Introduction

Good morning, I hope I can keep you awake after such an early start. I will try to stick to 20 minutes.

When Robert first asked me to give a brief talk on 'architecture' a few months ago I didn't know exactly what I would talk about but did say that it would be about the future and what it had in store for us all. I thought of the usual subjects – what I liked or did not about the buildings that have been built in recent years in Oxford, about my own contribution to Oxford or about the difficulties and frustrations of getting a response or even a planning consent in Oxford (about which I am sure many of you are all too familiar).

Three months ago the word 'recession' was being whispered by those of us who have been through a number in our professional careers and could recognise the symptoms in the economy that signalled another on the way. Rather like watching a series of weather fronts making their way across the Atlantic we have sat and watched the storm developing until Mervyn King told us what we already knew. Personally not only do the Banks need better regulation, but so does the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee and the Bank's own Governor.

The future has now arrived and I suspect it will be here for some time in a pretty bleak way. I think though we can and should learn some lessons from the history of the last recession and apply those lessons to this recession. Before I get to the main body of my talk, the twin themes of 'creativity' and 'sustainability' I would like to recount a little of the effects the last recession had on my profession and the product that we create – namely buildings.

Two things of immense significance happened in my third recession that I do not wish to see again, and they are fundamentally interrelated.

Firstly the quality of the product dropped dramatically, no doubt in response to less money available for construction or for penny pinching reasons, but also because in order to keep going projects were pushed through in the easiest and quickest way to generate cash for practices. Even so times were tough as you will all recall as both the 'private' and 'public' sectors closed down simultaneously. The result was far less 'contemporary' architecture and a reversion to a cheap 'pastiche' as a way of getting projects through the 'conservative' planning system, which existed at that time. This has left Oxford and many other cities in this country with a legacy of poor quality buildings in terms of construction, materials, design and urban responsiveness. Even though a period of seven years is short in terms of major architectural movements in the past the damage will take decades to resolve due to the high price of land in this country.

The second effect was a highly competitive fee environment where levels were forced down very low just to enable practices to keep generating income. In many instances fee levels were so low that it was impossible to see how anyone could make a profit on the projects. I remember one College project where four architects were asked to bid and, and I emphasize the 'and' provide a scheme for an accommodation project. Bids ranged from £17k and £56k with me second at £21k. The result is a dreary building that contributes little if not negatively to its immediate context.

Before all of you who are rubbing your hands together at the prospect presented that this is now a good time to screw architect's fees down I caution you to remember these three points:

- Fees levels never recovered and have remained at a low level ever since
- Low fee levels mean little time to provide a proper service and to do the best possible design resulting in poor quality thoughtless design
- Low fee levels result in poor service in terms of production information where the service is geared to the fee and the time available, leading to confusion, delays and extra costs to you as developers. This mitigates against the old maxim 'if in doubt draw it out'.

Whilst you may gain a few pounds here and there the environment we leave behind loses infinitely more in terms of quality, safety and thought.

We can, however, look at recession in a more positive way as an opportunity, a subject I will return to at the end of my talk.

My core subjects are accompanied by some images of buildings taken from a presentation I use at school careers evenings. They are designed to stimulate and capture the mind but do not relate directly to my text – this is an experiment so sit back, look and as they used to say, enjoy.

Creativity

Architects are inherently creative people, although some of you may disagree, who get excited by the very process of creation which ultimately (or hopefully) results in a finished building over a period of time that may take many years from inception to completion. Imagine for a moment the stamina needed to maintain without loss of enthusiasm the creative drive for many projects over a long period of time. Building a building is not a five-minute wonder. Three examples from my experience will suffice to illustrate how much we enjoy that creative process.

Many years ago I recall hearing a lecture from the renowned French Peruvian architect Henri Ciriani about two new museums he had completed – one in the south of France incorporating a series of important Roman remains near Arles I believe, and one in the north of France commemorating the battlefields of the First World War. Both were magnificently sophisticated, well handled, spatially flowing, exciting contemporary buildings but what impressed me and stayed in my memory was his description of what he liked most about architecture. In typically French fashion he said that you had 'to taste and to eat it'. Imagine eating concrete, steel and glass!! But from his cultural perspective, rather than our own 'functional' attitude to food this is a very apt description of one man's love for his art. By contract Richard (Lord) Rogers once asked what made cities exciting replied that 'prostitutes on street corners make cities vibrant with energy'. I think he subsequently regretted his answer!!

Back in 2002, Oxford Architects was commissioned to design a major prototype unit for people with 'Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorder' at Broadmoor Hospital. Who you may well ask – Quantity Surveyors, Solicitors, Accountants, Bankers (now but not then when they were having their fun), Planning Officers, Services Engineers or even Architects?

The project was large - £26m – the timescale short – 2 years from start to completion – and the site complex – within the Hospital (Category B prison status), on a 15m high bank and adjoining a number of historic Listed Buildings. There was no brief as such just a 'blank sheet of paper' so we were very much starting from scratch. This is quite unusual as generally you start a project with some at least basic information and for many projects previous experience that guides the hand. In this case our client was very happy to have someone with no experience of High Security Mental Healthcare Design (me) as they wanted to try the boundaries of what had been done at Broadmoor and to challenge their ideas.

What a great opportunity to experiment at the taxpayers expense, to take a brief from anyone in the hospital who might be involved (except the patients of course) and to develop a concept to a design stage in 8 weeks – fast for any project. And what is more an innovative concept never tried before in this country was required where the building could be seen as an aid to patient treatment. This approach was fascinating, exciting, and of course ultimately risky.

The climax of the conceptual stage came one evening whilst I was sketching in felt tip on a drawing board on a sheet of thin detail paper at home developing the concept plan of the building over a 2 hour period with the aid of a large glass of Bells. We all need stimulants at times and a glass of Scotch is nothing compared to the extent to which many sportsmen and women go to, to achieve fame. Across this 5 foot length of paper from left to right you could clearly see how the final plan developed from simple trial ideas to the final proposals. And all carried out in 2 hours. When the creative process works well ideas that have been generating over a number of weeks just come together quickly in an almost natural process that has a great element of fun in it – almost a release from the tensions of formulating the ideas, and from synthesising the problems and constraints.

I kept this piece of paper folded away in a corner of my office and used it to good effect again in a presentation for the redevelopment of the whole hospital three years later.

A third example is a small project that we have just completed for a Hospice in Stratford, curiously named after a well known playwright. Although a series of extensions and refurbishment works I suggested to my young colleague undertaking the work that he use coloured glass in the roof light to the quiet room and on an external canopy that allowed patients to sit outside even when the weather was bad. Sometime later he proudly showed me photographs of the completed canopy, a mixture of blue and clear glass, with such a smile of enjoyment on his face that I realised he had come to discover the enjoyment inherent in the creative process by himself.

I used the word 'climax' because that represents how most projects proceed with always a critical point where you are forced to 'get it right' and to then live with the consequences of the decisions that have been made. As projects precede the scope for flexibility after a number of critical points have been reached reduces to once the building is on site almost nothing so you have to be supremely confident in your judgements. Gone are the days when architects can go on site and say 'Oh I don't like that colour change it' as I knew when I first started my career.

So where does creativity come out in the buildings you are seeing and in my own personal philosophy of architecture? Well it is very much in how we use colour, light and texture to create and augment the spaces we mould. Le Corbusier made the same comment in that architecture is 'the play of light on shapes' – in his case the primary shapes of cubes, spheres and cones. Colour is important to us although we do tend to live in a rather drab society. Walk down Cornmarket and look at what people wear in this country for winter clothes. You would be hard put to find anyone in anything more exciting than a dark blue (and that is not because we are in Oxford). Go to other countries and colour thrives everywhere. We should not be afraid of it in our environment especially if it can be used as subtle highlights to well considered forms. Good architecture is about using simple ideas in complex ways to create a rich environment.

The real creativity does not end with the building but begins on the day the building is occupied. When you see a building that has come out of your mind being used and people enjoying it that is when the real excitement happens and then is not yours any longer of course. Someone once described this like having a baby and then someone sitting on it.

Sustainability

5 years ago climate change, sustainability and a 'green' environment were not the major issues they are now despite the knowledge that was available albeit in the rather specialist climate change science community. All that has changed and how we address these issues are at the front of what we do as architects.

For many years, and I even have books 25 years or so old, environmentally friendly buildings generally concentrated on how solar energy could be used to modify internal environments. There was also a school at the time advocating 'vernacular' architecture as environmentally friendly – that is mud huts and similar low-key approaches. Now we are all familiar with ground source heating, solar water heating, pv cells, passive stack ventilation and so forth. What we still do not tend to see are building solutions that derive much from natural factors such as orientation, natural shading, etc and that is very much due to the fact that we are by and large designing in urban environments that have their own physical constraints.

Whilst the new technologies we are adopting rapidly will no doubt come down in price the more demand there is in a similar way to PC's, Laptops, Digital Cameras and Mobile Telephones, there is another side effect of their use. The nature of the buildings we design will need to change to use these technologies most effectively. A good example is the need to maintain the equipment used – a dirty pv cell or solar water heating panel is 25% less efficient than a clean one – so the location of these items on accessible flat roofs is significant. Flat roofs are now back in fashion especially as they can be 'green' removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, adding back oxygen and retaining 80% of rainwater run off.

The nature of what buildings look like is changing. A simple example is a student room that if it faces south and has no shading to its window does not comply with the Building Regulations so solutions have to be found to these emerging design problems. This is not a bad thing and allows us to get over the old solar heating designs that were all about the technology and not about what the buildings looked like. It is now possible to design environmentally friendly buildings that do not look different from normal buildings and can in many cases be exciting themselves.

There are, of course, the usual delusions in the sustainable buildings game. The BREEAM assessment classification and other types add a lot of other subjects in apart from energy performance and where some elements of the analysis are applied to specialist building types – for example special schools where all pupils inevitably arrive by bus or car the scoring the building achieves reduces due to this need. Similarly location for many buildings is not a choice if the facility already exists at a non-sustainable location. Whilst useful indicators these rating systems can and do falsify how buildings actually perform amongst a large amount of 'ticking the boxes' procedures.

My big gripe is the curtain walled office tower that claims to be sustainable. These claims may be based on energy consumption but do not take into account the embodied energy used in the creation of that building. Bauxite is mined in South America and shipped to places like Iceland where there is cheap hydroelectric power to convert it into aluminium. It is then moved to Germany or Switzerland where more energy is used in extruding the required sections to export again to the system manufacturers and for painting. In Iceland there is the most powerful waterfall in Europe, 200 feet high, 200 yards wide fed by glacial melt water. I've seen it and it is impressive. Now due to the need by the United States for aluminium the Government of Iceland has sanctioned a scheme to use the melt water for a hydroelectric power plant, with the proviso that the waterfall can be turned on during the tourist season. That is serious environmental tampering.

Whilst I have heard a lot of criticism of Al Gore for the air miles he uses in spreading the message of global warming he has been at the forefront of the debate for many years and must have had a very significant impact compared with the slightly 'earth people' approach of other commentators. But how does climate change affect each and every one of us. A small example in my case was to do with woolly jumpers that as some of you who know me I used to wear a lot. In Gore's book and film 'An Inconvenient Truth' he relates the storey of some Dutch research into the relationship between the emergence of a moth lava and the breading cycles of some birds where numbers are declining rapidly due to the moth lavas emerging earlier than required by the birds to feed their young. The lavas become moths rather than being eaten and thus on an increase. The effect is that within two years early spring moth production reduced my wardrobe considerably. When climate change affects what you wear and your image, then that is serious.

Another image issue is to many people what we drive. I know someone who recently purchased a large 4 wheel drive - 20 miles to the gallon. On a trip on holiday of 2000 miles we in the office calculated that he put a tonne of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in a week. Given that the need is to get emissions levels down to 0.8 of a tonne per annum per person to stabilise climate change this does seem incredibly selfish. In order to tackle these issues we need to address our own personal way of life, not drastically but carefully and thoughtfully. I recently bought a small car for local journeys and have by doing that reduced my emissions levels when driving by 70% at no loss of comfort. I always tell people wearing T shirts in my office who complain of being cold to put a jumper on. After all to most people of my generation brought up in poorly insulated poorly heated houses that is the natural thing to do.

To make the issues nearer to home how many of you drink wine from the other ends of the world – Argentina, Chile, Australia and New Zealand – when the transport costs environmentally of drinking French wine are much lower. I know that one reason we don't is that the French keep all their best wine for themselves. Similarly people go on holiday to far away places in the Indian notion just to get a seat on the beach as it is well known that if you want to get one on a beach in the south of France you need to get there in the middle of the night before the Germans at 7.30 in the morning. Tackling environmental issues should be about working together and exchanging technologies to try to get the best for everyone. It is similarly quite absurd that in the Yorkshire Dales stone roofed buildings are being re roofed using Indian stone rather than local stone.

To combat climate change the lead needs to be taken by those of us who are broadly educated and we need to set examples ourselves. You are the people who can and must make these changes albeit not that considerable. A 'hair shirt' mentality is not what is required.

Summary and Conclusions

20 minutes is not really enough time to talk about recession, creativity, and sustainability but I hope I have given an indication of what I consider the three crucial issues today and how they may be tackled.

For the present the economic issues are likely to be those on which we and the Government concentrate but that should not be to the detriment of broader environmental issues. Learning from the past is something we should always do and one of the pleasures practicing as an architect in Oxford is almost constantly revisiting previous buildings as a matter of course – I pass 10 or more alone on my way to work every day. I see these 'children' grow up and mature, and see how details weather and by that experience learn from my own past. The last recession has given us lessons that we need to apply now:

- Work together to tackle the recession not fight amongst ourselves – in other words to use a common term 'partner'.
- Keep quality standards high and strive to achieve better standards
- Keep professional standards of service high
- Invest in staff if possible rather that just cutting the supply

The last point is so important when we remember that in the last recession 40% of architects lost their jobs and 40% of practices foundered. We in our office can see the lost generation in our staff profile of people who never returned to the profession and I am sure it is true in other professions.

The future of architecture lies with the young and running in conjunction with tackling climate change protecting the future lies in protecting those just about to embark on their careers. This is the issue for us all.

But most importantly remember that there is an opportunity this time that did not exist last time to produce good contemporary design in this city and that we can all participate in that process.

Thank you for the patience for listening.