An Interview with Colin Stansfield-Smith.

Joseph FALZON and *Ronald* SULTANA

Karl Otto wrote in 1996 that *'schools are not only institutions of instruction, but at the same time visible symbols of educational conceptions of their time'*. How far has school design in Britain in recent years reflected this principle?

In spite of all educational and architectural concern to remove any hint of fashionable intent in school design in the mid 20th Century, it is perhaps surprising to find how much school building reveals its origin, nature and time. Each building invariably tells the story of its own aspirations from the civic pride of board schools at or before the turn of the Century, 'the beaux art' conservatism of the between war period, the utopian ideals of post 2nd war system building, the institutionalised vernacular of the 70s and 80s. But perhaps the most telling statement about school buildings of the 20th Century would be 'the temporary', from the H.O.R.S.A, (a wartime legacy), to a whole range of diversified squalid cheap accomodation. Which child since the war has not spent part, if not a substantial part, or his/her education in one of these? The excuse for these is always the dynamic and flexible need of education but what an indictment of civilised society! This is symbolic of the post war story that tells of impoverishment both in thinking and investment, as well as progressive enlightened thinking in education. It is a story not about architecture but about management of resources.

Most of our state secondary schools established in the 30s are like mutations exposing an evolution over several generations, each addition and adjustment an indicator of a national trend or educational edict. There are, for instance, the R.O.S.L.A. buildings (Raising of the School Leaving Age), the need for increasing specialisms. laboratories, sports halls, youth clubs, etc., but each site expresses the same recurring sequence.

Now with falling rolls and diminishing numbers in some sectors, re-organisation and rationalisation come into play offering mouth-watering oppotunities of creative demolition and environmental improvement, but these are seldom taken; such planning strategies are difficult in a climate of competing market forces.

In the United Kingdom, the school building programme was dominated for a long time by system building. Can you make an assessment on the overall effect of this type of construction on school architecture and, maybe on the quality of architecture produced.

'Comprehensive' is the word that comes to mind for education in the mid 20th Century. It seemed synonymous with the universal forms of social modernism. Its ideas and its buildings were generalised and ubiquitous; education was a shared collective experience and each new educational theory was recognisably national or international in its physical manifestation of building typologies. Systems were a national consequence of these theories.

One understood the social cause in system building; its neutrality, its uniformity, its standardisation were seen as a positively advantageous, almost a moral statement to the left wing social mentality of the post war period. The pragmatic arguments for system building were also powerful; kit of parts and dry rather than wet building techniques and industrialised components were kind to the on site operative but even more convincing were the procurement benefits of bulk purchase. A consortia of like minded authorities organised to achieve potentially far reaching and collective progressive thinking was to many a rewarding experience.

The 50s and 60s were a time of post war utopian ideals, of universal homogenised and coherent pragmatism; aphorisms like 'form is function', 'less is more' minimalism sustained two decades of public sector programmed Miesian elegance was at one with an architectural theory that was objective, measured, scientific and calculated with technology taking the lead; it denied self expression and rejoiced in collective teamwork and multi disciplinary working.

In retrospect we now acknowledge these aspirations were a chimera, a social fallacy. The physical reality on the ground was universalised mediocrity and institutionalised modernism. Cheapness became an end in itself, a world exploited

by the speculator and cheap politician. What we were left with was an alienated public estate and a loss of confidence in public service.

But the ideas inherent in system building remain seductive and will no doubt be revisited but, we hope with more understanding, conviction and commitment to the wider issues. For instance, one factor that was ignored was the maintenance liability of the existing estate. This represented over 50% of most authorities building turnover and all of it demanded traditional trades. The process of system building had little empathy for sustaining these. The buildings of the 50s and 60s now consume nearly 60% to 70% of all authorities' maintenance budgets. Capital is converted to revenue to compensate for heavy shortfalls and a whole generation of new and future building has been pre-empted.

Surely here are powerful arguments to build better in the first instance. As a constant reminder in Winchester we have an ancient and high status public school. It has rrepresented an enduring educational presence for hundreds of years and beautiful architectural ideas that has served many privileged generations.

In the design of schools, in general, the educational functions of the school, within very stringent financial constraints, take precedence over considerations of aesthetics. Yet your school buildings have been praised for their architectural value. How did you manage to achieve this remarkable fact?

Setting up a culture of good design in the Hampshire Office was dependant on political support. In the early 70s the climate was already favourable. By the mid 70s the many users of the late 1950s and 60s buildings were expressing disaffection. The honeymoon period of cheap building management had finished and the repair bills and incidence of failure were growing at a rapid rate. All these reasons helped to obtain the enthusiastic responses for a change in design intention and building procurement. Our endeavours at first were cautious- the celebration of pitched rather than flat roofs (a continuing theme in the office philosophy) was a reversal of a primary tenet of modernism. Our buildings were popular and we earned credibility. We were able to abandon a flawed system of building, the Second Consortia of Local Authorities was doomed by this decision, Hampshire having once been the largest user of S.C.O.L.A. I spell out the title to indicate the indifference to competition. Who in these days would ever want to be associated with anything that called itself "the second consortia"?

The real answer to how we won lies in the leadership and vision of one politician who took an over-riding interest in what we were attempting to achieve, Freddie Emery -Wallis, who was the leader of the County Council from 1975 to 1991. The culture we created was deliberately pluralistic and studio orientated. The notion of house style was anathema and each project would be played on its merits. What also helped was the reduction in the scale of building programmes; each project now could be indulged individually and the aspirations and ambitions of a talented team of designers celebratred.

Of course, attracting such a team was part of the challenge but the important fact remains that we represent a team culture and there is a pride in identifying with such a culture inspite of it being a public sector. We would want to reverse the stigma of public practice and reassert a pride in public service.

British Primary Schools of the post-war period received considerable attention in the international press whether for their education methods or the quality of the buildings. Do you feel that your buildings reflect this traditon?

Post-war school buildings in the United Kingdom were universally revered during the 50s and 60s. Many architects were totally committed to the social modernism that they represented. It was essentially a European experience and, as I have suggested was international influence. Its social philosophies were to a large extent all pervading.

But strong reservations were already being expressed in international forums on architecture. Giancarlo De Carlo, was particularly questioning the validity and relevance of many of its implications in Italy. So frequently school building was the product of a set of policies, procedures and formulas that became so prescriptive and universally applied that the whole system felt like stale chocolate. The user of the buildings had little place in this structure, because in the complex nature of briefing architects, it was the politician and the administrator who held sway. User participation became an important event in the 70s. This was because a substantial part of capital programmes dealt with existing buildings and school communities rather than with new emerging ones as had been the case in the 60s.

Modernism in architecture had changed its emphasis - the tenets and beliefs so strongly held in the 50s and 60s were seen as too single minded, simplistic and superficial, but one could still remain committed to its social aspirations even though one abandoned some

of its physical symbols (like the flat roof).

The mood of the time was that the particular was becoming more interesting than the general. As I have said uniformity and consistency had become mindless. Nurturing the identity of an individual authority would have been anathema in the 60s because at the time local government was seen as a generalised phenomenon. But in the 70s, with the emergence of a Thatcher climate of individualism, almost a natural consequence of this political change would be individual competing authorities or competing schools.

To try and single out Hampshire to demonstrate its merits and uniqueness had a concurrency with our wish to focus on individual artefact. The maxims in the office were "its the product not the process" or "the project not the programme" that matters. Fair shares for all, or being concerned about 'a level playing field' were ideals of a discredited past. But to abandon such a sincerely held morality does have its problems. Producing a beautiful school can upset its neighbours who feel disadvantaged by the way it can attract more pupils. Quality can destabilise when it creates such exaggerated differences. But that is hardly an argument against the notion of quality as an end in itself.

The 50s and 60s were a time of innovation and experimentation, both in architecture and education. In some senses the 'post modern' culture of the 70s and 80s seem regressive in comparison - attitudes seem conservative and backward looking when philosophies on 'team teaching' are expounded or when architecture reveals an overriding homage to the past. I have often thought that our designers have represented a return to traditon, in the broadest sense, but they still incorporate a modernist ambition which is essentially about ideas, relevant technology and a new searching interest in a sense of place.

Technology itself cannot legitimise architecture or make it authentic but our sort of 'passive technology' applied with intelligence can create an empathy with the client user.

Architects working for the government, whether at national or local level, have a tendency to compromise their design work because of political realities and frequently end up doing managerial duties and hardly any architecture. How far would you say that this statement applied to you when County Architect?

It would be silly to pretend that one spends all one's time designing. All professions have two functions to cope with - the professional function, which in the case of the architect is the design function and the management function - one facilitates the other, I suppose it would be universally accepted that good professional judgements are easier to manage than rotten ones, although it might be argued that all professionals are in the risk business if they are at all ambitious, and risk-taking requires its own form of management. With the increasing demands of a complex society, architecture, it must be admitted, demands an excessive amount of management and I have relied on specialist support in this area. Provided this is sensitive, intelligent and understanding of the issues involved it must be the most sensible way to practice, because I cannot pretend to have been trained or wish to spend a disproportionate amount of time on administration. My time and skill is better spent on the architectural focus and in this sense I see myself as critic, catalyst, enabler, patron, entrepreneur as well as designer.

I would also like to feel that the difference between public and private practice are exaggerated - it is too easy to generalise; each practice whether private or public is different and in this competitive world some of this uniqueness is jealously guarded. There are no reasons why public practice should be anymore management or administration orientated than private. The partners of a large private practice have to market their endeavours in a way the public practice, until recently, has not. The more celebrated firms are large business enterprises which demand very sensitive and inspired management to adjust to the vagaries of an erratic market. However, I must confess that there will always be a tendancy in government to reward good communication skills in preference to design ones because of the visual bankrupcy in our society.

Hampshire as a public practice has won several commissions in the private field or outside its own area of jurisdiction. We enjoy the privilege of joint enterprise projects with some private practices. I am a Professor at a University and am commisioned to build a new School of Architecture.

Which, in your opinion, is your best school design? Is this opinion shared by your critics?

Most of our schools have been designed and developed as part of a theme. Hatch Warren, Tadley and Bishopstoke are part of a big volume energy theme, Eastleigh and Farnborough are part of an arcade theme. (also with an energy slant); Gosport Bridgemary exploited a security challenge; Alton College converted a drainage problem into a water garden. Exploiting these ideas has always offered rich design potential. So

I would find it difficult to choose between Tadley, Bishopstoke, Hatch Warren, Elson and Borden but I suppose the school that gave me most personal pleasure is Cowplain because of its simplicity and its elegance. It converted a headmaster, John Clouting from a position of scepticism to overwhelming enthusiasm. It was his commitment that won for us The Building of the Year Award in 1987.

And what about a school designed by somebody else?

Velmead, by Micheal and Patty Hopkins. Without this as a precursor we would not have developed Cowplain.

Can you describe what you consider to be the qualities of a good school building?

What is interesting about this question is that it would be impossible for me to answer it without explaining that nearly all our primary schools are the result of one standard brief. The dialogue between the design team, its personal chemistry, the uniqueness of context all contribute to a startling range of solutions, each expressing a difference of emphasis. Perhaps the elements that they have in common are an empathy and understanding of the purpose, the user, the site and its context and an integrity that comes from commitment, but primarily that it works as an educational environment.

In a recent book on school buildings (B.E. Graves 'School Ways' New York, 1993) one of the contributors claim that an important emerging trend in school design is that *'schools will be held in high esteem' because 'in the educational age, expect educational facilities to attract the best talent in planning and design, and earn important design awards'.* You have won awards for your schools and your work has received considerable attention - would you say this is a confirmation of the emerging trend?

The fact that we have won the B.B.C. Design Award twice out of the three occasions, it has been run over 10 years, seems to support this view.

However, it does reflect an emotional and, if I am honest, a distorted response of the public who perhaps are less interested in the architectural than in the social intent. The notion of 'school' seemed more inviting than some of the 'mega' building entries, (like Stanstead Airport), and this seems to suggest an emerging consciousness of a new social responsibility.

Over the last two decades social architecture attracted very few committed and interested talents. Schools of Architecture did not see a 'school' as an interesting design vehicle because it was too confined in its intention and dominated by too much prescription. This was a pity because challenging the policies, rules and regulations and what was and is contained in Educational Bulletins would have been a rewarding experience.

Can you predict how schools of the future would look and what facilities are they likely to provide?

How Information Technology will influence the design of schools is difficult to predict but could easily be exaggerated. Education always seems to be in a state of crisis. Interesting facts like an infant school being occupied for only 9% of its whole life or Hampshire having some 25,000 empty school places in a school population of 300,000 and yet sustaining several hundred temporary buildings (huts), seems to reveal that market forces and free choice do not always deliver the most cost effective system. The waste in the current structure is reflected in cheap building fabric and environments. As an architect, as an educationalist, I would be hoping to see a radical improvement in the quality of environments in which children have to live and learn.

Schools and colleges will increasingly become social in emphasis as managed home learning, through video and information technology, is developed. England has tended to vary from the continent in this respect with its family dependance on both parents working. But this is a huge social question which is quite beyond the forecasting skills of an architect.