

LEADER

Sense and eccentricity



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Piers Taylor's midlife crisis may point to an alternative future for the profession

In 1950 Berthold Lubetkin retired from architecture, disgusted by the way the profession was going, and became a pig farmer. No one called it a midlife crisis because the term was only coined 15 years later but he displayed all the classic symptoms of someone who — at the age of 49 — decided that his career was no longer fulfilling.

Piers Taylor, who announced last week that he is splitting from the practice he set up six years ago has come to a similar conclusion (see page 4) but happily still intends to be an architect — just not one with a logo and a corporate identity. Neither does he want to fill in pre-qualification questionnaires or sit in front of a computer screen and tell people what to do.

Many of you sympathise with his view that the demands of running a successful business have squeezed out the best bits of being an architect — namely designing in collaboration with others, researching, teaching and doing a bit of dreaming.

The real question is can you make a living if you don't play the game?

The simple answer is no. Practice is being suffocated by red tape, by regulation, and by the need to stay afloat. But the profession, as the RIBA's Building Futures' report pointed out last year, will have to change if it is to survive. It recommended that practices become more businesslike, more commercial and bigger.

But there is another school of thought that says survival is not about size or opening an office in China but reclaiming some of the roles the profession gave away in better times. These include building supervision, or as Taylor might put it more poetically getting back to architecture's roots.

Young architects who can't find a job

should take note. While architectural education hasn't taken much account of how the profession has to change, architects are figuring it out for themselves. Taylor may come across as an eccentric, fortunate enough to be able to pursue his dream, but his view that the future lies in collaboration not timesheets and A3 reports is a refreshing and important part of a debate on what constitutes an architectural service.

Many cooks can't save this broth

Housing nearly 3,000 units, the Olympic Village is the most substantial piece of city making undertaken in Britain for decades. It offers welcome evidence that the UK still has the capacity to undertake major urban transformation projects when it puts its mind to it, but speaks too of the poverty of the prevalent thinking about city planning in this country.

Seventeen different practices were employed, but their efforts at variety can't disguise the fact that the masterplan was predicated on the use of blocks that are overbearingly large, set too far apart and unmodulated.

There is a comparison to be made with London's Barbican where a single architect was tasked with the design of thousands of units of housing with far happier results. There, the variety derives from the adoption of an extensive range of housing typologies, not a pick-and-mix selection of cladding treatments. The same could surely be said about any of the great urban set pieces of the past — Georgian Bath, for example, or Edinburgh New Town. We need our cities to be complex, but real complexity derives from intelligent urban planning. If the plan is bad, no amount of stylistic variation is going to save it.

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