

letters

Image or content?

One of the predilections of the present United Kingdom Government has been to distribute funds available for public buildings and infrastructure not on an equal, or pro-rata, basis across the country, but selectively, in response to competitive bids prepared by rival authorities.

The Single Regeneration Budget, City Challenge money, the resources that accompany City of Architecture status, even funds committed to improving school security, are all allocated in this way. And now of course a similar approach has been adopted for the distribution of National Lottery money, a flow of cash into capital projects greater than the nation has experienced for many years.

No doubt the Government sees significant merits in this approach, attracted presumably by the logic that the rigours of the competition system will help ensure quality, and increase efficiency in the projects that it supports. No doubt too it welcomes the opportunity it gives to avoid any long-term financial commitment to the providers of facilities and services, and restrict instead all funding obligations to specific, one-off, short term, capital projects. Revenue support is always strictly avoided.

Unfortunately, whatever cost efficiencies may be achieved within the design and organisation of the selected projects themselves as a result of this process, they are more than offset by the enormous waste of human and material resources that are inevitably incurred by unsuccessful Lottery applicants. It is ironic that a Government that has professed itself committed to the eradication of excessive bureaucratic waste has unwittingly devised so cumbersome and inefficient a method for distribution of its resources.

Now the procurement of architecture itself has been drawn into this process, with architects competing through interview or design competition to secure commissions, and clients selecting architects specifically with the preparation of a Lottery application in mind. In general, the more open selection procedures that are now being adopted are, of course, to be welcomed, and Peter Blundell Jones provides in this issue (pp.16-27) a fascinating insight into the assessment process followed in the recent competition for the National Centre of Popular

Music in Sheffield, a project which hopes to secure Arts Council Lottery funding.

But for many architects in the United Kingdom, this new set of circumstances (which is being replicated in different ways all over the world) has also given rise to a significant shift in the role they perform. For, while in the past, the architect was seen as the agent responsible for the direction and utilisation of funds already dedicated to the project in hand, now the architect is increasingly being charged with the task of attracting the funds themselves: it is the architect who is responsible for providing the inspirational image that will excite the attention of the assessors and funding agencies and encourage them to release resources for the project.

Perhaps inevitably, this new obligation seems to militate against a complex architecture concerned with reshaping space and effective utilisation of resources. It favours instead a simple approach built around a single, dramatic idea or gesture, which can be communicated quickly and directly through the medium of a model photograph or computer rendering: the architectural equivalent of the sound-bite, in which image is given greater importance than content. Ironically the process of public consultation that now invariably accompanies building projects only tends to reinforce this.

There may certainly be moments where buildings of this kind – landmark structures standing apart from their surroundings, insular, idiosyncratic and exclusive – may have a place, and when they can provide a welcome relief from the overwhelming mediocrity that characterises so much of our contemporary cities. But it would surely be folly if all projects that are so earnestly seeking Lottery and other such funds today feel obliged to choose the sound-bite strategy to get built.

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