

**LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT  
CABE: ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY  
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## LECTURE GIVEN TO PROSPECTIVE PPP BIDDERS

There are three messages that we are seeking to get across this morning.

**The first** message is that architecture now matters in government procurement.

Paul Monaghan has expressed the importance of architecture to the Lord Chancellor's Department.

**The second** message is that CABA will be pro-active and supportive to all government departments that procure buildings through PPP/PFI.

CABA's approach in this area of its activities is to identify several PPP/PFI projects across government departments which can be invested with architectural ambition and skill in order to achieve a renewed level of civic and architectural excellence in public buildings.

**The third** message is that CABA will help those involved to understand architectural design, at what stage it becomes recognisably present or absent, how can it be achieved and its value to everyone.

I intend this talk to be polemical.

I will begin by saying that a good building is not necessarily architecture. What then is the difference between a good building and architecture? This is not an easy matter to communicate in words.

All architecture ought to be a good building, but a good building is not always architecture.

(I can imagine that some of you are thinking that architecture is often not a good building - the roofs that leak syndrome).

Architecture is fundamentally about the three-dimensional mastery of space and light.

Architectural space and light are not recognisable commodities you may purchase over the counter.

As individuals, or even as consortia, you will no doubt be looking at other projects apart from those of the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Architecture, not just architects, has now to enter the bloodstream of the PPP consortia.

My talk is **not** focussed upon the architecture and specifics of designing a courthouse, but upon architecture being of real value to our well being and civic pride.

It is unquestionable that any client engaging an architect should expect, if the client is fair in all matters and decisions, a good building. But to expect architecture requires something more.

Of course, the design must meet the client's brief, be well planned, user-friendly, respond positively to environmental and whole life cost issues and many other matters. The result, if everyone and everything performs well, should be a good building. No bad thing in itself, but as a solution contributing to a renaissance in the quality of our civic buildings it is not good enough.

I do not underestimate the fundamental importance of these design issues.

Yet neither individually nor collectively will they create architecture.

Today there are many languages of architecture - including those that have departed from the familiar western aesthetic of certain rhythms, of scale and of composition.

Equally, there are many architects who are, regrettably, illiterate when it comes to using the classical tradition - whether it originated two thousand or one hundred years ago.

### **Not every architect can create architecture**

The simple reason for this is that architecture is a result of inspiration - a level of creativity beyond that which makes a good building. I am not advocating that architecture is innovation - or pioneering in the sense of carrying enormous risk to the client or consortia.

This can happen, but is the exception rather than the rule. No, it is the individual who is searching, pioneering and taking the risk by extending himself and his design beyond the ordinary. This is why an architect who imitates, rather than developing upon that which they have seen, does not produce architecture. The soul is missing. Imitation paralyses creative intelligence.

Creativity has to operate in freedom, but in a freedom constrained by discipline.

To quote John Constable:

"A new gothic building...is in reality little less absurd than a ruin...it is to be lamented that the tendency of taste is at present too much toward this kind of imitation, which, as long as it lasts, can only act as a blight on art, by engaging talents that might have stamped the Age with a character of its own, in the vain endeavour to re-animate deceased Art, in which the utmost which can be accomplished will be to reproduce a body without a soul."

Or as Conrad Atkinson put it, "Dead artists are easier to work with".

This is at the heart of the matter. To engage an architect is to engage an individual.

It will involve emotion. Without wishing to offend anyone, the client and the consortia are not engaging a lawyer or an accountant or an architectural technician.

### **Architecture starts within an individual**

It is an act of will which s/he imposes upon the concept and thus upon others who become involved - often without the others necessarily fully understanding it.

It requires immense tenacity to see through. There is a cast of hundreds - accountants, legislators, planners, other consultants, contractors, health and safety officers and, dare I say it, even clients who are all concerned only with economy, efficiency, and value for money. They can, individually or collectively - a bit like dripwater torture - entirely destroy a concept without having recognised its existence in the first place.

A design by numbers solution, to which the architect may be permitted to add a few twirly bits on the outside to tart it up before it is submitted for planning, is too often the reality. I think that we can all recognise the types of building I am referring to.

For the architect trying to create architecture it is far too late if it comes to this - and his or her soul will no longer be around, even if s/he stays on (a mistake) for the fees and out of a misunderstood sense of "duty" to the client.

Quite simply, this type of building is an unacceptable response to the new civic architectural ambition.

### **Nurturing architecture**

The client must allow the architect time and space to think conceptually.

"To design" is a verb that describes a creative process which concludes with a product - a spoon, a mobile phone, a piece of software, a boat, a building.

Many people become involved in the fabrication and assembly of the product, but few are involved in the early stages of the design process - the concept stage.

This is where architecture is born.

This time is the most precious commodity for the architect - unfortunately it is usually the most precious commodity for the client as well.

The outside pressures that bear upon an architect, who is trying to make this time available are immense. Like it or not, we are all in a faster-faster, rougher-rougher, media-mad world society. With so little time and so little quiet, it is hardly surprising that that so few good buildings, let alone architecture gets built.

For too many architects the days of concepts and architecture were left behind after five years at university. They find that the invasive pressures, the inherent responsibilities and liabilities of the real world represent enough to contend with. This is a symptom of the legal and financial audit framework we live in today.

As consortia, you have to find architects who are not daunted by this reality and who have the talent and discipline to create architecture. They can even be young!

### **Economy and efficiency are not sufficient**

The architect, the client, the contractor, in fact everyone involved in the design process, must accept a moral responsibility that what they are doing is not just about meeting the brief to the minimum cost.

Society expects something more from its public architecture.

For the architect working in such a climate, s/he must sense that all of his or her creative skills are required and not just the pragmatic planning and material specifying of areas and surfaces.

Obviously it is up to the architect to prove that these other skills are not only vital to the project but genuinely enhance its value.

However, for this to happen there must be a new openness and commitment from the client and the consortia.

If the same prejudices and preconceptions continue to exist then we will not advance the architectural quality of our civic buildings or civic spaces.

There is every reason to be optimistic.

There are very good architects out there who are not driven by the business of architecture. However, they need to be paid properly.

Is it intelligent to ask the architect to work for nothing during the bid stage, to take a risk based upon the argument that everyone else in the consortium is doing the same?

As I have outlined, the key stage for the birth of architecture is at the beginning of a project - the concept stage.

Why pay for something that you cannot recognise?

Indeed there are many architectural practices that scale down the percentage of their fee for the concept stage - sometimes eliminating it altogether. Why? Probably because they do not recognise creativity and they are sure that the client doesn't. They then back-load the fee on the basis that they will then be able to look after the client better once the building is completed.

With this occurring, it is no surprise that clients and consortia have been under-valuing architecture.

I am hoping to convince you that this is not the future.

Certainly CAbE will be advancing this argument to those concerned with procurement at the very highest level throughout government.

As with the artist, the architect who creates architecture is answerable and responsible only to himself and to his conscience. The architecture will inevitably have the architect's own personality embodied within and without. This is the unquestionable origin of the art in architecture. It is also the characteristic which gives rise to a tangible humanity in architecture.

This is why we can look outside or inside a work by Hawksmoor and see parts of his personality. He mastered the architectural elements in the architectural language he chose to use and placed his own personal twist upon them for us to delight in.

How do you recognise architecture as opposed to just a good building?

The RFAC's 1994 publication "What makes a good building" is a fine attempt, on a good .v. bad comparison to illustrate most of the issues. However, it avoids confronting the fact that architecture has this personal dimension which can make a good building into one of architecture.

Nevertheless, it is very worthwhile reading, together with the 1997 RFAC's "Design Quality and the PFI" seminar proceedings.

I am sure that we have all experienced awe, wonder, and a thrill, both outside and inside a building somewhere. I know that for many people, the interior of Grand Central Station, New York achieves this uplifting experience (Warren & Wetmore and Wilgus, eng.). I specifically chose this example because it is a utilitarian building of the twentieth century and, unlike Pennsylvania Station, it does not imitate an historic precedent (Pennsylvania Station copied the vaulted ceiling and scale of the Tepidarium of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome). However, it is evident that the client was very aware of the civil contribution and uplifting experience that architecture could make to the experience of thousands of travellers, as well as use the architecture to promote his railway. Brunel created equally significant architecture for his client, the Great Western Railway. His work, although as an engineer, illustrates how architecture as innovation generally emanates from new materials or engineering techniques.

Architecture does not have to shout or scream, although sometimes a client seeks an architect who he knows will produce such a building (Guggenheim NY and Bilbao).

The obsession with being original at any cost is ridiculous. The desire to astonish is a classic sign of insecurity, of those who have to prove just how clever they are.

Because there is no book or formula for producing architecture, as opposed to a well-designed building, many avoid the hard investigation by simply saying that it is all subjective.

It is subjective - ask any creative architect. But this is not the same as accepting the fact that because everyone has eyes their opinion as to what is or is not architecture is as valid as anyone else's opinion. There is a level of appreciation, which can only come from making an investigative effort, not just seeing but being able to look beyond the apparent surface.

It is also true that the new does shock, but again, this emotional reaction should not camouflage the inability to look deeper. Here we enter the world of the educated eye and mind and the psychology of perception.

What appeals to us and gives us an initial pleasure, e.g. the lights of Las Vegas, or of Disneyland, or of Christmas tree lights in the living room should not be confused with what gives us long-term visual satisfaction. Few of us can live with this level of brashness for very long - and we prefer a more subtle gratification. Similarly, some people can live with garden gnomes and cute trinkets both outside and inside their homes, but if every street garden was decorated thus .....

The imposition of the architect's personality at the conceptual design stage that eventually emerges upon the public carries huge responsibility.

The architect that forgets this displays arrogance.

This personal taste is not about imposing some superficial style. Architecture is more than skin deep.

A committed client is an essential prerequisite for architecture.

A committed client offers support and gives confidence and trust to the architect.

Of course, in return, a committed client expects trust and confidence to be reciprocated, the building to function in all its pragmatic requirements and not to be bankrupted by the process!

It is these pragmatic requirements coupled with the context which gives the underlying discipline to the creative process out of which architecture emerges.

Understanding the context is the first investigation of architecture. The context is not only physical, but also human - the client, collaborators, occupiers and the local (and often global) society.

A blank piece of paper does not exist for an architect. It paralyses creativity.

From this understanding comes a period - not very long - when real creativity moves into gear - within the disciplined freedom I have mentioned.

Architectural creativity cannot ignore the past. We rework it all the time. Traditions - in design, in construction, in ways of working - are essential ingredients for the architect.

One may decide to break with it all, but that is making a reference to the past in itself - be it as revolution or total opposition.

Architecture is synthesis, not separation - the synthesis of ideas, of people, of materials and ultimately the synthesis of the man-made with nature.

A good building will be one that, many years after completion, still fulfils all of the requirements mutually established between the design team and the client well (even exceeding expectations).

These will include the user's comfort, the maintenance and running costs (whole - life cost), environmental performance, flexibility in use and so on - terms with which we are all familiar, but we are not necessarily all at the same level of understanding.

There is still much progress to be made in these areas for both client and architect despite a generally held belief that they can be measured and be "valued".

Is there any fundamental difference between the architectural design process and say that of the industrial design process of a car?

Yes, because there are hundreds of thousands of hours of research and development in producing one new car, independent of the research and knowledge base already established by the industry as a whole.

In contrast, for a major building which will have a unique site context including geology, infrastructure and environment, the number of hours available to the entire design team may be only 25,000.

Add to this working with a new client and team of consultants one can begin to appreciate why producing architecture is a challenge.

Yes, because the fabrication of a car is a mass production process from beginning to end.

Each component and assembly, including the entire vehicle is fully tested, and despite all of this its life expectancy is perhaps only 10 years. So far, there is no designed or manufactured non-polluting or environmentally friendly car.

Yes, because the assembly of a car takes place in a controlled clean environment, whereas we all know the current muddy boots scenario, the driving rain etc.

There are no revolutions in car design - only in individual components, and the inexorable improvement of them, and the slow introduction of technology transfer to improve safety, in-built diagnostic intelligence, etc.

While there are very clear lessons to be learned from such industries, we should be under no illusion that in responding to context, architects need to find expression.

"An architect certainly never bathes in the same river twice". (adapted from Heraclitus)

This does not eliminate the possibility that such expression and architectural integrity cannot be found by creating bespoke solutions from standardised components.

Good architects know that they have to push themselves to perform well.

The client should not have to ask for it.

The government is aware that the consequences of poor buildings and poor environments are enormous - social and health costs and environmental damage.

All clients and users want good buildings.

When it comes to civic buildings, architecture is required because architecture lifts the spirit through the beauty of its space and light.

The built environment is the most tangible context in which the public can meet art, and architecture is that art.

We would not expect to build the Royal Courts again. Its spatial, light and material qualities are evident - it is of its own time. An example of a part of the spatial qualities that contribute to its architecture is the expression given to the idea of procession. A mature understanding of the need for a generous public threshold is captured in the visitor's experience from the pavement to the great hall.

Is it not the architecture of great cities such as Florence, New York, London that attracts the visitor? It is not just the awe or wonder of exceptional architecture, but that architecture really can make places more enjoyable to be in.

For those who work within the building they will find the environment more conducive to work and communications, and the architecture will facilitate a general feeling of well being.

Architecture can help people to look forward to work.

For the local public who pass by, a sense of pride in the building will emerge over time.

We have an obligation to build architecture of our Age for the future.

If our senses are dulled to mediocrity, our expectations and aspirations diminish accordingly.