

RIBA CONFERENCE, VENICE - 28 OCTOBER 2006

Thanks to RIBA for inviting me to speak here in Venice. I'm Director of the Centre for Cities, based at ippr – the Institute for Public Policy Research. And a former policy adviser at the Treasury. I've been asked to provide an alternative perspective - to add the economic angle to your discussion about architecture and social change.

The Centre for Cities looks at the economic drivers of urban growth and change. We're not experts on architecture, but we do share with you a common interest in the role and importance of cities. Cities matter – over half of us live in them, and well over half of us work in them.

I want to make three main points today.

First, architects are too focused on the latest iconic building and high-profile awards ceremony.

“Rockstar architects” are stealing the limelight, but their work is relatively marginal – and the impact of their iconic buildings is overstated.

Take Bilbao and its Guggenheim Museum. We did work in Bilbao last year, talking to local government and businesses. They told us that the impact of the Guggenheim was important but relatively marginal. In fact, the revival of the city had mainly been due to its fantastic new transport infrastructure – the airport, tram, tube and rail network.

Take Newcastle-Gateshead, where I was earlier this week. The Sage in Gateshead is great, but the local economy is still lagging behind the rest of the UK – according to a recent OECD report. And many local people in the city have yet to visit or benefit from the Sage. We must not equate shiny new buildings with total city turnaround. It's more complicated than that.

Most architects are actually involved in designing regular community infrastructure like schools, houses and hospitals – and should be recognised more for this. But their work is often overshadowed by the media noise about the Stirling Prize or the latest shiny new iconic building.

We're very good at celebrating our best buildings. But even some of the Stirling winners have not been up to scratch. A recent report in The Guardian described the 2000 winner, Peckham Library, as "dingy, dark and oppressive". That can't be right.

I think we should drop the awards for a year. And focus instead on promoting school buildings that have helped to raise educational attainment – and hospitals that have accelerated patient recovery. This would do a lot to reposition architects as key agents of social change, rather than a privileged few concerned only with aesthetics.

Second, urban regeneration is not just about buildings. As Bilbao and Newcastle-Gateshead show, it's about also transport and social inclusion.

Already this morning, we've heard about the turnaround of Manchester. It's true that the city centre of Manchester has been transformed – and not just because of the IRA bomb.

But it's not true to say that Manchester is now "sorted". You only have to go half a mile from Piccadilly Station to find that out. In Manchester and many of our other major cities, we have a "doughnut of deprivation" around our city centres.

Our "City People" report looks at the growth of city-centre living in Manchester and other cities. The new city-centre apartments are certainly one of the most visible physical changes to our city centres in recent years. But they mask the housing challenges that remain in our inner-ring neighbourhoods.

Third, much of the legacy of this current wave of regeneration is already here. We will need to work hard to secure the legacy of other items on the "to do" list – like the Olympics.

The volume of new building in recent years has been astonishing - and is continuing. Schools for the Future. Growth Areas. Housing Market Renewal. The 2012 Olympics site. All these projects will have a major impact on our social fabric. But I'm concerned that some of this legacy will not last as well or as long as it should.

Ippr's recent report "Would You Live Here?" says that the Thames Gateway needs much better infrastructure if it is to work. And we need even more houses if we are to meet our future demographic needs.

A quick word about the London Olympics. The Centre for Cities is about to publish a new paper on the likely economic impact of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. We will say that the local direct employment benefits will not all go to the local people in and around the 2012 site. Nor will all parts of the UK benefit equally. Doncaster, Huddersfield and elsewhere do not stand to gain as much as they think they will. We need to work harder to manage expectations in the run-up to the 2012 Games.

Finally, the Centre for Cities believes that radical new devolution to our towns and cities would help promote stronger economic growth. It would also trigger a revival of local democracy, and an improvement in the performance of local councils. There's a direct link here with your work. Stronger local leadership will result in better design, planning and build decisions.

Yesterday, the UK Government unveiled plans for reviving local government in England – including proposals for directly elected mayors with a 4-year mandate. Stronger, more visible leadership in our towns and cities will help deliver the jobs and growth that we need across the country. The 4-year mandate will also allow local leaders to take tough decisions over planning, road pricing and jobs – rather than resorting to short-term easy options.

So, to sum up – architects have a clear role to play. It's not about shiny new buildings, or the latest Stirling prizewinner. It's about shaping the lives of real people. Their homes, schools, offices and shopping centres.

To get there, architects need to do more to demonstrate their role in delivering community infrastructure – not just iconic buildings. You need to place just as much importance on transport infrastructure, as buildings. And you need to work even more closely with local councils, to shape everyday places. Finally, you need a better dialogue with central government – especially the Treasury – to show that better design is cost-effective, not just an additional up-front cost.