PAST IMPERFECT, FUTURE TENSE

Promising young architects have had to grapple with recessions before. In 1981 RIBAJ interviewed what it called The Frustrated Generation. How did they fare, and how are their youthful equivalents today coping with the crisis?

Words | Hugh Pearman, Jan-Carlos Kucharek and Pamela Buxton

As now, the start of the 1980s was a bad time for architects. The Winter of Discontent had led to the austere early years of Thatcherism, with both public and private sectors equally hard hit. I was lucky – emerging from university in 1977 in a brief upswing between two recessions, I landed a journalistic job which actually paid money. That was £3.027 a year at first, working for Building Design under the editorships first of Peter Murray, then Sutherland Lyall, then Martin Pawley. Turnover of both editors and staff was rapid in those days, but at least the concept of the unpaid intern was unknown, as was word processing. We used manual typewriters and carbon paper, and cutting and pasting meant just that.

From there I moved to work for BDP, where the next recession meant that relatively few projects were coming into the office and a lot of effort went into the few competitions and selection processes going. It was a tough time, but they successfully kept afloat by developing new private-sector specialisms – especially high-tech factories and shopping centres.

Not everyone was so fortunate, and this was reflected in a special issue of the RIBA Journal in January 1981, which Murray had gone on to edit in succession to Monica Pidgeon (see her obituary, page 14). Written largely by Stephen Gamme, The Frustrated Generation analysed the situation – comparing it unfavourably with a decade earlier when work had appeared to be plentiful – and asked some Young Turks of the time for their views. Most of them were without a building to their names, and those names included Will Alsop, Paul Gibson of Sidell Gibson, serial competition-winner Tom Henehan, Peter Wilson of Bolles+Wilson, and others including Julian Wiskham (who had worked with Ted Cullinan and designed a fashionable bar), and a frustrated project architect at BDP, David Lees, who blamed the RIBA for not supporting young practices.

Other young ‘uns, like Keith Priest of Fletcher Priest, were doing pretty well and had few complaints. So, as part of our final issue of this 175th anniversary year of the RIBA, we have returned to some of those names from 1981, and talked to some younger practices of today. What’s the same? What’s different? What advice would the 1981 generation offer to their younger equivalents?

There is this consolation for those finding things hard right now – most of the Frustrated Generation went on to do pretty well for themselves.

Will Alsop
Will Alsop at RMJM
Design principal

‘I never expected to gain work until now, and consequently never looked for it,’ wrote Will Alsop in the RIBAJ Frustrated Generation issue of January 1981. ‘I always felt that six or seven years after finishing fifth year should be spent exploring the subject free from the constraints of school and free of built consequences. I do not feel cramped by the current situation.’

Alsop, then in his early thirties, had made his living by teaching sculpture rather than architecture but – having also spent some time in the 1970s working for Cedric Price – he was clear where his vocation lay. ‘We are in the business of giving joy to those that experience the places we design, and that cannot be done by being anything other than an architect,’ he wrote. And as it happened, 1981 was the year he set up Alsop and Lyall with John Lyall. ‘Two projects paid the bills – Riverside Studios in Hammersmith and Wesminster Pier,’ he recalls today. Although Westminster Pier, a floating building, was built, Riverside Studios in Hammersmith never saw the light of day. Slowly the practice grew, and the 1991 competition win for the Hôtel du Département in Marseilles, known as Le Grand Bleu, made its reputation internationally. But it was the far smaller Pecham Library that won Alsop the Stirling Prize.

Since then, Alsop has been famous for falling out with his partners – first Lyall, then Jan Stirling, then SMP group (renamed Archial). Colleagues like Christophe Egret (project architect for Pecham) and urban planner David West have set up on their own. Alsop now resides in the RIBA stable (Will Alsop at RMJM), while, confusingly, Archial retains the rights to the name of Alsop Architects. But through all the changes he has built a lot – in Britain, Europe, and Canada.

Negative publicity from the odd controversial, white-elephant project such as The Public arts centre in West Bromwich tends to mask the fact that, for example, he has a strong showing in university-level buildings like the Queen Mary research laboratory in Whitechapel, East London, and such masterplans as Urban Splash’s New Islington development in Manchester.

‘I’d give the same advice to young architects today as I gave myself back then – go east! I meant Europe, and Germany in particular. Then they didn’t ask to see track records. They were interested in ideas and their competition system was well-run,’ says Alsop today. He advises trying the north European countries in particular – France, Germany, the Netherlands. ‘Don’t exclude Britain, it’s just that it’s harder to get anywhere in the short term here.’

Unlike some architects, Alsop claims never to have had a wealthy private client; his success has mainly come from the public sector. The key to the future, he thinks, is collaboration – both young firms pooling resources and large successful practices gawking succour to the young. In much the same way, in fact, that Alsop himself gathered a stable of younger practices like FAT around him for certain masterplans. This is for sound commercial reasons, he says – the pre-qualification bar is set so high for many OJEU-notified projects, and insurance requirements are so daunting for projects of any size, that younger firms will never get a sniff of them unless they form coalitions. More big-firm masterplans should make room for talented youngsters.

He says he does still need to build; theoretical architecture can only go so far. ‘To me it’s all the same shoot – but only by building can you know if something’s right or not.’

Vincent Lacovara,
Daisy Froud, Geoff Shearcroft, and Tom Coward

AOC

Founding directors

‘We thought that after three years of hard work in the public sector we could find the right projects at the right level to compete on. But we’re finding the entry vehicle is essentially too high today, part of the frustration of
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Sidell Gibson
Paul Gibson
McKnight.

good stead for the future.

involvement in the group Forum for Alternative Belfast. This all stands HHMcK in

cities, and its size means it’s far easier to network – also helped by Hackett’s

Belfast’s low overheads give HHMcK an advantage over firms in more expensive

architects’ over-reliance on the public sector that they need to build their own

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Having won the Young Architect of the Year Award in 2008 and with a couple of

substantial built projects behind it, HHMcK was poised to move up a gear. But the

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practice has a dozen other projects on the back burner due to the recession. This

includes its E43m offices and masterplan for Meath County Council, which it won

in competition in May but has also stalled.

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challenging,’ says McKnight, who co-founded the practice with Mark Hackett and

Alastair Hall.

It’s difficult to run a practice of 11 people on houses’, says Ian McKnight of

Belfast practice Hackett Hall McKnight, which has spent most of the past year
designing new homes in Surrey, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and Scotland.

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Meanwhile, HHMcK has thrown its energies into the houses, which although

interesting in themselves, have become something of a cash flow treadmill. As a

result, it’s been hard to find time to enter as many competitions as it would like –

although in a recession the firm is well aware that this one of the best ways for

young, smallish practices to win work.

‘We’re so focused on cash flow that things we’d like to do to develop our practice,

like competitions, aren’t happening,’ says McKnight.

It’s an all too familiar story. Without the built track record, HHMcK has little chance

of getting work in its own right for major public schemes – it simply couldn’t tick

enough boxes to get past prequalification. ‘The only way we can get into public

work is through partnering with a large practice. We’re in for a few things at the

moment,’ says McKnight.

Despite these difficulties, HHMcK remains positive and is confident the MAC really

will kickstart any day now, although the practice may have to wait longer for the

Meath scheme.

‘The Meath project isn’t going anywhere because of the Irish economy. But

because the MAC is going to be built, we’re optimistic for the future. We have

10-15 potential projects and we only need one or two to come through.’

Meanwhile, the recession has brought a few positives – they’ve had time to
develop their ideas on the houses as a team, and have learned from other

architects’ over-reliance on the public sector that they need to build their own

practices on a broader base of work.

Belfast’s low overheads give HHMcK an advantage over firms in more expensive

cities, and its size means it’s far easier to network – also helped by Hackett’s

involvement in the group Forum for Alternative Belfast. This all stands HHMcK in

good stead for the future.

‘Word of mouth is very powerful here. A good reference is very significant,’ says

Paul Gibson

Sidell Gibson
Consultant

No, says Paul Gibson, he has no regrets about retiring from architecture –
although he’s still Arb registered, and billed as a consultant by the practice he
jointly set up in 1973, the highly successful practice of Sidell Gibson. He and Ron
Sidell – still at the helm of the practice – had trained together at Canterbury and
Regent Street Polytechnic, bought a house together, even had a joint bank
account as they prepared to launch the firm. Now living in Wiltshire and practising
(as does his wife) as an artist, Gibson, 68, says: ‘I still love architecture, and the
idea of designing, but administering an office – no!’

In the Frustrated Generation issue of 1981, Gibson talked of how – following stints
working for the Farrell Grimshaw Partnership and Foster Associates – Sidell
Gibson had very little work in the UK. The practice had been set up on the basis of
a large office project in Germany for developer MEPC, but later in the 1970s that
market dried up. They also found themselves working in Iran – both for the Shah
and, following the revolution, for the Islamic republic. But this university and
housing design work again led nowhere. ‘We now live in hope that our current
projects, office interiors and sheltered housing, will give us scope to build
something worthwhile,’ said Gibson in 1981.

Indeed they did. Sidell Gibson successfully developed its strand of rural sheltered
housing – resisting vernacular typologies such as almshouses – across some 30
UK schemes for the English Courtyard Association. But it first hit the headlines in
1987 when it won the high-profile competition for Grand Buildings on Trafalgar
Square with a controversial scheme to rebuild the existing structure virtually in
replica. ‘That made a big difference,’ says Gibson, who remains adamant that this
office building was an appropriate low-key response that should not have tried to
compete visually with the big set-piece public buildings of the Square.

Although the practice later developed a specialism in conservation, being

responsible for the restoration of Windsor Castle after its fire (Sidell Gibson

...
larger practice. That’s now stopped, and Levitate is pleased to have remained with the project as it transferred to the Local Education Partnership and then on to Carillion.

‘Once you get the chance at feasibility stage, it’s important not to push for the whole thing, but just to do your job so well that they have no reason not to continue with you,’ says Guy. Another tactic has been the personal touch. Every tentative enquiry gets a visit from one of the Levitate directors.

One day Birnbeck might come back into play in some form: ‘We really believe in it and think it’ll be a fantastic solution to the town,’ says Guy. But in the meantime Levitate has enough on its plate, and is wary of getting too big too soon – its happy the size it is. In this way says Guy, instead of being their downfall, the slowdown on Birnbeck and the broader recession has almost done them a favour.

Tom Heneghan
Tokyo University of the Arts
Professor

Tom Heneghan’s entry in the Frustrated Generation issue was a clever mix of both aspiration and pragmatism, stating that architects were not conferred a ‘divine right to build’, but he also put forward the rhetorical questions: ‘By what right were we to lay out our future, and by what manner were we to earn that right?’

For Heneghan, it was to involve a move away from the comfort zone of the AA where he had been teaching for years, to the Far East. ‘Teaching was a really fun time, but I hadn’t planned to spend all my time in education – I found the only way to get out was to leave Europe altogether.’ Japan seemed a natural move towards the end of the 1980s. Heneghan was always fascinated by the work of Cedric Price and Archigram, bringing him over from his native Australia to study in London; and there was probably nowhere more exciting than Japan at that time, with its fascination with the temporal and ephemeral, and with a burgeoning architectural scene – the product of the bubble economy.

Heneghan recalls his first presentation to his Japanese client as a revelation. ‘I presented three options, the first being my favourite,’ he recalls, ‘but they stopped me after this and asked why I was presenting options.’ They reminded him he had already been appointed, and that they respected his aesthetic judgement.

Heneghan has done a lot of built work in Japan, notably his Kumamoto Animal Husbandry Research Institute. Now he is back from Australia after spending eight years there, and has tenure at the highly respected Tokyo University of Art. While having to build up his practice again, he is optimistic, always finding the Japanese architectural community convivial and supportive. And maybe age has given him a more sanguine view of the profession. Instead of polemicsing, he finds he’s suited to a more measured pace of life.

‘There was one student in my AA class whom I was convinced was going to be heading up his own firm in no time at all,’ he remembers, ‘So I was surprised when I read that later he’d moved to some Pacific Island and was taking it easy, only working until sunset and cocktail hour. It’s about finding a good work/ life balance, while doing the best that you can’.


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