Resisting the endgame

Jonathan Charley spoke at the RIBA on the importance of alternative ideologies. Clare Melhuish took note.

Jonathan Charley's lecture "Mad Histories and Memory Loss" was the last in the RIBA's innovative series of three lectures given by representatives from the world of architectural education. Next week the stage will be taken once again by practitioners – Lifschutz Davidson – and the project review which usually forms the content of these lectures.

It seems the RIBA programme is attempting to address the problem of the growing separation of the architectural profession from architectural education which to a large extent was the subject of Charley's lecture. Indeed, Charley believes that this separation has already happened, leaving architectural education as "the last bastion of humanist education that hasn't surrendered to the management consultants", and, in David Dunster's words, "the rest of the profession [as] the worst form of prostitution".

Doubtless this assessment will raise the hackles of many architects who feel they are doing their best to produce good work in the face of the odds stacked against them – as it did during the question and answer session. But Charley believes "it is time we recognise the tragic condition in which architecture exists".

The basic thesis of Charley's paper, when it eventually touched down on architecture, was that buildings have become commodities and their use factor strictly subordinated (and sacrificed) to their value as tradable assets in the market place. This argument will not be new to anyone trying to practise architecture in post-Thatcherist Britain. Architecture, stated Charley, has been "cleansed of a sense of social purpose" and turned into a form of commodity production by the ideology of capitalism.

Charley – education has a vital role. Photo: Morley von Sternberg.

This is not in itself a new situation. The "central part of the project of the avant-garde", said Charley, specifying the constructivists, Lubetkin and Tecton amongst others, has always been the liberation of architecture from its commodity form as a precondition for its redirection to the "fulfilment of human need". Even then Lubetkin, Charley's hero and role model, ended his days as a pig farmer. But today, warned Charley, the situation had become far worse, threatening the "terminal extinction of architecture" and the end of the profession.

The purpose of Charley's long preamble was to identify the reasons for the particular crisis in which we find ourselves now. While capitalism has been the dominant ideology for a long time, the difference today is the lack of any attempt, even, to articulate an alternative: the loss of the "rebel tradition" based on the belief that "human civilisation does not end with capitalism".

This apparent hopelessness can be attributed to the "ideology of the end", or "endism", which has "raped the intellectual landscape". This is the belief that civilisation is on the precipice of the big break with history. In the "post-capitalist post-modernist endist world... people have lost faith in themselves as the subject of history", and therefore in any possibility of an alternative to capitalism.

Architects may complain about the commercialisation of architecture, but they are as contaminated by the plague of endism as anyone else. As Rex Henry, editor of *A3 Times*, stressed afterwards, architects are notoriously apolitical animals. In schools of architecture students will refuse to collaborate in groups because it will "cramp their style" – so much for the collective spirit. But the root of the problem, Charley argued, is the fact that, "locked in the bourgeois notion of buildings as high art", architects are "unwilling to own up to the fact that buildings have become commodities".

In order to embrace, and campaign for, the "liberation of all social practice from the rule of commodity" the profession must acknowledge the reality of the situation.

It is Charley's hope that "concepts of freedom, liberty, and justice which have been emptied of meaning by profit... can be reclaimed for the 21st century". As he said, the "Emptiness of Language" has "a particular resonance for architecture". To campaign for such a reclaimation of meaning is "to be condemned as a mad preacher" and "worst of all a modernist" but the long-term transformation of the built environment, inextricably linked to ideals including the global redistribution of resources and unregulated time and space, depends upon people prepared to suffer such accusations.

Contemporary architectural education has a vital role to play in producing a new generation of architects prepared to take a stand and articulate alternative possibilities to the dominant ideology of capitalism and the plague of endism.

It is with that purpose in mind that teachers such as Charley and his colleague Per Kartvedt at Strathclyde University are attempting to establish an intellectual backbone to education – too much of which is "a jellyfish" at the moment – which can support the production of architecture as, in Kartvedt's words, "a deeply political act".

Lottery win

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ham was next most significant winner with £100,000 for Levitt Bernstein's scheme to rehouse the gallery in a Victorian school at Brindley Place.

A grant of £98,000 was awarded to the Unicorn Arts Theatre, London WC2 for the completion of a renovation scheme by architect Anita Sen.

London dance venue The Place received £19,000 for a study into the improvement of its facilities.

A total of nine grants were awarded by the Arts Council, which, like other lottery distributors, will be making monthly announcements. It has already amassed £49 million from the lottery and received over 150 full applications.

Civic Trust awards

The Civic Trust this week announced 22 winners in its 1994/95 awards for high-quality environmental design.

Four special awards were given for outstanding schemes: the Conservation Practice's restoration of Uppark House in West Sussex; ADK Architects' rural housing in Rosthwaite in the Lake District; the Drax Power Station landscape restoration scheme in Selby, North Yorkshire, by Weddle Landscape Design; and Carfax Environmental Improvement Scheme in Horsham by Horsham council and West Sussex County Council.

Eighteen Civic Trust Awards were made including Michael Hopkins & Partners' Glyndebourne opera house; MacCormac Jamieson Prichard's student residences at St John's College, Oxford and Sir Norman Foster & Partner's Cranfield University library.

Medallist fails gold standard

Jeremy Melvin explains why although Colin Rowe changed his life, his enthusiasm for him has waned.

I first came across Colin Rowe – by name, not in the flesh – some years ago as a first-year architecture student. One of the tutors, then unknown but who has since achieved a certain degree of notoriety, was a former pupil of Rowe's at Cornell and encouraged me and my contemporaries to read his essay collection *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* before graduating to Collage City.

I found the essays baffling but stimulating, a welcome introduction to the values of iconoclasm. Yes, there really were analogies between 16th-century villas on the Venetian mainland and 20th-century country retreats outside Paris. Architecture could be discussed as if it were a serious mental activity. For someone trying to find a way of ordering his impressions of buildings into intellectually respectable thoughts, this was very exciting.

Over the intervening decade, however, my enthusiasm has waned. I know it seems churlish to criticise such a distinguished figure, who has been elevated to the status of Gold Medal laureate by luminaries such as Edward Jones and who RIBA president Frank Duffy portrays as the weaver of a "golden thread of thoughts [which] holds together architects as diverse as Graves, Stirling, Eisenman and MacCormac". But can such sinuous fibre be spun from anything other than fool's gold?

Take "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa", written in 1947 and probably Rowe's most famous essay. Armed with the powerful new intellectual apparatus of the Warburg Institute (as used by Rudolf Wittkower in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*), Rowe suggested by formal analysis of plans that there was an affinity between Corbusier's Villa Stein and Palladio's Villa Malcontenta. Building on Wittkower's academic tome, which proved remarkably popular with architects seeking to claim an intellectual basis for their subject, Rowe's ideas linked one of the greatest architects of the past with a then living master. The golden thread was actually a canon; the proportional systems and compositional devices he identified were a badge of architectural respectability. And as with all canonic constructions, what lay outside its territory was automatically reclassified as inferior.

Enter the generation of architects who studied in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Looking for simple certainties, such as fixed exchange rates, cradle-to-grave healthcare and uniform solutions to the housing problem, they could perhaps embrace propositions which appeared to be the last intellectual word less critically than would be possible now.

To them Rowe proved with almost scientific exactitude that there were underlying themes common to all great architecture of the past and present which appeared to transcend style. Here appeared an embryonic and supposedly intellectual justification for a historical interest in the past. If there is a canon, you sure as hell want to be part of it; Rowe told you how. Graves, Stirling, Eisenman and MacCormac learned their lessons well.

As Rowe's ideas became a cornerstone of what passed for "architectural history" in the education of the period the problem compounded. He defined architectural history as what interested contemporary architects about buildings of the past. It may have been welcome relief for anyone brought up among the sterilities of Banister Fletcher, but it is not history. Indeed it is part of the process which removed discussion of architecture from mainstream thought.

It is when Rowe is considered as an historian that his failings are most apparent. I admit to a sneaking admiration for the dramatic sense which must make lectures scintillating. And whatever failings a jaundiced 30-year-old might see, I am grateful. For if I had not read Rowe at an impressionable age I might never have found a way of expressing ideas about architecture. That would have been a shame, for me if not anyone else. And I feel guilty about knocking the first writer to win the gold medal since John Summerson in 1976. I just wish it had been Banham.