



ESSAY

The View from Here:
"Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man."

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The View from Here: “Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man.”

From the United Kingdom, Paul Hyett reflects on three challenges facing RIBA's new president and Britain's architectural profession: Brexit, The Grenfell Disaster's Insurance Impacts, and COVID-19.

Grasping Nettles

Simon Allford, the recently elected 60th president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, faces greater challenges in terms of scale, breadth, and complexity, than any incoming president since the aftermath of World War II. Back then, Sir Lancelot Keay's concern was essentially singular: how best to orchestrate the repair, renewal, and expansion of the national building stock. When Keay took office, that process was already well underway: the great reforming Labour Government of Clement Atlee was a year into its stride creating the infra-structure of welfarism - new towns, suburbs, schools, hospitals and above all, new housing. The aspirations of the New Jerusalem Movement, which had long engaged in informing the post-war agenda, were to be pursued with a vengeance.

In contrast, Allford's problems today are multifarious, and there is no 'New Jerusalem' style roadmap to guide his effort.

Sir Lancelot was also superbly well prepared to respond to his challenge. At 63 years old, he was the first RIBA president to come from a Local Authority salaried background. He had spent his entire life in the public sector, first at Birmingham where he was responsible for 16,000 new homes, then from 1925 at Liverpool where he ultimately became City Architect leading the effort to re-house families from the cleared slums of inner Liverpool. *'Cometh the hour, cometh the man...'*

In stark contrast, and through a career spent entirely in the private sector, Allford has, with college chums Johnathan Hall, Paul Monahan and Peter Morris, created one of the finest architectural practices in Britain. AHMM has established a prodigious reputation with a string of awards to its credit across a wide range of building genres, the Stirling Prize being the recent crowning glory. Like his father David, who also enjoyed a distinguished architectural career, Simon lacks nothing in guts, grit, determination, and intelligence, but again in contrast to Keay, Allford's background offers little in the way of relevant experience to the tasks before him. *'Cometh the hour, cometh the man?'*

What an hour it is! Unlike the concentrated reconstruction challenge facing Keay, Allford must urgently shape the profession's responses to three pressing practice related issues: Brexit, The Grenfell Disaster, and COVID-19.

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Simon Allford, Photo courtesy of RIBA architecture.com

The burden will be awesome for we must look to Allford's presidency alone to lay the groundwork and frame the essential responses to each of these challenges.

The competition for presidential office at the RIBA was fierce this year and offered no shortage of enterprising talent: three women and two men campaigned on agendas which covered all the familiar territories: low carbon eco-friendly design, innovation, diversity, inclusivity, communication, and government lobbying. But only Allford's campaign included initiatives for the wider range of Grenfell and COVID- generated problems, and only Valerie Passetti campaigned on the issue of Brexit.

So, let's look at these issues in their order of emergence, starting with:

Brexit

Brexit's potential to damage the interests of UK architects is enormous. Hitherto free to practice across the European Union, British architectural qualification and registration are no longer recognised. That privilege was traded away as a last-minute Government concession to secure the elusive, much coveted 'Brexit separation deal'. Beyond that, UK architects will now be ineligible for inclusion in European tenders for public commissions – a condition that had previously been mandatory.

Our freedom to recruit younger architectural talent from across Europe will also be severely hampered as the lethal impacts of work permit restrictions kick-in. This has

potentially dire consequences for a profession that exports professional services extensively, relying on architectural 'overseas' talent to deliver its workloads, and on the 'core' language skills of our continental friends to communicate on a par with our clients and competition. (As in America, the presence of second and third language skills among our indigenous British architectural population is shamefully limited.)

Allford has much to contemplate here, and much to do to get architectural service exports into Europe onto the Government's priority list. Public and Government interest remains stubbornly preoccupied with the emotive subject of UK fisheries, an economic segment with an annual catch value of just £987 million which is insignificant when compared to the UK's Professional and Business Service exports into Europe which stand at £66 billion.

Of that, architecture and engineering services represent 16% — over ten times the value of fishing! The shocking explanation here is that our 12,000 fishermen - with their 5,911 small trawlers which are over 50% foreign owned anyway - have appealed to this once maritime nation's nostalgic sentimentality in a way that 56,000 architects, despite our extraordinary global influence and earning performance, have notably failed to do.

As a celebrated Stirling prize-winner, and a sophisticated lobbyist, Allford is well equipped to bang this drum at Government's door.

Cometh the hour....?



Allford must urgently shape the profession's responses to three pressing practice related issues: (above, left to right) The Grenfell Disaster, Brexit, and COVID-19.

The Grenfell Disaster: Insurance Impacts

Sir Martin Moore-Bick who has, with admirable determination and skill, led the investigation into the tragic fire to the residential tower block that killed 72 people on 14 June 2017, is still hearing evidence for Phase 2 of the Inquiry. But even as that process continues, the impact of the Grenfell tragedy wreaks havoc across the entire construction industry's indemnity insurance market. A recent issue of the Architects' Journal reported three-fold Professional Indemnity (PI) premium increases, with some architectural firms unable to renew coverage at all. An incredible 69% and 58% of firms respectively report cladding related claims and fire safety issues being excluded from future coverage. Some architectural practices with large portfolios of completed, metal clad buildings, reportedly face 'eye-watering' 1000%

premium increases.... irrespective of the quality of their work and their ability to show code compliance and safety of design. Understandably, architects' insurers have no appetite for these risks.

To attract renewed interest in our PI business, some argue the profession needs to increase Insurers' confidence in our education, training, and quality control. Either way, we will need to increase fee levels to facilitate payment of higher PI coverage costs. One commentator insists that in getting our own house in order we must re-establish authority over our own work. Allford will have a heavy-duty agenda to deal with in this regard, but there can be no doubt that he carries the experience to lead the response.

Cometh the hour...?

Covid-19's Effects

James Pickavance, one of London's leading construction lawyers, recently said in a [PODCAST interview](#): "The world of construction litigation is only just beginning to 'inhale the impact of COVID-19.'" The pandemic has certainly had far-reaching social and economic consequences beyond anything seen in my lifetime.

Our architectural responses can anticipate incorporating 'intelligence' into our building surveillance and services systems to facilitate early screening and detection of 'COVID-Carriers' (see this author: Design Intelligence Q3, 2020). Short-term, architects will continue to assist in planning safer circulation and separation arrangements in those public buildings that have remained in use, and they will continue to design conversions and adjustments to provide emergency COVID hospital facilities. Like many other professions, architects have adapted quickly to remote and isolated working practices, on-line meetings, and virtual communications.

But Allford's attention will principally need to turn to the further impact on PI insurance cover for COVID is set to generate a heavy stream of claims relating to construction delays, many of which are already in incubation. Much of this will centre upon the legal battles around the meaning and application of appointment clauses relating to force majeure. These disputes will feed lawyers for a decade and more as new Case Law emerges. Developers and Contractors will clamour to establish their respective rights during a pandemic which has made it all but impossible for



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the construction supply side to discharge its duties under contract.

Consultants can operate a remote working policy courtesy of today's brilliant IT facilities, but how can builders build when the UK Government has enforced a Stay-at-Home policy? Breaches of Stay-at-Home directives may not have been an option for Contractors, but Developers can claim that Government 'lock-downs' have merely been a necessary response to a force majeure. The issue of whether force majeure applies will surely become critical.

Pickavance estimates it will be six to twelve months before we see these claims coming on stream in construction disputes around the world. Much confusion will surround multitudes of scenarios where contracts were already in varying degrees of delay before COVID circumstances began to impact progress adversely. Architects whose fortunes are inextricably bound up with Design and Build procurement will be particularly exposed here.

Ultimately, this will only escalate the cladding crisis that has already consumed the world of construction insurance. We need to mature in our attitudes towards insurance... it's essential as a profitably functioning insurance market is one of the cornerstones of our industry. Allford has serious work ahead of him on this issue.

Cometh the hour....?

Nettles Grasped

To put all these challenges into further perspective, let us go back to an RIBA presidency even earlier than Sir Lancelot's. Just over one century ago John William Simpson took office. Like Allford, Simpson, also the son of an architect, faced the fall-out of a global pandemic.

Spanish Flu became the worst healthcare disaster of the 20th century. It was so named because, unlike allied and axis powers, neutral Spain had no censorship imposed on reporting outbreaks there. But the disease didn't start in Spain.

Some historians trace its true origins to Kansas and the illness, on 4 March 1918, of US Army Private Albert Gitchell. From there it spread rapidly across the Atlantic to the trenches of Europe - in the last months of World War 1, 84,000 American soldiers were deployed to join the allied war effort in March 1918 alone. As with Covid, both the USA President and the British Prime Minister - Woodrow Wilson and David Lloyd George - would catch the virus and survive and, as with COVID, a second and far more lethal 'wave' of the pandemic followed shortly after the first. Ultimately, 675,000 Americans would die, and some estimates put global deaths at up to 50 million. The toll in the UK was around 228,000. In comparison, UK COVID deaths already number 106,564.

In this respect Allford is destined to lead the architectural profession in its response to the worst pandemic in a century. If history repeats itself, it will also be the worst pandemic of this century.

Unlike Keay, whose profession embarked on a rapid course towards a majority of its membership being in state employment by the early 1970's, Allford, courtesy of Mrs. Thatcher, will preside over a largely privatised profession with less than 1% in state employment. However, notwithstanding these statistics, some believe that the RIBA's broader membership has never properly thrown off its state employee culture, arguing that despite notable exceptions among its leading practices, too many UK architectural practices have remained shy of the commercial sharpness and discipline expected by the development world.

Any residue of such shyness is surely set to change. We've received the shrillest of wakeup calls and Allford is set to turn all lights on as we face his call to arms to meet the churn in the months ahead. These crises may well spark a major cultural re-orientation of UK architectural practice. A yawning vacuum openeth before us. Will we step into it, grasp the nettle, and stand to be counted? There is no doubt we should, and no one is better positioned to lead the process.

In so doing, Allford will do well, irrespective of Brexit, to look beyond our shores. The UK architectural profession already punches well above its weight on the international stage with some 10% of our £4.8 billion contribution to the national economy being in exports. Our biggest markets for architectural services are Asia, The European Union, the Middle East, and the USA with respective shares of 27%, 23%, 20% and 14% of our international revenue. These figures have grown rapidly with exports of professional services by UK architects increasing some 28-fold in the last twelve years.

The future is bright if we continue to grow these markets, and the demand is surely there: between now and the year 2035 the global market in construction is expected to be 80 billion square metres of new build. That equates to 60% of the entire current stock of building worldwide — to be added in just fifteen years. Of that 38% will be in China and 15% in North America. If the world's design teams address the eco-agenda effectively in this work, the beneficial consequences will be incalculable. British architectural practices can and should play an enormous role in this challenge, potentially taking our export services up as far as five times their current values – that would be 50% of workloads to be export based.

Simon Allford's presidency should be the stepping-stone to great days ahead.

Yes: cometh the hour...!

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