Even a prince’s views should be heard

Jay Merrick

UNLESS he loses his nerve, the Prince of Wales will tonight deliver a speech on architecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, despite an attempt to have it boycotted.

Nine high-profile figures in the architectural profession, including Will Alsop, Piers Gough and Paul Finch, are outraged by his apparent attempt to derail a redevelopment scheme for London’s Chelsea Barracks site, designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour. The site belongs to a property company controlled by the ruling family of Qatar, and it seems that the prince asked them, privately, to drop the scheme because he doesn’t like the modernist look of it.

It is impossible to support the prince’s action, but the call for a boycott, though well meant, is specious. The RIBA Trust invited Prince Charles to speak, and they can hardly uninvite him, regardless of how many architects are furious about his let-them-eat-cake-in-Poundbury meddling.

Who, in the democratic circumstances, would not want to hear what he had to say, even if they were ready to loathe him for saying it? Furthermore, the Chelsea Barracks site developers, PBGL, stated on 1 May that they had written to Westminster City Council confirming “wholehearted commitment” to the Rogers scheme. So it’s safe to presume that Prince Charles’s begging-letter has been ignored by the Qatars.

Is there another reason to avoid the lecture? The boycotters’ argument turns on two ideas. First, that “the prince’s latest move displays the destructive signs of his earlier interventions, when he set out to scupper modern architecture”. Yes, he has blocked modernist schemes such as those for the National Gallery extension, and Paternoster Square. But, no, he has never stood the faintest chance of stopping the pre-eminence of modernist design – some of it marvellous, most of it average – in virtually all sectors of urban development.

The boycotters also say that his actions threaten the “democratic procedures” of the planning system. Those procedures might once have been at risk, but the long-gone age of quizzical deference to royal utterances has been overwhelmed by the violent surf of routinely leaked information and ephemeral entertainment. It is in this cultural plasma that Prince Charles’s architectural opinions have made him just another what’s-he-gone-and-said-now figure, a pixelated consumable.

The boycotters have buried themselves in the surface of a more important debate about planning authorities whose “democratic procedures” struggle to prevent the imposition of abject architecture by developers. A mile east of Chelsea Barracks, for example, the design of the redevelopment scheme opposite Victoria station has dragged on interminably, not least because of the developer’s initial attempt to argue the case for a bold building cluster. But the story is the same everywhere.

In Scotland, as the architect John McAslan has argued, key waterside developments have not been supported by enough new infrastructure. Architecturally dreadful things happen even in uncontroversial places. Take Ipswich, whose urban fabric has been traduced by some architecturally appalling new developments that the local authority seem either unwilling or unable to prevent.

The debate about architectural design democracy shouldn’t obsess about what Prince Charles wants, or doesn’t want. It should concentrate on illuminating and balancing, humanely, the fraught relationship between architectural and place-making quality, and the need for reasonable profit. On this great stage, dominated not by princes but by commoners, Punch and Judy are an irrelevance.