Research

In-house: the council architect

Far from being the arm which extended the dead hand of bureaucracy, council architects' departments fostered an aspiration, ingenuity and innovation which benefited UK architecture as a whole – and can do so again, writes *Ruth Lang*

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In the past 60 years the professional context of architecture has changed unrecognisably, but not irrevocably. The freedoms once afforded to the profession in terms of time and experimentation have diminished as the hierarchies, procurement, and professional boundaries have shifted to diminish our agency as architects. Yet this is not a misty-eyed reverie for what has come before, but a frustration at the situation we have become wound into, posing an ongoing question as to how and what we might adapt as a profession to address our future needs. And the way forward has the potential to be led from an unlikely corner, far from the limelight of the starchitects.

Although ostensibly bureaucrats, the architects of the London County Council's in-house department produced post-war architecture of such a level of refinement and innovation to rival their contemporaries in private practice *(pictured: Pimlico Secondary School, by John Bancroft).* While John Bancroft is often singled out to be decried as a 'maverick', experimentation was rife elsewhere within the department, as is evidenced in the tectonics of the work they produced – from housing blocks at the Watney Market Estate clad in a fibreglass panel construction usually found on the County's ambulances, to the funnelling roof forms of Bob Giles' now-listed Bromley Hall Special Educational Needs School, which echo Erich Mendelsohn's Luckenwalde Hat Factory and the courtyard layout of Jacobsen's Munkegård School.

Certainly, not all of what they produced was successful, but the breadth of references and materials they called upon is far removed from the kind of 'bread and butter' architecture that might have been expected of local government architects, supposedly swaddled by red tape and micropolitics.

Far from being constrained, these architects were actually empowered by the bureaucratic structures in which they worked. The LCC's department attracted some of the brightest and best students from across the UK. The security of a regular pay cheque from the council might not seem the likeliest attraction for the maverick architects of a generation, yet it granted them the freedom to work more experimentally as one of many anonymous architects within the walls of County Hall, rather than having to win work on the merits and suitability of their last job. The social contexts of the time also played a part, with financial stability being especially important for those who were newly married.

Working for the LCC meant being able to have grander aspirations, unbounded by the constraints of the individual project. The County of London Plan, published by the council in 1943, enabled proactive rather than reactive proposals to be developed, including accommodation for even the undesirable necessities of urban life, since the architects' potential scope of influence enabled them to be propositional, rather than Nimby-istic.

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This affected the work they produced as much as how they produced it. Planners and architects at this time shared not only an educational background but also the corridors of County Hall *(pictured overleaf)*, closing the loop between propositional feasibility and tectonic realisation. As Percy Johnson-Marshall, senior planner from 1949 to 1959, furiously scribbled in the margins of the draft report questioning whether architects should be involved in the administration of planning: 'Who better?'. The plan encapsulated a mindset when planning meant just that – determining the physical and infrastructural necessities of the county in a coherent manner, despite neither funding nor legislation yet being in place.

Sandwiched between the politics of national government and local-scale delivery in the individual boroughs, despite the flux of leadership from the government and the council from left to right the department's direction established a datum against which political tides shifted. Acting as designer, client and regulator simultaneously, the department was also able to learn from end-users, integrating sociological observation within the residential and educational plans they proposed. This was paralleled by David and Mary Medd, whose work documenting children's behaviour in Hertfordshire schools led to radical reconsideration of their design, equipment and construction. Their buying power was such that they were able to influence industry developments, commissioning specialist school furniture and MACE (at LCC) and CLASP (at Hertfordshire) systems building.

But systems thinking didn't necessarily have to lead to systems building. Thanks to the comprehensive and long-range nature of the work they undertook, the council was also able to provide facilities for ongoing research, including the work of the Survey of London and the sociologist Margaret Willis, alongside material and component testing and development in the Scientific Division, a comprehensive in-house library, and reference material spanning the development of London in the hushed hallows of 'sub-basement 8'. They were afforded the luxury of time to experiment, to be involved with education as both students and educators, to invite in the best architects of their generation – such as Frank Lloyd Wright *(pictured opposite, giving the department his views on the Royal Festival Hall in July 1950)* – to host masterclasses, and to take lunches out to the art galleries nearby, all of which served to break down the boundaries of the profession and to afford it much richer and more innovative results.

Halcyon days indeed. Such luxuries were infeasible for the piecemeal work undertaken in private practice, and while these freedoms were attributed for their sometimes wayward responses to the brief, they were also an integral part of the architectural development of the country, being published

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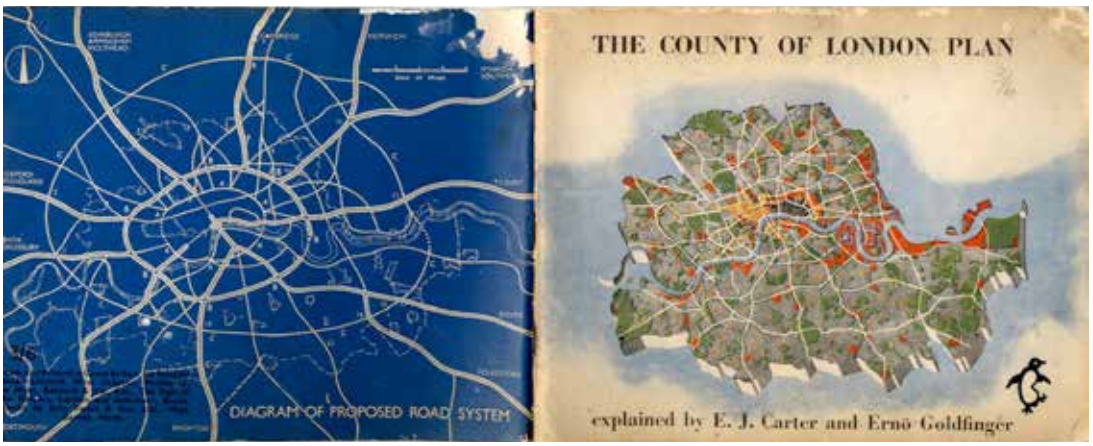
widely (if anonymously) for the benefit of the profession as a whole. Such considerations are key to the success of contemporary departments, such as that of the legacy maintained by Hampshire County Architects, which, particularly under the guidance of ex-LCC and RIBA Gold Medal-winner Colin Stansfield Smith, has created award-winning schools since the 1980s *(Frogmore Infants School, pictured right)*.

But it is important to note that in developing such tectonic ingenuity, it was the invisible processes which surround the practice of architecture that were crucial to its realisation. The department's position within such networks – politically, socially and geographically – gave access to the agency to deliver tangible impact across a range of scales, from the neighbourhood unit to the bathroom sink. Connections were forged administratively, from architect to minister, but also from civic to private practice through publication. Working in this manner, these architects were often unacknowledged, anonymous beneath the umbrella of LCC until they escaped to form their own practices, as the Smithsons, Archigram and HKPA did. Yet, in the time they were there, they delivered discernible impact upon the architectural horizons we look up to – literally – today.

Connecting the dots between planning and delivery is just one part of the architect's role. Beyond design concerns, their value lies in the expertise they provide in commissioning



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private practice, administrating works on site, and pushing the boundaries of tectonics from the industry norms. Council architects shouldn't be left to the least financially attractive schemes, nor those with the lowest architectural potential, but could be used – as the LCC did – to generate real value, rather than simply cut overheads. The fledgling department established in Croydon, led by AJ Emerging Woman Architect of the Year finalist Chloe Phelps, has a direct remit to address the frustration at the reliance on private equity to deliver buildings for public benefit, negating outsourcing site clearance, development and construction to those who are motivated by financial return – a frustration which was the also in play in 1889 when the LCC and the Architects' Department came into being. Here exists the potential to deliver discernible change, not only in terms of the architectural product which results, but in the means by which we practise architecture, determining the links and gaps inherent in the networks at hand.

In our concerns for how we frame architecture as a process as much as a product, we must consider the immaterial networks we need to construct as a profession to help us in the material realisation of our architectural aspirations.

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