The call to arms answered
Our profession suffers from a poor research base and what research we do is undervalued. We need to do something about this. We also need to address prejudices that have become established in the construction industry as exemplified by the outrageous references to architecture in the Fairclough Report. The good news with regard to both issues is that, for once, practice and the schools have a coincidence of interest.

We may hold the idea that architects comprise the intellectual core of the construction industry, and the quality of intake to our schools would support this, but others in practice are out-thinking and out-performing us and that is not going unnoticed in either project or political circles. The practising profession needs to generate a knowledge base or ‘intellectual capital’ relevant to the needs of society, industry and clients. With this we could be differentiated, have something to say and thus gain influence. Without it, practices’ services will be bought and sold like plastering subcontractors’ and we will be, even more, excluded from decision-making fora – whether it be at governmental, industry or project level. If we want the opportunity to design better buildings, we have got to ‘get smart’.

I know very well how the beneficial effect of research works. The status of my own practice was transformed, in the specialized area we work in, by the work we did in the mid to late ‘90s. We researched and published two reports, 20/20 Vision and the Net Effect, both of which analysed the impact of emerging IT on the workplace and office buildings. 20/20 Vision has been particularly influential and has resulted in a whole new work stream for the practice – operating at a very strategic level advising on the genesis of large commercial projects.

There is much good research going on in the schools as evidenced by some of the results from the recent RAE (see pp 203–207 in this issue, Ed). But no architecture school was awarded the highest 5* rating and in the eyes of some ‘old’ University Vice Chancellors this represents failure. Clearly not all schools can achieve really high RAE ratings although I’m sure that a lot aspire to being ‘research active’ or wish to improve their performance. An issue for many of them must be to determine what the relevant research agenda should be and I suspect that quite a few are unaware of what the ‘real issues out there’ are. I also suspect that this insularity in some schools extends to a lack of engagement with related disciplines in their own university, together with a lack of understanding of the need to build multi-disciplinary teams to address many of today’s key research issues.

The third element in this equation is funding. Neither the schools nor practice can afford to fund their own research, but there are huge funds available from the UK public sector research councils, Europe and the private sector – if the proposed research fits within their current ‘framework’, ‘strand’ or commercial interests. And, of course, successfully funded research in the schools in turn contributes to a high RAE score, which delivers the virtuous circle of increased base funding to the institution via their relevant funding council. Established university researchers will understand the rules of public

letters arq vol 6 no 3 2002
research funding well enough – but will often need an ‘industrial partner’, ie a practice, as a partner to qualify. Practices are generally deeply ignorant of the major funds available, and might find the research councils’ rule systems inappropriate or difficult to handle in a commercial environment. Practices are also typically unconvinced of the benefits that can flow from being active partners in ‘academic’ research projects.

So one might argue that practice is at least how built environment needs the product of research, ie the ‘demand side’ and yet does little real research, much to the detriment of its prestige and influence. Conversely, many schools have a research appetite, not least how support their funding base and position in their institution, but are not (always) in touch with real world requirements! Add to this the fact that funds are available, but practice doesn’t understand the rules and we have a truly dysfunctional triangular relationship!

I believe the RIBA has a pivotal role to play here as a co-ordinator and an enabler. We need to understand the range and nature of research our practices and their clients are interested in – that blue sky. We need to understand the funding bodies’ interests, rules and timescales – and lobby to change them if necessary. We need to act as a ‘dating agency’ between practice and academic to catalyse ideas to carry out the work. And we need the best possible understanding of funding mechanisms to guide and support these research teams in their search for financial support.

I suspect that schools will have to act as conduits to other expertise in their Universities as much of the research needed will be cross disciplinary – and not just within the construction industry disciplines. It may be seen as a good thing for the schools to be more integrated within their institutions.

Linked to this is the need to disseminate the research in both refereed journals such as arq and also in many more commercial ways. This will help schools with their future RAE submissions and practices in equipping them with the knowledge base they need to secure new work streams. The RIBA should also use its involvement in disseminating this new intellectual capital to lever the profession’s influence.

Finally, the RAE itself. The RIBA must join the schools of architecture in lobbying to change those elements of the process that so thoroughly disadvantaged architecture in the 2001 exercise. We need to question the make-up of the Units of Assessment (UoA). Should schools of architecture face the decision of submitting to ‘The Built Environment’ UoA with its technological bias and apparent unwillingness to consider outputs other than traditional scholarly papers or the ‘Art & Design’ UoA with its willingness to consider creative outputs, but with a limited pot of funding to distribute? Should we lobby to establish our own UoA focused on our own issues, as the planners did, or would this be a trap as we could never get it funded well enough to satisfy our expectations?

I acknowledge the call to arms in recent arq editorials (5/4, 6/1 and 6/2). The RIBA has not been as engaged with the research agenda as we should have been. We have now started thinking seriously on these issues at the RIBA and we have initial funding for a new ‘Research and Development’ Department and a small staff. This will be jointly owned by Practice – headed by Richard Saxon – and Education, which is chaired by myself. I am pleased to report that I believe that Richard and I very much see eye to eye on the way forward, albeit representing our different portfolios.

But we are going to need your help if we are to take on the linked roles of facilitating debate about research funding and genuinely attempting to develop the ‘enabling’ and ‘disseminating’ roles I have sketched out above.

Jack Pringle
London

Jack Pringle is a partner in Pringle Brandon and RIBA Vice President for Education

From assertion to rational discourse

Following up both your leader (arq 5/4) and Alan Jones’ letter (p105) in arq 6/2, the arrival of Jack Pringle as RIBA Vice President for Education and myself as Hon Vice President for Practice does indeed reinforce the moves already in progress to create an RIBA voice in architectural research and to connect it to education and practice. Council has now created the necessary resources, but full approval of the initiative is still in the pipeline.

Another step of note is the merger of the Reading

Construction Forum (RCF) with the Design Build Foundation (DBF) to form ‘Collaborating for the Built Environment’ or Be for short. I am its first chairman. Be is a fully cross-industry forum, from clients to product makers, owned and run for member businesses. We are working on the twin tracks of seeking out value for customers and community while collaborating to reduce waste in the process. We commission or support relevant research. A full exposition of our mission and its research implications is set out in the September issue of Building Research and Information (30/5 pp334–37).

We consider that Be’s most important work will be that which reveals how built environments affect and enhance the performance of occupier organisations. The 4% of GDP spent on new construction each year creates the setting for the other 96% to perform. We need to clarify how and is created, how it flows through the economy and society in order to move the case for architecture from one of assertion to one of rational discourse in this non-visual society. The Design Quality Indicators are a good new tool, but we need depth and some quantification behind it.

Richard Saxon
Building Design Partnership

Richard Saxon is chairman of the Building Design Partnership, RIBA Hon Vice President for Practice and chairman of Be, Collaborating for the Built Environment

Ignoring environmental issues

There is a strange perversity about the way in which Dean Hawkes writes so eloquently about David Lea’s work (arq 6/2, pp130–143) without mentioning sustainability or environmental issues. No doubt he will argue that they are implicit in Lea’s programme. However this is essentially the problem in that without making them explicit, many people will not understand them. Hawkes is an authority on environmental architecture so why is he so assiduous in avoiding such issues in this piece?

It is indicative of a general problem that I come across on a regular basis in which the self-appointed custodians of aesthetic sensibilities have to safeguard the preciousness of ‘DESIGN’. There is a fear among many ‘good designers’ that they cannot risk attracting the tag of being a ‘green’ architect because this will jeopardize their
design reputation. I experienced the same problem when writing about ‘community architecture’ in the ‘70s in that architects who prided themselves on their status as ‘designers’ did not want to be stereotyped as ‘community architects’ even though they adopted very progressive, socially responsible strategies in their work.

At the AA in the ‘80s those of us, based in Percy Street, who were concerned about community and environmental issues were disparagingly referred to as ‘the builders’ while the superstars in Bedford Square were ‘designers’. Fortunately we had Walter Segal as an external examiner to come to our rescue. Segal, of course, was a key influence on David Lea. Susannah Hagan is one of the few recent writers to try and bridge the gulf between these two cultures and examine the complex theoretical relationship between aesthetics and the environment which Hawkes has avoided.1 Another recent book, The Art of Natural Building2 describes how the relationship between aesthetics and sustainable building techniques attracted Canadian Arts Council funding, but in the UK it seems we still have to keep Art and Science apart.

Today the same problem arises because many rather ugly, so-called green buildings cluttered with clichés such as grass roofs, ventilation chimneys and solar panels frighten away the aesthetes. This is all the more reason why the relationship between the simple elegance of Lea’s pottery and its green credentials needs to be spelt out [2]. The use of local timber, ecological insulation, engineered timber rafters and ‘Fermacell’ as well as the overall design and concept are evidence of Lea’s impeccable responsibility to the environment … so why not say so!

Tom Woolley
Belfast

Tom Woolley is Professor of Architecture at Queen’s University Belfast


Lea: determination and ingenuity

David Lea’s Bridge Pottery (arq 6/2, pp130–143), like his other designs, demonstrates his unique gift in handling form and material and light and detail to create serenity and magic from the mundane and ordinary. This pared down modern design incorporates the essential features of the vernacular – human scale, a sense of place and the texture of natural materials – an Arts and Crafts tradition for our time, modest and informal but without the nostalgia and mediaevalism. It appears effortless but, in reality, it is difficult to achieve, requiring a clear vision and an uncompromising approach in its execution.

The use of timber piled foundations, common in marine construction and used for the foundation of cities in the Netherlands and so appropriate for this riverine setting, shows courage and determination. The structural glass units as gutters cum rooflights is a very ingenious example of more for less – maximum effect from minimum means.

This small project contributes to David Lea’s significant oeuvre and demonstrates that magic can be made with modest means [3]. It may even suggest an alternative approach for those faced with the economic and moral dilemmas of commercial architectural practice.

JON BROOME
London

1 David Lea’s Bridge Pottery: the elegance of its green credentials needs to be declared
2 Maximum effect – and magic – from minimum means

Jon Broome is an architect practising in London and the author, with Brian Richardson, of The Self-Build Book
Body and Building
Essays on the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture
edited by George Dodds and Robert Tavernor
Essays on the changing relationship of the human body and architecture.
592 pp., 110 illus. $54.95

The Minimum Dwelling
Karel Teige
translated and with an introduction by Eric Dluhosch
The long-awaited English-language publication of Karel Teige’s influential book on the minimum dwelling as a new housing type for the working class.
360 pp., 295 illus. $59.95

Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China
Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan
“Peter Rowe and Seng Kuan persuasively present us a magnificent panorama of one and a half centuries of Chinese architecture, in which Chinese architects have tenaciously pursued a culturally informed modernity.” — Delin Lai, Ph.D., former faculty member, School of Architecture, Tsinghua University
340 pp., 75 illus. $34.95

The Portfolio and the Diagram
Architecture, Discourse, and Modernity in America
Hyungmin Pai
A history of modern architecture as a discursive practice.
430 pp., 128 illus. $44.95

Surface Architecture
David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi
A study of the building surface, architecture’s primary instrument of identity and engagement with its surroundings.
300 pp., 150 illus. $40

Central European Avant-Gardes
Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930
edited by Timothy O. Benson
foreword by Péter Nádas
An illustrated study of the early twentieth-century transformation from Expressionism to Constructivism and beyond in the Central European arts.
464 pp., 480 illus., 360 color $59.95

Perspecta 33
The Yale Architectural Journal
“Mining Autonomy”
edited by Michael Osman, Adam Ruedig, Matthew Seidel, and Lisa Tilney
Essays exploring the legacy of architectural autonomy and its relationship to architecture’s potential as a critical agent.
120 pp., 165 illus., 30 color $20 paper

To order call 800-405-1619.
Prices subject to change without notice.
hp://mitpress.mit.edu