

CULTURE, HISTORY & PRACTISING IN FRANCE & GB

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I will begin my observations with a short tale of two libraries in order to signpost certain cultural differences prevalent in the two countries.

In the late 1960's, the British Government decided to build a new British Library, allowing the existing institution and its world renowned reading room to become part of a renovated British Museum. Its literary history is archived at the British Library, where a record of all published books and journals are held.

This new library, with facades of red brick, designed by Colin St John Wilson, a senior British architectural figure, is still some years away from completion. It has endured considerable delays and escalating costs due in part to prevarications by successive governments.

In 1988, the French Government, mother of the French language, also decided to build a new national library. It held a design competition in 1989, and, although officially opened by President Mitterand in 1995, it will open to the public in 1996. It will have twice as many reading spaces as the new British Library. It will be fully computerised. It endured a ferocious political battle between 1989 - 91 over the glass facades of its corner tower buildings, which represented a metaphor on four "open books". Conceived by Dominique Perrault, a young architect for whom it was his first major project, these elements were a key aspect of his design.

One could be forgiven for expecting the British library to be on a more significant scale than that of its French counterpart, simply because the number of publications and people around the world who speak and read English as a first language is so much greater. On the other hand one might also anticipate that the French would wish to state the equal importance of their language.

What is revealed is a clear distinction between convictions in the late 20th century.

The British have nervously advanced with their project, with a "safe & mature architect", and a "safe architecture"; while the French have approached the potential of a new library with youthful energy and commitment, allowing controversy, even scandal, to be part of the rich political framework within which projects happen in France, yet ensuring that this is relatively quickly resolved. Is it because a higher degree of autocracy has existed through the office of the President of France?

My own experiences of working in both countries confirms the message from the above tale.

As an 'Early European Architect', first working in Germany in 1970 and receiving my first commission from France in 1976, my interest in seeking a boundary-free approach to architectural thought and practice made the emerging European Community a

natural setting. The UK was and still is prevaricating over Europe, while for more than two decades its reality has been central to my life.

While my contemporaries were still working within architectural practices, I was off on my own account at the age of 28. By the time we received our first large UK commission, to design the Roy Square housing scheme, I had already taken responsibility for several constructed projects abroad running into many millions of pounds.

My ideas and creativity have certainly been more readily accepted abroad, and this has, fortunately, led to our practice receiving more commissions from mainland Europe than from the UK.

Abroad, one has an opportunity to approach work with a directness, freshness and openness which can bring a lot of pleasure. As cultural strangers there is an inevitable curiosity on both sides and no-one anticipates a conventional exchange. Because of this framework, preconceptions, although clearly existing, are given a low priority, and new ways of exploring ideas and the process to achieve them come much more easily. Simply being in a milieu of different cultures is an action which brings forward innovation and development. The more we collectively or individually remain marooned within our own culture, the more our ideas will fossilize. For me, my cultural identity has not been lost working abroad, but rather it has become much more focused, clearer and contextual.

I have never chosen to work specifically in any particular country as against another, although both I and my French partner have always preferred to live in London. I suppose that having learnt to speak French fluently, language has not proved to be an obstacle when a French commission came along. What did surprise me was that they have come along so regularly, while they have been very rare in England. Now, more invitations come from Germany than from either France or England, yet I do not speak German fluently. Participating in different European cultures has been hugely rewarding, not only in the development of ideas, but also in helping one's confidence to mature.

The British have always had a propensity for both innovation and amateurism. Exploiting innovation has often seemed amateurish, as if this position is more morally correct.

I recall one of our English clients saying "I'll consider innovation, but not pioneering; pioneers get arrows in their backs!" Most British clients will not even consider innovation. A favourite saying abroad is - "the British invent, let others exploit, but then come round the back to insure."

Living with modernity when that modernity is being led by other countries, is, given its illustrious past, difficult for the British to accept. Britain's own ability to modernise itself has been tentative, and for those who have had the will to invest their energy in the present for the future have often been frustrated by a British reluctance to back innovation properly - and have subsequently emigrated.

Why is it, that for so long, the British seem so reluctant to invest in young professional talent? Is it that we are preoccupied with safeguarding the status quo, of a misplaced sense of self-preservation? Is the UK's pop and rock music industry so successful because it doesn't rely upon or invade the nation's establishment arenas? The reactionary element which is always present in the young always demands or implies the need for change - exactly what British culture seems to deny, or to have abdicated during the last forty or so years. I have felt that while a marginally quicker rate of change can be tolerated abroad, indeed sometimes welcomed, we in Britain seem so reluctant to accept the premise that another way of doing things could not only be better for all concerned, but would actually be more enjoyable. I am not referring to the imposition of a centralised political dogma, but of cultural development in professional activity. I find it astonishing that we still maintain separate professional institutions for architects and engineers. Switzerland does not separate, and I doubt that this is because there are not so many of them to justify separate institutions? It is probably because they simply recognise the obvious interdependence of the professions.

While we in Britain have been basking in the sunset of Empire and Victorian enterprise and invention, others countries have sought to invest in new futures. Has my involvement with some of these European countries, and their government projects, somehow conveyed a sense of disloyalty to Britain? I hope not, but the lack of commissioned work for young architects here has given me the feeling that this country has shown a disloyalty to its own.

These are some of the opening lines which potential clients in the UK have opened with in their letters of rejection to us.

"We were extremely impressed with your approach and presentation.....but unfortunately..."

"Your ideas were very innovative, indeed brilliant...however for this project....."

"We very much appreciated your unique approach, but we feel that it is too

advanced...."

"We have reluctantly concluded that your design proposals are too modern...."

And these opening lines in letters from various people in mainland Europe.

"We were delighted with your creative proposals and although they appear extremely advanced we are very pleased to inform you that we wish to appoint you to develop them, despite some element of risk to us."

"We have become aware of your innovative approach to architectural design and development and application of new materials and their assembly, and we would like to..."

"I have followed the progress of your architectural work with much interest, and I believe that your work is now of such high quality that I am recommending you to the University of Paris..."

We are familiar with your exceptional work in France, and we wish to fly to London to discuss the design of a very significant cultural project with you...."

We are delighted to ask your office to join us on a major project in Germany where your creative and innovative approach and skills will be of significant value to us and our client...."

For me, the irony lies not with cultural attitudes to modernity, but with the fact that we have been permanently based in London since 1978. Over nearly two decades we have completed only three permanent buildings - all of them have received awards - a few temporary structures, and one temporary museum exhibition interior. Meanwhile, during the same period, we have completed seventeen projects in mainland Europe - and regrettably, not appreciated by people in England for what they are and my contribution to them.

In the first few years of practice I thought that the lack of British commissions stemmed from the fact that my independent career was launched in France.

In 1976, at the relatively young age of 28, I received my first commission, the design of a house in France and I went to France to personally build it.

The next commission, in 1981, came from England for a house - Eagle Rock, and enabled us to establish our Wapping Studio, where we still remain. However, this house was considered avant-garde. Peter Cook described it as "architecture that he might expect to come across in California, but not in the conservative Weald of southern England."

In England, it is said that you have to be over 40 to be taken seriously. It is not uncommon at the age of 30 to be married, and to have children. This is considered in mainland Europe as a reasonable sign of maturity and that one is capable of responsible behaviour and presents little problem to potential clients. As an example, I recall at La Villette that both Directors of the enormous Cité des Sciences Exhibition Programme (£300 production and construction value in 1985) were appointed while in their mid-thirties.

On the contrary, here in England we somehow have difficulty accepting this. After seven or more years of study, an architect is still rarely trusted with a substantial commission. Similarly, in many walks of life, friends or acquaintances, who might become future clients, also seem obliged to reach their fourth decade before they have either the trust or independent means to commission architecture.

Another possible reason for our lack of UK commissions, and perhaps more significant, was that I co-founded the design engineering office of Rice Francis Ritchie in Paris in 1981. I was 33. Although none of us was permanently based in Paris, the impression I sensed in England, apart from our local area in Tower Hamlets, was that we were now mainly involved in France. In fact, the next built commission in 1986, Roy Square Housing in Limehouse came from within Tower Hamlets during the UK building boom of the 1980's.

During the same period, between 1981 and 1989 we were involved in major French and Spanish projects, which were undertaken from our Wapping studio. All of these projects, once built, received European wide media coverage.

Only at the end of this period did we increase the number of our UK projects to four.

In 1989 we received two UK commissions, one for a building at Stockley Park from Stuart Lipton of Stanhope Properties, and the other for an enclosure for the proposed Ecology Gallery from Dr Roger Miles at The Natural History Museum. The latter came about as a result of Dr Miles's awareness of our French work in museology and glass structures.

We also received our first major public building commission in December 1989, from the Jubilee Line Extension Team of London Underground.

For us, we felt that these important and 'visionary' clients heralded a sea change in attitude towards our practice. Yet, since 1989 we received only two further British commissions, in 1995, for the architectural master plan to refurbish the Geological Museum and to design a demountable Opera House.

However we remain optimistic. We have been invited to several UK competitions whilst still being invited to competitions in Germany & France - winning in February 1995 the EDF international pylon competition and receiving several more commissions from mainland Europe.

The introduction of the National Lottery in 1995 offers the potential for Britain to realise new social projects for the Millennium and beyond. So far the signs are not brilliant. In London it appears that it will be a case of polishing the brassware already on the mantelpiece - The South Bank, the British Museum, South Kensington (including the idea of a Museum for the 21st Century before we've even reached it!), The Albert Hall, The NMM Neptune Hall; or resurrecting ideas from the past - a giant ferris wheel, and perhaps even a millennium exhibition to celebrate 150 years since the Great Exhibition of 1851 inside a reconstruction of the Crystal Palace. One project which we have nurtured along, a revolutionary spherical planetarium at Greenwich, on the Thames riverbank, has received outline planning permission, but was rejected by the Millennium Commission as "not sufficiently distinctive". The construction and projection systems are unique, and bring together scientific, educational and entertainment in a forward looking project for London.

I know that from either home or office in London, it is quicker for me to reach a meeting in Paris or Frankfurt than it is to reach one in Birmingham, Stratford or Liverpool. I can never disguise my pleasure to be homeward bound. I have learnt to accept the vagaries of air travel on outward journeys, but if there is a delay coming back, I still get upset.

I have been frustrated, sometimes incredulous at the manner in which things are done here, but I have never once felt like leaving London. The arts, music coupled with youthful energy, compassion and tolerance makes London uniquely attractive and a wonderful city in which to live and work; and with its international transport interchanges, a very convenient base for Europe. However, life would be yet more enjoyable if we could have a few more commissions in Britain!

A desire to recognise contemporary architecture as a statement of cultural virility, places the French attitude, as expressed through its architecture, firmly in the present.

The prevailing attitude in Britain is conservative in its aspirations and desires, such that one is led to question whether there exists in Britain a genuine confusion as to

what is history and what is culture. In France there is a strong and clear recognition that history is history, and that culture is about making the present, in all its forms of expression. Denying this activity, even failing to support some of its extreme tendencies is seen as a preventing cultural development. Contemporary architecture, design and avant-garde & classical music have been, for more than three decades, the most celebrated of the arts, acting as emblems of a continued cultural investment by the French. In contrast, the cultural climate in Britain and particularly in its built environment seems to stifle innovation and radical ideas. Britain appears too tightly tethered to history.

Meanwhile, innovative contemporary architecture has been built abroad by the leading British architects of the last two generations, yet less often in their own country. Pastiche reigns supreme in Britain, exemplified by the new additions to Britain's most famous arena for political and national celebration - Trafalgar square. American imported styling and scale seems to prevail amongst developers for most of the new office buildings in the London, and 'tudorbethan' - a mixture of Elizabethan & Tudor styles dominate domestic urban architecture, mostly erected by volume house builders/developers; and pseudo-high tech styling has invaded industrial estates and leisure centres. In music, it has been the youth of Britain, not supported by government, which has blossomed - rock and roll, heavy metal, punk and house. This music reveals a youth which needs to express itself perhaps far more strongly than in France where the government perhaps listens and responds more positively to their desires, and in the process renders French youth less vociferous.

History is revered and respected in France as much as it is in Britain. Both Britain and France have well documented histories and well protected landscapes and buildings. They have parallel institutions whose purpose is to keep their patrimony and history alive in the minds of its citizens. But whereas the French, at the highest levels in government have actively invested in and encouraged its citizens' endeavours throughout the nation, the British government have sought to redefine government commitment by seeking more and more direct investment from the private sector (with the inevitable consequences of self-interest when individuals and corporate entities make the choices). It is difficult to imagine the French extending the Louvre with overt private funding and "naming" by one of the largest supermarket chains in the country, as did the British with the extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. But perhaps this is important as a sign of redistributed capital and social

commitment, and continues that part of the British tradition that was born during the economic expansion of Empire.

Current investment in the culture of the nation, i.e. its people, is becoming slave to the private inclinations of investors. Culture is commerce in Britain. But one should also recognise that in France, their cultural investment, although much more government based, has a commercial edge to it. There is no doubt that Mitterand's policy of reinvesting in Paris culture through architecture and the activities which take place within his "grands projets" was taken with a view to maintaining Paris as a leading destination for worldwide tourism.

Britain reinforces its tourism by expanding its stock of historic buildings. There has been an extraordinary policy by the British to regard virtually any building or structure which is still standing after a few decades as better than any replacement which can be designed and built today. The number of buildings listed has trebled in the last few years, and the conservation blanket seems to cover most of the centres of Britain's cities.

Comparing architecture and government architectural commissioning between France & Britain is wearing thin in Britain. Yet, looking a little further in mainland Europe, in particular Spain, Germany & Italy, there is as much evidence of architectural vitality as in France. The insular nature of the British appears evident. When, and how often in the last 40 years has an overseas architectural practice, whose principals do not speak English as a first language, been commissioned by a government or municipal agency to undertake a building in one of our major cities? I can think of two in the last couple of years - Herzog & de Meuron for the Tate Gallery of Modern Art and Calatrava for a modest bridge in Manchester. And there is the example of the Prince of Wales commissioning Leon Krier to masterplan his village, Poundbury, near Dorchester. The tide may be turning - with the British becoming more open to design ideas from Europe. It is also possible that the EEC will further influence this direction.

With EEC rules on public expenditure on buildings creating more and more competitions, the need to understand the process and the pros and cons of them is now very important. This is particularly important for the commissioning agencies because there is considerable work involved in their organisation and administration, and the route to a successful outcome is fraught with potential disasters.

What is an architectural competition? It is not as obvious as it may seem.

Its constituent elements are a client with an objective, a design brief, competition conditions, competitors, a jury, a result and a winning design which is built. This is the architectural competition we think of as normal, and when all of these elements are well structured the architectural competition should be successful. However, for those who have competed and been involved in them in various ways, the normal architectural competition is indeed rare. The enormous qualitative variation which can and does occur in the aforementioned constituent elements inevitably makes comparisons between competitions impossible.

Competitions seem inevitably to court controversy - even scandal - yet they have survived with differing degrees of success and respectability in different countries and the recent publication of two beautiful volumes reveals the diversity of them.

There is no single formula. There are those which are open to any architect for which there is no remuneration, only the hope of 'immortality'; those which are initially open - then closed to a few invited architects who are usually paid something for their efforts; there are those that are closed at the outset, those that are mixed, of which the Cardiff Bay Opera House is the most renowned recent example, where a selection of celebrated architects are guaranteed a payment, while the rest hope. In this case, one of the rest, Zaha Hadid made it all the way, despite the scandalous prevarications of the organisers.

Then there are competitions which are local, national and international. Often the main reason for international competitions, of whichever variety, is prestige - not only for the architect who wins - but more importantly and fundamentally for the organising agency, town or country itself; and (hopefully) the pride that comes from its successful realisation.

It is noteworthy that the number of architectural competitions in any given town or country appears to reflect directly its self esteem and economic strength. It is true of Victorian England and Franz-Josef's Austro-Hungarian Empire, as much as it is true more recently of France, Germany or Japan. For many years competitions were not part of the British architectural culture, and have only recently started to catch up with other countries.

The rules governing competitions also vary enormously.

National & international institutions, e.g. Union Internationale d'Architectes have established guidelines, but they are not always used. The rigueur with which competition criteria and rules are applied has been and still is often abused. The temptation and opportunity to get good ideas from leading architects and then pass them on to others still exists, and today many architects are wary of competitions.

The quality and balance between lay & professional members of the jury is crucial to a successful competition, as is the formal recording and publication of the deliberations. The political and or publicity stress that can be placed upon jurors can also be considerable. Lay members of juries are more often than not guided by architects as to the quality of the architecture in the submissions, but there is ample evidence that the latter is not necessarily seen by them as the most important issue.

The example of the recent Thames Barrier Park (1995) and La Parc de La Villette(1983) competitions illustrate differences between France & England in the importance of social issues in relation to architectural competitions. Europan is another interesting example. France has supported this competition since its inception in 1988, while Britain is participating for the first time this year.

One of the strongest messages which come from a review of the history of competitions is how the shift in the physical scale of the urban environment was so often effected through competition and the choice of winner. 19th century examples in London show this very clearly, e.g. The New Parliament and The Law Courts, as do late 20th century examples in Paris e.g. Pompidou, La Bibliothèque Nationale. Perhaps most architects have a natural tendency to grandeur, and the competition context provides a rich outlet for this characteristic.

Certainly the degree of audacity and nerve of architects and juries to overcome the status quo is quite evident in both countries at different times in their history.

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