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 Lifschez Davidson — and the review which usually forms the content of these lectures.

It seems the RIBA programme is attempting to address the problem of the growing separation between 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 practice architecture in post-Thatcherist Britain. Architecture, state and society, has received “a sense of social purpose” and turned into a system of production by the ideology of capitalism.

This is not in itself a new situation. The “central part of the project of the avant-garde,” Charley said, “replicating the concrete structures, Labelbon 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 Labelbon, Charley’s hero and role model, ended his days at a gas works. But with 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 preambles 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 is that there is not the attempt, even, to articulate an alternative: the loss of the “rebels tradition” based on the belief that “human purpose 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 in the precipice of the big break with history. In the “post-capitalist period,” people have lost faith in themselves as the subjects of history, and therefore in any possibility of an alternative to capitalism. Architects may complain about the commercialisation of their profession, but their attitude is contaminated by the plague of endism as anyone else. As Rex Henry, editor of 43 Times, stressed afterwards, architects are notoriously apolitical animals. In schools of architecture students refuse to collaborate in groups because it would “cramp their style” — so much for the collective spirit. But the root of all this, Charley argued, is the fact that, “locked in the bourgeois notion of building in the high art”, architects are “unwilling to own up to the fact that buildings have become commodities.”

To borrow a phrase from the RIBA’s own membership survey, “the spirit of independence, freedom, liberty, and justice which have been such a feature of the profession can be reclaimed for the 21st Century”. As he said, “the emptiness of academicism has a particular resonance for architecture”. To campaign for such a reclamation of meaning is “to be condemned as a mad romantic”. But, “worst of all modernism” — and the long-term transformation of the built environment linked to ideals including the unjustified redistribution of resources and unregulated time and space, depends upon people’s commitment to suffer such accusations.

Contemporary architectural practice is facing a crisis in producing a new generation of architects prepared to take a radical and articulate alternative to the possibilities the dominant ideology of capitalism and the plague of endism.

It is with that purpose in mind that Charley and his colleagues Per Normark, Kencr and the Bartlett Ph.D. students 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 Kaplan’s words, “a deeply political act.”

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

It 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 mentioned the name of his mentor contempos to read his essay collection The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa before graduating to City College.

I found the essays baffling but stimulating, a welcome introduction to the values of iconoclast. 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 it was a serious mental activity. For someone trying to find a way of ordering his impressions of buildings into intellectually respectable thought, this was very exciting.

Over the intervening decades, however, my enthusiasm has waned. I know it seems curious to compare a major intellectual figure, who has been elevated to the status of Gold Medal laureate by luminaries such as Edward Jones and who RIBA president Franck Duffy portrays as the weaver of a “golden thread of thoughts” which “bind together the most diverse as Graves, Stirling, Eisenman and MacCormac”, yet can such a figure be spun from anything other than feel-good?

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 the Villa that there was an affinities between Corbu’s Villa Stein and Palladio’s Villa Malcontenta. Building on Winckelmann’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 complicated web of technical diagrams and compositional devices he identified were a badge of architectural respectability. And as with all canonic construction of what lies inside its territory was automatically reclassified as inferior.

But the generation of architects who studied in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Looking for simple certainties, such as fixed exchange rates, that would care and uniform solutions to the housing problem, they found them in the work of those architects whose ideas seemed to have been the last intellectual word rather than as a response to the here and now.

To Rowe they proved with almost scientific exactitude that there were underlying themes in the contemporary architecture of the past and present which seemed to transcend the ersatz. Rowe seemed an embodiment of high art and subsequently intellectual justification for a historical architecture. If you know you are an academic and can then write the canon, you have as a skill to wait as 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 it became apparent that these architectural problem compounded. He defined architectural history as that which interested contemporary architects about buildings of the past. It may have been as easy to come to the conclusion that anyone for a better than the best anywhere among the lobbies of Baner
to, but it is not history. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work.

In the end it is considered as an historian that his failings are not the least. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work. Indeed it is part of the task of his work.