

12/13/2004

James Boyle  
Cultural Commission

Dear James

I was pleased to hear that the further session on Architecture and the Built Environment in Glasgow on the 19th November went well. I recently had the opportunity for some further discussions with Gordon Davies and Charles Strang who attended, and it was agreed I should follow up a number of particular points, prior to attempting a response to the "62 questions" which have since been circulated

1. **PII**

Currently, a number of major clients make pre selection decisions on the basis of a professional business's level of Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) cover. Such blanket approaches are most probably a mechanism to ensure a minimisation of risk, particularly where public money may be being expended. However, as can be imagined, with the majority of professional businesses in the construction sector being relatively small, such an approach can effectively put large tranches of public work outside the reach of the majority of creative practices. For example, we know from our own records, that currently only about 6% of architects' businesses in Scotland carry £5m PII. In January this year I prevailed upon Jim Wallace MSP to intervene in a case where all those who wished to receive work from the Scottish Enterprise Network on a consultancy basis, would have had to demonstrate the holding of £5m PI insurance in order to pre qualify. Subsequently this position was reviewed, and a second round of advertising took place. (We have subsequently heard that this second round has now been abandoned as well. Meanwhile over 800 consultancy firms have spent a few days of senior management time on two occasions to complete forms, to no avail. That is, of course, a separate issue.) The primary matter relates to the inhibition of access to small businesses, to ranges of opportunities within the construction scene. While the private sector market will largely self-regulate in such issues, and is generally both more relaxed and more sophisticated, the public sector tends to be rather more bogged down with bureaucracy and an aversion to risk taking, which leads to such policies. These are not in the interest of a vibrant architectural (and cultural) life for Scotland.

2. **A+DS**

A culture of greater skill and therefore competence needs to be generated, and there is a general hope and expectation that Architecture and Design Scotland will provide the context within which that may be taken forward.

### 3. POE

Despite being a Government objective, post occupation evaluation (POE) of buildings has not generally been implemented in any thorough or consistent way. This has meant that, for example, with regard to major public investments such as the new round of school building, the opportunities to learn from one built project, and feed it back into subsequent ones, has too often been missed. It was pleasing that, at the third Architecture Policy Unit-sponsored conference on school buildings recently held at Riccarton (and attended by around 400 delegates from all round Scotland) that this issue is now being taken up more seriously within the Education Division. These opportunities for collective learning should not be lost, and mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that this happens rapidly and across the networks. One problem is, of course, that Government policy at this level is implemented by local government, and there has been a problem in managing that process, and setting aside sufficient resources. The Incorporation has argued that such evaluations should be an integral part of any programme of substantial building, and government endorsement to such work either through funding or other mechanisms, should carry that obligation with it.

However, there are much deeper learning lessons that, as a society, we appear not to have grasped, specifically in the world of education. Very few authorities have taken a serious look at the nature of education in future, and what sort of buildings might be most appropriate for such activity over the next generation.

### 4. TIME & ENGAGEMENT

In short, the political objective of dealing with dilapidated schools has generated an enormous pressure to build, without all the prior thinking and participation which such levels of investment justify. In this process, architects are treated as technicians, rather than those who can assist all the stakeholders in exploring options in a creative and diverse way. This is, sadly, a continuing and massive lost opportunity. There was a distressing moment at the conference on 3 December, when a Glasgow councillor spoke out about the frustrations of the Glasgow PFI programme which had delivered multiple blocks of identical design, all of them pared down to the minimum and without any architectural aspiration at all. Whatever method of building facilities such as schools is chosen, there is surely a lesson here for all those charged with responsibility, particularly in the public sector: if we wish to build well, it is essential to have an appropriate time to think through what is required, and sufficient stakeholder participation (not merely "consultation") to ensure that such investment matches their shared ambition.

### 5. ASPIRATION

Finally, there may be some lessons for public procurement from the Lottery. From the outset, a quality demand was set by Lottery funders for capital projects, seeking excellence both in design, and in construction.

That demand for excellence led project promoters to seek ways of showing how that had been achieved – either by the careful selection of design teams with track records of excellent and peer-reviewed buildings, or by design competition etc, and such approaches have indeed led to a raft of buildings which have changed the public's perception of modern architecture.

What much public building fails to have, is a similar level of demand for design quality. Given that that will colour all future experience, both within and outwith such buildings for years to come, remains a matter of deep cultural concern for the Incorporation. The art of Architecture is not merely a technical one.

What those who come after us consider to be “the cultural legacy” of our time, is not for us to determine. However, we should be debating fiercely, and in public, what we are investing so much of our shared resources in. Perhaps the strength of the legacy will reflect the intensity of that debate?

With warm wishes

Yours aye

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