

Taking the Initiative

Tate Modern. The Lowry. Glasgow Science Centre. Odyssey. Just four of the highly successful and visually distinctive visitor destinations helping to regenerate depressed areas of major British cities. But could you name any four projects created under the Private Finance Initiative? In all likelihood, no. Why? Because these unsung heroes of urban renewal rarely make the headlines. While political controversy has raged over the use of PFI in the ten years since its launch, individual projects actually delivered by the scheme, including schools, hospitals and homes, have been afforded sparse coverage. A real shame, considering the findings of a report by the National Audit Office in November 2001, which concluded that 80 of the first 100 PFI projects are delivering better value for money than conventional funding. The gulf in media coverage between a Millennium Project and a new hospital is understandable if inexcusable; but ignorance of the common ground that binds them together is unforgivable. Visitor destinations and PFI projects may have different functions but they both serve the same end users: the public. And the long-term sustainability of any city demands ongoing investment in high-quality, well-designed cultural facilities and social infrastructure. **Paul Hyett**, President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, believes that the architectural profession must review its own attitude to the PFI process if it is to play a bigger role in designing the next generation of public buildings. He also argues that the Government could help the profession by becoming 'a better client'.

There is no doubt that PFI is here to stay and that the architectural profession will have to respond to the challenges posed by the process, rather than challenging the process itself. It is here to stay for two main reasons. First, rightly or wrongly, what went before plainly did not deliver the required levels of investment to our national infrastructure. Second, the policy has been settled philosophically within Government. As the chief executive of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), Jon Rouse, said recently, 'it is the only game in town'.

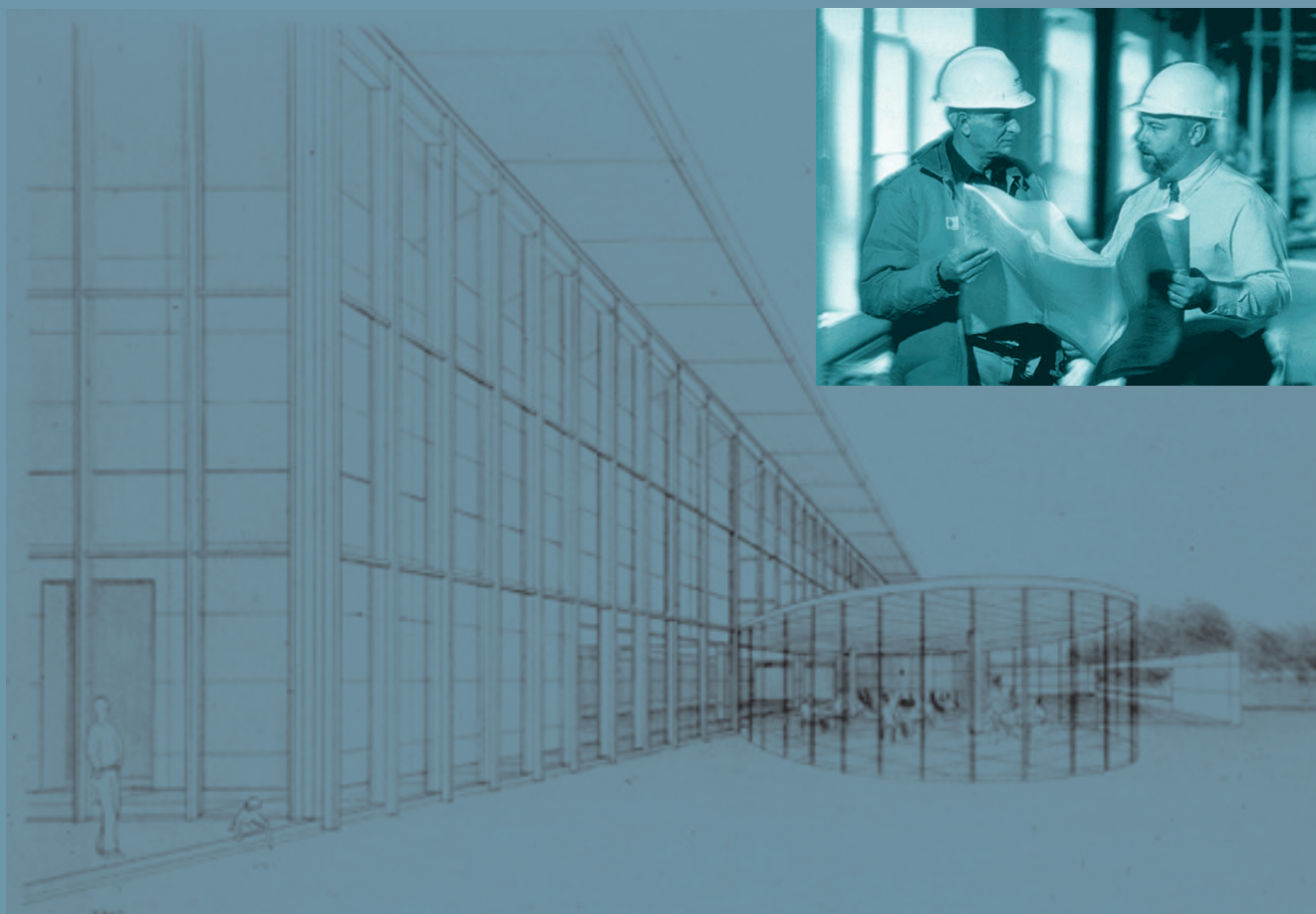
A large proportion of the architectural profession is concerned about PFI. Apart from ideological arguments, the principal practical concern is that because most PFI projects are very large, they tend to deny opportunity to medium- and small-sized practices. Small offices, that is ten people or less, make up the vast majority of the architectural profession - some 80 per cent of its members. A further concern is based on the view that the Government is not committed to a high quality design agenda. Against this view is a presumption that PFI mitigates against good design. It is my view that such a charge is unwarranted: in principle PFI can and should deliver excellent design.

The main purpose of PFI is, of course, to increase total funding for public infrastructure projects. Its adoption produces a major challenge: how does the profession itself change to take advantage of any opportunities that the PFI process offers?

I am convinced that we are not dealing with a Government that is 'anti-design' or 'anti-architecture'. On the contrary, the profession has been pushing at an open door for the last four years. The Prime Minister's personal commitment to good quality public buildings is particularly welcome. The Government has established the powerful CABE, launched an awards scheme and published an important document, *Better Public Buildings*, which offers guidance to all Government Departments. We now also have a Ministerial Design Champion in each Department, reporting to a Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by Planning Minister, Lord Falconer.

Government departments have also been commissioning research into the link between good quality buildings and educational standards, a recent Pricewaterhouse Coopers report for the Department for Education and Skills being the clearest example. CABE is also undertaking research into this area and the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) now incorporates quality of design into its procurement criteria.

There is also an economic case for well-designed buildings as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Andrew Smith, has pointed out: 'By taking account of the whole-life costs of a building at the earliest design stages, we can reduce them. Design improvements which improve the effectiveness of staff, or decrease the costs of running and maintaining a building, can pay for themselves many times over during the lifetime of the building.'



But there is more that the Government can do. In particular, it can become a better client of the construction industry. The Government is the construction industry's largest client, accounting for two-fifths of turnover. There is a lot more that the Government needs to do to persuade officials at all levels of the importance of design quality. As Jon Rouse said at RIBA's small practice conference in November 2001, 'It is no good going to the Treasury and arguing about aesthetic values ... every now and then you'll get a Peckham Library, but beneath the surface of public-sector procurement is a huge permafrost of public sector client/managers who have been working on the basis of lowest cost for years.'

Indeed, the OGC itself has admitted recently that the Government 'is not an intelligent client'. CABE and the architecture profession have much work to do here in persuading the Government to become a better client and to demonstrate how well-designed buildings deliver better results economically and socially. Local authorities also need more training and this is something CABE is addressing at the moment. As more schools and hospitals are built over the coming years, the political stakes will be increased massively.

The profession also needs to adapt its thinking in order to respond constructively to PFI. In response to criticisms that have emerged about the results of early PFI projects we must push for reform - both of the system (to deliver consistently good design

quality) and of ourselves (to ensure we are playing our part in the renaissance of our public services that is currently underway). It is important for small practices to form new partnerships in order to bid for the larger projects. The architectural educational syllabus is changing to respond to the nature of building design in the modern world; sustainability is now at the heart of the syllabus for the first time. It is, above all, essential that projects are undertaken by integrated teams, ensuring that good design is integral to their overall planning and execution.

There is no doubt that the Government is taking design quality seriously. This is not for reasons of aesthetics, but because Ministers can see the economic benefits of good design and how it can deliver better quality public services - a key element on which the Government will be judged over the course of this Parliament. This emphasis on good design, the work of CABE and the continuing strength of the UK economy is good for the 32,000-strong architectural profession, because it is the architect practitioners who have the education and skills to embark on the design challenges that face the construction of new schools, hospitals and other key buildings.