

letters

RAE 1: anger, aggression and hope

Sir: I have three somewhat conflicting reactions to the significance of your excellent report on the Research Assessment Executive (arq 7) on the work of UK university schools of architecture. The first is frustration at the damaging outcome of the profession's long standing neglect of architecture's knowledge base that has led to the undistinguished results reported in your Spring 1997 issue. We should all have seen this coming. That some of us did doesn't soften the blow. Collectively and individually, we have all failed an important test.

My second reaction is also angry but more aggressive. How is it that we architects, with our understanding of the design process and our well honed system of project based teaching – so much better than the slipshod pedagogy of other disciplines – have not had the wit to explain the intellectual as well as the practical advantage of our methods?

My third reaction is more positive. While I appreciate that to argue in the battle for funding that architecture is a special case is politically to guarantee isolation, architectural knowledge, like architectural teaching, does have certain characteristics that set it apart from other disciplines. Architectural research, to be any good, is inherently interdisciplinary, systemic, deontic, different. In the longer term, I believe, other disciplines will want to emulate what is inherent, if undeveloped, in our design based discipline. In the short term, architectural schools will have to survive the danger of being bullied into accepting categories and criteria that are very different to – and intellectually much more limiting – than our own.

This won't be easy. However, there are more sources of funding for

architectural research than the Research Councils. Excellent research work is being funded and carried out in the context of architectural practice – for example, in Foster's office, in local authorities like Hampshire and Essex, and in my own practice, DEGW. Not enough, of course, and too often cut off from the intellectual resources within the universities. However, enormous amounts of data exist in practice and above all in the buildings of our clients to which intelligent practitioners have ready access.

I believe that if we build on the groundwork that has been done in the RIBA Strategic Study, if we don't lose our nerve in arguing our case within the university funding system, and above all if we as architects in developing our own research programme build on our strength by developing links between practice and the schools of architecture then there is some hope of surviving the present crisis.

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RAE 2: too little, too late

Sir: UK schools of architecture are frequently chastised, even by outside well-wishers, for the introverted and self-referential nature of their discussion and debate. But, as the last Research Assessment Exercise has made plain, they are not immune to changes in their external environment. According to Peter Carolin (arq no. 7), research – or, more precisely, the funding which follows assessment of performance in research – has moved from being something which did not matter much to 'perhaps the most

critical issue for the future form and very existence of Architecture schools within universities'.

If true, this Road to Damascus conversion has possibly come too late for most schools of architecture. Building a robust research culture and capability is a long term process, requiring commitment and forward planning over a five to 10 year cycle. It isn't something that can be put in place quickly, in time for the next RAE in 2000, for instance. A research culture and capability have to be cultivated. Both grow slowly. Both are highly susceptible to the environment in which growth has to occur.

The RAE is a major driver for change within the UK's construction research base. As Peter Brandon, chair of the Built Environment Assessment Panel, made clear in his debriefing report, the government wishes to see selectivity in the allocation of research resources based on assessments of the quality of research. One impact of the RAE has been to make universities more 'research active', at least as far as construction-related disciplines are concerned. According to the Department of the Environment's 1996 statistics, universities are now the fastest growing part of the UK construction research base, increasing their funding by 60% between 1990 and 1994, at current prices. Today, after in-house capacity in private companies, universities are the construction industry's largest resource for R&D. In 1994 they undertook 23% of all construction R&D, up from 17% in 1990.

To date, the RAE has had contradictory effects. Its focus on funding universities through selectivity based on high performance is concentrating funding on existing

centres of excellence. Simultaneously, until now, it has pushed more UK academics to become 'research active'. This has expanded the size of the UK's research base without necessarily increasing its quality or even its capability.

Taken at face value, the comparatively weak RAE ratings for Built Environment-related departments reported by Carolin must imply a subsequent shake-out. While staff in university departments may have become the fastest growing component of the UK's construction research base, they have been judged as wanting – as not possessing, either individually or collectively, a strong research capability. So, if government (and private sector) clients are to be more selective about whom they choose to fund, some university-based researchers will be forced to leave this 'market place'. Under these circumstances, the chances of nurturing a nascent research culture or capability in a school of architecture will be considerably reduced.

The RAE also has to be seen in context. It is just one of the forces tending towards centralisation being introduced into British higher education. This has also been encouraged by the focusing of government policy on science and technology through the Foresight programme. In construction, the conjunction of Foresight with the emergence of a Whole Industry Research Strategy has given rise to the formulation, and currently to the implementation, of a top-down, big business-led, approach to construction research and innovation. This is unlikely to map directly on to either the interests and needs of architectural practices, which remain obdurately

small, or on to schools of architecture. Along with the RAE, these forces are likely to result in academics designing research projects whose time horizons are short and whose scope and nature, under the influence of Foresight, become more constrained and less innovative in order to secure increasingly pigeon-holed funding. In turn, this will constrain the ability of schools to nurture spontaneously emergent research interests.

In short, most schools of architecture find themselves in an intractable position (which is possibly irretrievable in the short term). Thirty-five years ago, Elizabeth Layton, in a report prepared for the RIBA in the wake of the Oxford Conference on architectural education, wrote, 'One aspect of the failure [of the profession to make fundamental advances in architectural knowledge] is the small number of staff and post-graduate students in Schools of Architecture who are concerned with research or post-graduate study. This is now recognised as a serious weakness of the Schools and the profession as a whole'.

A third of a century later, this weakness has been rediscovered, re-revealed by the RAE. Unfortunately, the external climate is now much less propitious than it was following the Oxford Conference. Accordingly, architectural education, along with the profession, will have to respond much more vigorously if either want to recover ground lost to other (newer) construction-related disciplines during the intervening period.

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