There are plenty of British architects around who are very good and they are as numerous and diverse as at any time in history. We are not saddled with a singular style, or two or three styles to choose from. There is a certain inventiveness within cost constraints. On the other hand many of those architects don’t do anything because no one asks them. Many, like AOC and FAT, are younger than me and have grown up in a very different climate than my generation, and the one immediately above me.

There are many other practices that could do better. Many firms have just become machines for making buildings. When you employ 1,000 people you have to keep throwing meat into the machine. Are very large offices a good thing for the world? Probably not. They have to churn out projects and can’t give the tender loving care to them.

In Britain we have the talent, and some good schools, but it’s been true for a while that good young architects have to go abroad to get noticed. So we have good architects, but what gets built could be better. It needs to be more diverse.

British architecture probably means less today. The vast majority of architects only practice in this country. Relatively few have globalised themselves. The distinction is that many architects are local and happy to live and work in medium sized towns and they do an important job.

Then there are practices of ten to 15, who are big enough to do interesting things. They are the ones that are suffering in the current climate. They are the ones that are big enough to grow and do more national and international projects, but should get off their backsides and do it.

Recognition

I do think there are too many awards but, as an architect, the Stirling Award is the prize that you want. It’s decided by architects for architects. It’s always nice to be recognised by your peers, whether or not there’s a cheque attached. We put in the Hôtel du Département des Bouches-du-Rhône in Marseille in the first year (1997) as a building in another country could be considered. I’m also comfortable having foreign architects, as long as their work is in the UK. The fact that it has grown to encompass all efforts related to the UK is good.

James Stirling’s Leicester Engineering Department Building was near where I grew up in Northamptonshire and I got someone to drive me there to look at it at 16. He transformed through life, he didn’t just stick to one thing.

I don’t know what I think of Accordia (the winner of the 2008 Stirling Prize by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studio). I thought the Manchester Civil Justice Centre by Denton Corker Marshall was a more interesting building, but to be fair I know that building, whereas I haven’t been to the winner. I looked against some of the people living in Accordia. They seemed very smug, and for social housing, the people who were interviewed, seemed very middle class. I think there should be a mix of people of different financial backgrounds in places.

In the UK, I think that there shouldn’t just be social housing but a mixture. You can’t just build the houses then tick a box. You need to provide the facilities that people need, then people will behave themselves. The social housing policy in London is good, 40% to be affordable, but then it got changed so that a developer could build the affordable housing on one site and the unaffordable housing on another. That’s wrong because there tends to be a rule that those who are well off tend to be more engaged with the community. The people who don’t have much money don’t, but if you put them together it heightens the awareness of the community and of civic pride. Certainly the London borough of Southwark, we are very proud of our Peckham Library, which got the Stirling Prize.

Making the shortlist

One of the great things that can feed any nation’s stock of architects is public work. The problem is, in order to be considered to get onto the shortlist for serious consideration, you have to show three years of audited accounts. Some of the people I know don’t have them so get ruled out. It’s not about architecture, it’s about money. How do they get off the starting block?

The vast majority of architects only practice in this country. Relatively few have globalised themselves.

Some places are worse than the UK. In Vienna who gets to work is controlled by three architects. I think it’s a crime against architecture. If young architects are waiting for the old ones to die then there is a huge skills gap. If you never get to build anything, you don’t learn the rest of it. They don’t teach you that at school. You learn by working for other people, then you try it yourself, and then you learn some mistakes and then you get better at it.

I don’t think other European countries are better at nurturing talent. People talk about Holland a lot, but actually Holland is shit. Young practices there don’t do anything the planning stage. That’s quite common. After the design stage it goes to someone else and gets changed, so it becomes a bit wonky. In the future there will be lots of frontline staff like contractors and product managers and no architects protecting the design, which mitigates against Holland getting the best built environment.

The Good British Architecture Debate: Alain de Botton