

## Skyline Styles

Prince Charles' *Vision Of Britain* (BBC, October 28th) offered a passionate and honest exposition of cultural conservatism. Here was the usual rag-bag of beliefs and fears stressing the importance of national character, national heritage and natural country landscape, and the imminent threat of their demise via the ungodly forces of the destroyers of nature, anti-social moneygrabbers, Americanisation and the workings of architects and planners detached from these obvious commonsense beliefs. The questions resonated in their simplicity: 'But why does it have to be so big?', he asked Caesar Pelli, architect of some massive new Docklands development.

The prince's proposal seems straightforward. The surroundings in which we live should reflect those quintessentially British characteristics of restraint, decency and good taste, as they have done from time immemorial, at least until the postwar period. Here, as with all 'common sense' built on an association of feelings, values and attitudes rather than historical accuracy, there is a certain amount of slippage. Sometimes it might be Victorian cities which represent a more humane environment (constituting a pretty major piece of forgetfulness), sometimes classical cities and architecture, and occasionally something more recently designed.

The truth is, of course, much more complicated. As the *Architects' Journal* peevishly wrote in an editorial entitled 'Charles The Outsider': 'Is it simply that the profession is lamentably out of touch with public opinion as represented by royalty? Or do architects, who daily grapple with all the political, legal, moral, constructional and economic complexities of building design, know something that the prince doesn't; that architecture is not just about picturesque skylines and facade-

*making?'*

It is, of course, precisely the

naivety of the prince's stance which is its strength. His arguments echo around a very real popular sense of dislocation from our built environment, of alienation from its ugliness and lack of control over its changing face. The Left ignores these values and attitudes at its peril. But the prince, like the old Right, offers the superficial and appealing solution of an aesthetic and cultural response to deeper economic, political and social problems.

This ability to maintain the debate within the framework of aesthetics alone as *the* popular issue has both focused the debate on architects and led to a fragmented and defensive reply from their professional establishment, the Royal Institute of British Architects.

On the one hand, the motion debated by RIBA Council at the beginning of November (which believed the Prince of Wales 'would accept that the errors of the past were due as much to politicians, planners and developers, amongst others, as architects') is born of the irritation that this argument is nearly 25 years old, that architects are no longer nasty modernists, and anyway that the majority of the worst postwar building - high-rise housing development and offices built in the property boom to 1974 - were not designed by architects at all but by building contractors. Such is their frustration, they cannot see that the prince does not blame architects alone for postwar design, rather that it is only architects he asks to change their habits.

On the other hand the profession is built on a particular understanding of what constitutes architectural knowledge; painfully fought out from the 1830s as architects sought to legitimise their role in the building process. The battle of the styles between the gothic and the picturesque, through arts and crafts to modernism, was part of a decisive *shift from architecture based on aesthetic rules and*



Banking on a classical revival

patterns of combination to one generated from basic principles such as function or social need and emphasising originality. The RIBA is still committed to this position as the crux of architectural skill against architects like John Simpson or Quinlan Terry who offer '20th century buildings with 19th century wallpaper'.

Further, many architects support an alternative set of values and attitudes to those of cultural conservatism. It is equally vague and untheorised, and concerns the importance of modern life as a progressive force; under threat from conservatism and pastiche. The RIBA has just awarded its gold medal to staunch modernist Richard Meier (who still *designs white buildings*), a man with 'nothing but contempt

for architecture which ransacks the past, robs the present and obliterates the future'. The new RIBA president-elect, Max Hutchinson, clearly intends to continue defending this position.

Interestingly, when the Prince of Wales recently commissioned an architect (for a model village on Duchy of Cornwall land near Dorchester), he passed over his old community architecture adviser Rod Hackney, plumping instead for classicist Leon Krier. As the *Architects' Journal* noted, these grander visions of a classical golden age sit uncomfortably against 'a basically suburban site' and planners' preferences for a more humble low-key, vernacular development. The battle of

*the styles goes on.*

Jos Boys