

ARCHITECTS IN CRISIS

Martin Pawley

This year Britain's 25,000 architects are celebrating their institute's 150th anniversary. The festivities will culminate in a gala evening at Hampton Court in May, with Prince Charles as guest of honour. The only problem is that the profession is coming apart at the seams.

Since 1945 the architectural profession has changed so profoundly that its present form has neither historical precedent nor foreseeable future. In the immediate postwar years it underwent an enormous expansion so that by 1950 the number of registered practitioners was already 40% higher than in 1939 and, more significantly, the number of students of architecture had risen by 500% to an estimated 11,000 — virtually one student for every architect. The unsettling nature of this explosive growth was clear even then, and as early as 1948 the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Council appointed a committee chaired by Sir Percy Thomas 'To consider the present and future position of architects in private practice.'

It was the conclusion of the committee that 'If the housing needs of the nation, the making good of buildings destroyed by war and dereliction, and the demand for new ones, were the criteria by which to estimate the future prospects of architects ... a steady prosperity for the profession for at least the next fifty years' could be foreseen. And so it appeared, for an immense growth in central government, local government and nationalised industry construction work had thus far created employment in pace with increased membership — not merely by the direct route of creating departments staffed with salaried architects, but also through the handing on of work to private practices.

Since it could be shown that the growth of the public sector made a large contribution to the work of the private, earlier criticisms of the emergence of a large salaried class in the profession were soon stilled.

In the same way the considerable expansion of architectural education and



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the emergence of a class of membership insulated from the vagaries of the construction economy altogether found few opponents. While the first professorship in architecture, at Liverpool University, dated from 1894, and full time classes at the Architectural Association began in 1901, almost all the 29 schools of architecture in existence in 1950 had been created in response first to the requirements of legal professional registration, laid down in the 1930s, and second to the introduction of grant-aided study under the 1944 Education Act. Between 1939 and 1950 the number of architects involved in teaching more than doubled and, as the postwar student boom passed through the schools, this group became established as the intellectual leadership of the profession. A status confirmed by the 1958 Oxford Conference which decided that full time education in university and polytechnic departments was to be the recognised route to professional status.

Steady prosperity for the profession in the terms foreseen by the Percy Thomas report did in fact continue for the best part of a quarter of a century, peaking in the late 1960s when nearly half a million houses were completed every year and 10% of the GNP was consumed in building. In 1964 the expansion of the public sector was such that only one of 61 county councils had no architects department and the 200 local authority departments in existence employed 25% of the profession. Central government employed another 10% in what was then called the Ministry of Public Building and Works, the National Health Service, what was to become the Department of Education and Science, the Home Office and several other administrative branches. By 1976, even though the fall in workload triggered by the 1974 energy crisis had already wound construction activity

back to the level of the late 1950s, no less than 40% of a profession twice as large as it had been in 1950 consisted of salaried architects in the public employ. The dependence of private architects upon the public sector was even more striking, with 40% of new commissions arriving from this source.

The profession which greeted the economic disaster of the recession was thus structured in an entirely novel way. Of about 22,000 active architects, 9,000 were salaried public employees, 3,000 were teachers or engaged in miscellaneous activities, and 10,000 were employed in the private sector either as salaried workers, associates or partners in more than 3,000 practices — of which some 450 were responsible for well over half the work carried out. Actual principals in private practice were probably fewer than 5,000, a number not very different to that in existence in 1939.

The onset of a severe decline in workload soon opened up cracks in the cement linking these disparate factions. Separate organisations representing each group gained strength and the institute itself was compelled to fight on two fronts: externally for the life of the profession, and internally against the withdrawal of any group which considered itself inadequately represented or served. In the public sector redundancies, begun with local government reorganisation in 1974, rapidly intensified with the merging and closure of formerly independent departments. In the private sector practices closed down, sought overseas work, or reduced themselves to a skeletal establishment, often only the principals themselves. Teaching jobs were much in demand, often drawing 50 or more applicants for every post even though incomes in this sector were relatively low. Problems which had been developing

over a long period suddenly assumed a critical importance. The 1975 report of a RIBA group formed to look into the whole question of professional competence following a worrying increase in building failures concluded that 'The frequency of complaints, the labyrinth of controls and the volume of technical and other information, the decline in contractual responsibility, standards of craftsmanship, and inflationary pressures leading to irresponsible claims against architects have made the profession acutely conscious of new and hitherto unknown risks.'

Not least of the hitherto unknown risks was a rapid change in the public image of the architect and a widespread attack on the functional principles of modern design which had underpinned the whole period of postwar growth. Nothing more clearly illustrates the fissile nature of the new profession than the enthusiasm with which its intellectual leadership, shielded from the impact of economic forces by tenured academic appointments, conducted this ill-timed ideological purge: unless perhaps it is the failure of those modernists honoured for their achievements during the years of prosperity to spring to the defence

of themselves and their abused colleagues.

Today, the crisis in architecture may be a subject for catastrophe theory. While it is possible that a dramatic renewal of capital spending on construction might wind the fortunes of the profession back to the boom years of the 1960s, it is more likely that the changes undergone and the animosities revealed cannot be reversed. Under the impact of rising energy costs the housing needs of the nation are as urgent as ever, but there is little likelihood of the recreation of dismantled local authority departments to carry out the necessary programme. Similarly what the RIBA once described as 'The importance of architectural design in the cultural life of the community' once fallen to ridicule cannot easily be restored to respect.

Part of the crisis in architecture is the conflict between an 'independent professional' and 'salaried employee' group identity. Before the Second World War, the ideology of the independent professional was almost universal. In the early 50s the large contribution of public sector spending which went to private practices enhanced their professional self-image. Since then the influence of the salaried public sector has

grown. At present the collapse of the public sector as a source of work causes the two groups to make contradictory demands on the leadership: the salaried architects to oppose government policies, the independent professionals to seek an accommodation with them. The desire of both groups for a single collective identity as architects may collapse under this strain; either the salaried group may take over the profession, pushing it perhaps towards independent action, or two individual organisations may form and the profession divide itself between them. The 150th anniversary celebrations may be very close to this breaking point.

What the architectural profession achieved in the years after World War Two was a measure of cruciality which it has since lost in a process of growth unrelated to work, that can be compared to the devaluation of a currency. Revaluation will in all probability require the withdrawal of some denominations and the creation of units of larger value. At present the graduation of 1,000 new architects every year into a market for their services 25% smaller than it was in 1979 bodes ill for professional solidarity.

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	— 30 May 6.15pm
Vibration	— 22 May 6.15pm
	— 24 May 8.30pm
Destiny	— 22 May 8.30pm
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