



RIBA Building Futures

Good morning and welcome to our second Futures Fair. Our aim is to bring together those engaged in researching, exploring and just simply speculating about the future, with those at the coal face of designing, developing and constructing buildings and places today. Our premise is that to be an effective business you should be as aware as possible of the changes we will all face over the next decade and perhaps the next two or three decades. And we believe that those engaged in thinking about the future will be better able to focus their work if they are well briefed on the issues which practitioners are facing in their daily work.

Gladstone speaking on the Reform Bill in 1866 said “You cannot fight against the Future. Time is on our side.” He was of course referring to the inevitability that economic realities would sooner or later sweep away the vested interests which were holding up progress and wider emancipation. That sense of the un-stopability of the future is much sharper today in our global economy and polity. Interestingly that speech was given when Britain was at the height of our economic supremacy, and although the empire was to last another hundred years, in relative terms it has been downhill ever since. At that time it must have seemed as if our society had the freedom to take any decision regardless of any wider world influences. Things are very different today.

So perhaps the first point about reflection on the future is that we have less and less control over it. We may have some limited scope to influence it around the edges but in many areas perhaps not a lot. What we therefore need to do is concentrate on how we can organise our society, our business and our personal careers so that we can optimise our ability to surf whatever waves arrive.

A good example of inevitable change is climate change. Responding to this imperative is a key priority for the RIBA. For its part Building Futures has been studying flooding, and recently published a volume of essays on the subject. We are planning to extend this work by considering how we can plan for the inevitable withdrawal from those areas that we can no longer justify protecting from rising sea levels, or persistent fluvial flooding. This will result in a potentially very large loss of capital assets by individuals, companies and the state. We will explore where this might happen, how consequential losses might be minimised and crucially over what timescales should planning for retreat be undertaken.

Another important current strand of our work is a study of how our buildings make us happy or by inference sad. Due for publication in September “Building Happiness: Architecture to make you smile” brings together the thoughts of an eclectic group of commentators, both academic, professional and lay. They describe how they or others react to their environment and what it is about the buildings they inhabit, design or build that makes them happy. As you will recall the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence which refers to “the unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.”

Thinking forward to a world vastly more populous than we experience even today, it is important to ask ourselves how will we create built environments which will allow a multitudinous world to feel happy? It is a particularly apposite question as an admittedly simple reading of our own attempts over the past sixty years suggests to me that the increasing density of residential environments has seldom lead to creating happier people. So we will have to be smarter in future if we are to be more successful, and that will require both learning from past experience, from the experiences of other cultures, coupled with a willingness to embrace fearless innovation in reprioritising where we spend our money.

With the great bulk of our people living in towns and cities, urban issues are always uppermost in the thoughts of planners and politicians. As the social divide between the wealthy and the poor grows ever wider, and the demands of creating an economy that can compete globally become ever more challenging, achieving consensus on urban change becomes more difficult. The Building Futures game which was launched earlier this year at Daventry forces its participants, many of who may have very different views of the future they want, to face up to the realities of the situation they jointly face, and through scenario building and testing to work towards consensus.

Behind all the issues we look at lurks the increasing unpredictable phenomena of population growth, birth rates, rising proportions of the old and very old, new household formation and household dissolution, internal and international migration. Huge efforts are made by government and academia to predict, and measure these changes and movements. But they appear to be becoming more unpredictable, and more and more difficult to manage and plan for.

Currently the UK is a beneficiary of many of these movements. Inward migration brings high net worth wealth creators as well as a numerous hard working semi skilled and skilled workforce to do the jobs we no longer wish to do. We are all on average living longer, but the cost of supporting us in our last year of life is driving our cherished national health service into financial ruin. And the way we are fragmenting into smaller and smaller households is not necessarily a sign of social health. Nor is the increase in fatherless families something for our society to be proud of. We have been discussing where Building Futures can best make a contribution to thinking about these issues and I am hoping that today may give us some leads.

One issue that we are just starting to work on is the impact of concern about terrorism and conflict on the way we design and plan urban areas and new buildings. There are some real scare stories coming out of the Home Office about how they think our buildings should be "hardened" to withstand terrorist bombs, and the ugly walls which surround the Palace of Westminster may be a depressing harbinger of things to come. And we are all aware of the phenomena of the dividing wall constructed when all attempts at mediation fail: Berlin, Londonderry, Belfast, and on a vastly larger scale Israel/Palestine. What is a proportionate response to these attacks? Is the fear greater than the reality. Are we doing the terrorists job for them when we degrade our environment in this way? Given the other threats to personal safety from traffic, severe weather, and climate change (remember the thousands of elderly people who died of heat in Paris in the summer of 2003), are we over reacting. To kick off we will be holding a debate on this subject as part of our regular series in partnership with the Evening Standard in June. Following that we will hold a meeting of our Advisory Panel to crystallise how we will take the work forward.

Those of you who read Will Hutton in the Observer will have been reassured by his faith in the continuing strength of the US economy and their society in general. He wrote recently " the next 50 years will be as dominated by the US as the last 50. The US will widen its technological and scientific dominance, sustain its military hegemony, launch a period of reindustrialisation and continue to define modernity both in culture and industry." No doubt each of you will have your own views on how sound or desirable that prediction may turn out to be. However what I think is most interesting about his article is his reasoning. He goes on " The country is developing the prototypical knowledge economy of the 21st century, an economy in which the division between manufacturing and services becomes less clear cut, in a world where the deployment of knowledge, brain power and problem solving are the source of wealth generation."

Are there some resonances with our own lighter than air service based economy? Perhaps. But he says "What counts is the strength of a country's universities, research base, commitment to information and communications technology and new technologies along with a network of institutions that supports new enterprise. Here, the US is so far ahead of the rest of the world it is painful".

Nothing there about the value of all those arts based degrees we so favour in the UK. However his point about the importance of Universities is one that we strongly agree with and in particular we have been gnawing away at the fascinating issue of the way universities impact physically, socially and economically on the urban form of their host cities or towns. The degree of synchronicity between the ambitions of town and gown vary enormously and were the subject of a meeting of our advisory panel last year. Currently we are preparing a publication that will discuss six very different scenarios, each of which may have a major impact on our cities. They include:-

- Mass Market, Niche Market, a shift towards privatisation resulting in the emergence of a few elite universities for those who can pay and a mass of standard class universities for those who can't.

- Big, Bad Beasts, the sector engages in major consolidation via mergers and takeovers resulting in no more than a dozen major brands with local branches in the more economically marginal locations.

- My Space, where virtual learning takes over with technology driven virtual universities and learning-on-the-go replacing traditional learning experiences.

- Dead Space, where demographic shifts and competition from foreign universities leaves our cities with redundant specialised academic buildings and massive oversupply of purpose-built student residences.

- Passage to India, or outsourcing takes university education by storm. All our students decide to study in India where rising academic standards, coupled with huge cost savings and a parallel gap year experience forge an unbeatable offer.

And lastly Gold and Silver. As the younger generation shrinks and many turn their back on a University education the over sixties take their place and life long learning, and the concept of education for its own sake replaces the job ticket conveyor belt of today.

While none of these scenarios is entirely plausible, it is nevertheless worthwhile to recognise that in a global economy we cannot take the status quo for granted and exploring these scenarios should strengthen our ability to exploit positive opportunities and manage the threats effectively.

There has been much commentary on the rise of London as the worlds leading financial centre. More recently the focus has been on our perceived over dependence on the financial sector and our potential vulnerability to the after shocks of the credit crunch. There is no doubt that the growth of the financial services sector is a great success story. But I have a sense that it masks an even more important success story, which is the growth of London as the world's greatest concentration of professional services. This is one area where I think we may be able to hold a candle to the US. Whether it is in legal, medical, actuarial, engineering, accounting, management, surveying or architecture, you can find it in spades in this city.

For the last year I have been asking colleagues in architectural practice what proportion of their staff are from abroad. It is generally about half, but sometimes as much as eighty percent. I then ask them if they are engaged on UK work or work abroad. Over the past year the proportion of foreign earnings has been increasing rapidly. All anecdotal I know, but what a far cry from the early nineties when the domestic market collapsed and there were no established foreign client relationships to add robustness. All of which is by saying that I also think it would be timely to return to the excellent work done by Building Futures in its first year on the "The Professionals' Choice: The Future of the Built Environment Professions" You never know if all those financial sector jobs disappear to Shanghai, the contribution made by professional services may be what drives our 21st century economy.

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