac:** As a profession over the last 50 years we have been evasive about what we are really about and have invented explanations for what we do which are very pragmatic, technological or sociological. I think we have got to pursue our art and if we do that really well people will respond to it. The so-called man in the street is very responsive to good design... This is not a rarefied activity, it is very real to people.

**Robert Adam:** The core issue is to abandon the underlying culture of the avant-garde, the idea of the lone artist whose work, if it is not appreciated by the public, is more likely to be good. Parallel, we need to abandon the idea of change as a standalone good. This is something we pursue as a profession but is not necessarily true.

### **Building Design: Is architectural education up to the job?**

**Ian Davidson:** My belief is that we cannot expect to train every architect to be the total renaissance man. That has been tradition... At the moment I think the responsibility [for education] has been fragmented. The RIBA and the schools play a major part and the role of the profession is questionable. I am not clear it plays a satisfactory role. There is evidence that schools are not delivering consistently in all cases.

**Richard Murphy:** Schools of architecture should be as different from each other as possible and I think the current system tries to make them all the same. There is also an issue of competence. I discover in my own office that people have massive knowledge gaps. I think the RIBA and ARB should have nothing to do with it until the Part III exam. Let the schools do what they want and let a hundred flowers blossom, but if somebody wants to become an architect they sit a stonker of an exam.

### **Building Design: Paul Hyett, is architectural education up to the job?**

**Paul Hyett:** Not quite. British architectural education continues to produce fantastic graduates with wonderful energy and it's the envy of the world. But much of what Richard Murphy has said is right. The schools have expanded too much, resources are on top of them and there has been a drift away from the love of the technical. Schools haven't been helped by the incessant meddling.

**Richard MacCormac:** I think there is a case for very highly specialised postgraduate education. There ought to be project manager architects and architects who have a real understanding of strategic cost planning coming out of education, because IT allows that and we need to grasp our responsibilities for the way in which a building is resourced. We are tickled by notions of sustainability, but it may be of a more fundamental importance to understand how a building is resourced. The distinction between the education system and the industry is very disadvantageous.

**Paul Hyett:** Absolutely devastating.

**Robert Adam:** Architectural education is a staggeringly Stalinist intellectual procedure. I have had students refused places in schools of architecture because they work for me. It is gobsmacking and breathtaking for what is supposed to be a liberal art. I employ huge quantities of foreigners, mainly Americans because they are the only people who are educated to do anything other than bog-standard modernism. There is also a staggering degree of technical incompetence.

**Ian Davidson:** Next year schools will have to be more open. They have to recognise that scrutiny is not about persecution. If students are coming out of schools with tens of thousands of pounds' worth of debt, the very least they can expect is an education that will enable them to practice. Practices need to get involved in teaching or managing in schools. My biggest concern is who is going to take up this issue and come up with some cogent answers?

### **Building Design: How will business change for the profession next year?**

**Paul Hyett:** If this profession gets itself together and gets off its backside and seizes the opportunities there will be a massive up, a staggering up. This government is committed to billions and billions of pounds in spending. Get out there and be useful.

**Robert Adam:** We have doubled in size in the last year and that makes me nervous. But, looking into the medium-term I am extremely busy and have run out of space yet again.

**Richard Murphy:** Right now I am looking into the abyss. But who knows what will turn up. One major job will turn us round. I have to say it is luck, especially with competitive interviews - it depends what aftershave you are wearing sometimes.

**Ian Davidson:** I don't have the same confidence that projects will go from inquiry to completion in the way I did two years ago.

**Robert Adam:** Yes, we never anticipate a job beyond planning.

### **Building Design: Who or what will be biggest influence on design in the next year?**

**Richard MacCormac:** Saddam! The economy and the influence the government has on economic situations is going to be the main influence on the profession. But in the longer term, if we take this idea of the economy of the imagination seriously, and I think we can, I am optimistic about architecture.

Architecture fits into a perception that culture and production are much more integrated into our society than they were, and could have conceived of being, a generation ago. There has also been a reaction against the pragmatic utilitarianism of modernism towards a more subjective idea of what architecture might be like. On an international scene, people like Gehry, Libeskind and Hadid represent that idea of architecture as being liberated from a tightly defined sense of utility and technology. But if I thought one architect could [have the biggest influence on design] I wouldn't say who, would I?

**Richard Murphy:** There are some practices which seem to steamroller themselves around the world - naming no names, of course! But you know, you can do a brilliant building, with a wonderful plan which is incredibly unphotogenic, which is the quietest of architecture. Banal press criticism has skewed architectural debate into shocking one-liners. There's a whole generation of architects out there who are much more subtle and much cleverer than these people who don't get work.

**Ian Davidson:** But it's more that their work might release us from preconceptions about architecture.

**Richard Murphy:** I think things have gone too far in the other direction now. It's very difficult to enter a competition where someone of these sort isn't winning.

**Richard MacCormac:** Unfortunately, I agree with you. Architects are primarily interested in the praise of their peer group and many now feel that they have to produce the shocking one-liner, gimmicks or oddities in order to be successful and therefore receive praise through the press or of their own peer group system.

**Robert Adam:** I think we are going to have a surge of glass walls in 2003. Glass wall modernism is the cliché of the moment and how people respond to them over the next couple of years will be interesting.

**Ian Davidson:** The organisations that will have influence in the next years are: CABE which has really built up steam; the RIBA which already plays a big role and could play a bigger one through the Stirling and Gold Medal. The third is English Heritage - the tall buildings issue in London is a big platform for architecture which will be played out in the next 12 months.

**Building Design: Will there be a dominant style of any kind in architecture next year?**

**Richard MacCormac:** I am not interested in style as a superficial manifestation. There are lots of criteria for judging whether a building is successful or not, but what interests me is the relationship between the idea of a building and its organisation and the perception that the users and the organisation within the building have of your intentions.

**Richard Murphy:** I completely agree... when did we last read that kind of analysis in a broadsheet newspaper? It's never about social organisation, it's always about what it looks like.

**Richard MacCormac:** Yes, the awards system rewards immediacy and has great difficulty in trying to reward the kind of thing I am trying to articulate.

**Ian Davidson:** I agree too. I could cite lots of examples of competitions where the intelligent building is overlooked in favour of something more photogenic. So what I think we should be looking for over the next 12 months is intelligent building - people who are actually solving problems intelligently.

**Paul Hyett:** I am also not so interested in style. If we are looking for a fantastic new agenda that will have an impact on the aesthetic it is sustainability. That, together with the new forms of procurement worked properly, is the kind of development I would like to see.

**Richard Murphy:** I am not against sustainability, I just can't bear the morality that goes with it. There's room for architectural expression in every agenda. I've seen some absolutely appalling architecture which has a low gas bill.

**Robert Adam:** I can say with absolute certainty that the kind of architecture I produce will not dominate in 2003.

**Richard Murphy:** Except in areas of Dorset maybe!

**Robert Adam:** You mention the word "style" and, thanks to our modernist education, everybody starts twitching. The truth is there is nothing very complicated about the issue of style. It is a combination of recognisable elements and we all have one, so it's not surprising the press pick up on it. You could probably easily detect one or two of our buildings. But most architects are obsessed by it and cannot see beyond the three mouldings or vertical proportion windows I might put on. You know if there is an architect on a competition jury, there's no point in our entering it.

**Richard Murphy:** With me it's the other way round. If there isn't an architect on the panel, I don't enter.

**Robert Adam:** Yet another example of the cultural monolith that emanates from British architectural education.

**Building Design:** So there you are... you are all obsessed by style even though you thought you weren't...

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