



Challenge your perception of architects

Continuing our monthly series of articles celebrating 2010's Power of Place event, **Adrian Wishart** attempts to tackle the public's negative views of the profession.



Power of Place
Shetland's Year of Architecture and Place 2010

As we embark on Shetland's first ever celebrated year of architecture, I thought it would be interesting to look at "the Architect", and how they are perceived in Shetland. As a Shetland-born architect, I want to see if I can challenge some perceptions while taking a somewhat light-hearted look at the relationship between the architect and you, the Shetland public. Louis Hellman's cartoon "Arcane School of Architecture" portrays the relationship between architects and the public that is hopefully not so common nowadays.

I'll start by describing how folk have jokingly summed up architects to me over the years since I embarked on becoming one. "Woolly gansies and buildings wi roond windoos" seems to be a recurring description, usually with an expletive somewhere in there too. Thick rimmed specs and corduroy breeks, bad ties and garish socks are also commonly attributed to the profession. Attire seems to be the obvious target, but I can sometimes see why. Lots of people dress to express, but architects (and artists) often look so different that they end up giving themselves a stereotypical image which is quite easy to mock. I have friends from university who laughed at the oddity of our Le Corbusier wannabe tutors. Now they are turning into the very same as the years go by. I believe I have yet to develop my own style – not sure yet,



but it might be a black suit and orange turtleneck jumper, as I've not seen that "style" yet.

A common perception of architecture, in Shetland and beyond, is one of eccentric folk designing quirky buildings that are not relevant to the man on the street. "Only folk wi money tae burn and a want o wit, pay an architect tae design onything" is another unfortunate view I have been aware of since moving home to Shetland. I also feel that when considering the use of an architect, some people don't get far before deciding the fees can't be justified; they have a fear of being railroaded into a design they don't want, or "Billy fae next door" can do the same drawings for a few cans of beer. Although each of these perceptions will be based on someone's real experience somewhere, the chances are that fees can probably be justified on the benefits brought from a well-considered design. Also, a good architect will listen to your needs and produce a better design along with you. And Billy next door probably won't dedicate a lot of his time to thinking about how to give you the best possible solution.

Bad experiences involving architects would understandably account for some people's doubts. Without seeking to justify ugly buildings, many a criticism is aimed at a building's outward appearance.

Appearances are after all subjective to the viewer, and "creative" occupations have a lot in common in this respect. But criticism is more constructive when it is based on a sound knowledge of the design philosophy and reasoning. Shetland architects wouldn't always agree on the success of each other's buildings, but that's not to say we don't share an appreciation of the work that goes into designing them.

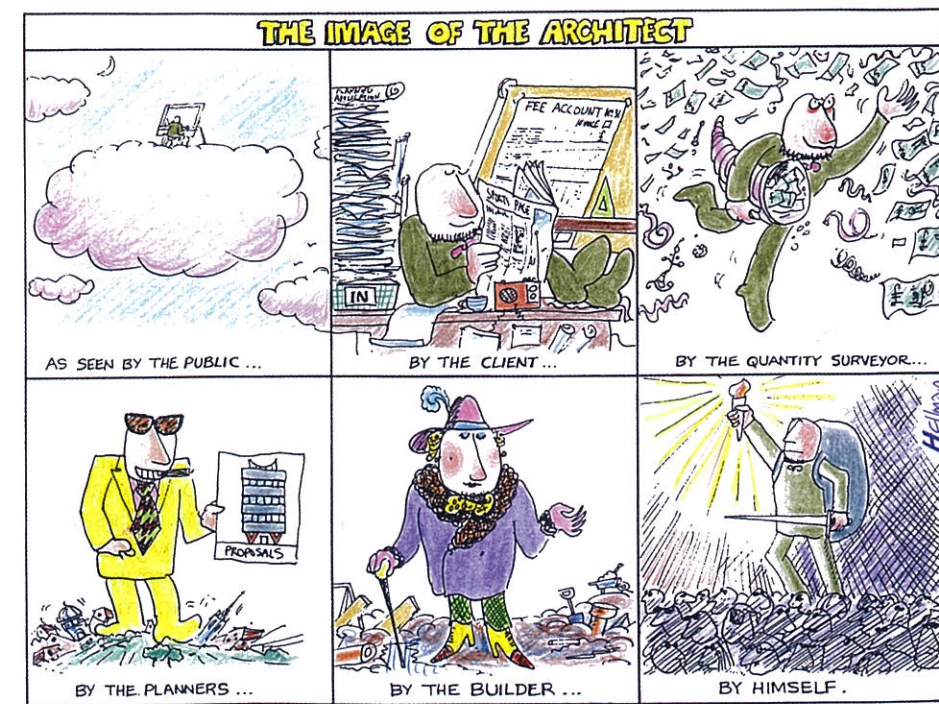
By describing how architects are trained I might hopefully challenge some of the perceptions I've described. The study of architecture includes the basics that you may expect, such as structural mechanics, history and theory. I did yawn through many a lecture, but came to realise they were crucial to understanding the origins of a well-established profession that plays such a large part in society.

I think most architects will agree that a very beneficial part of our studies were the design projects. Hypothetical scenarios or briefs were given to us to research before working through a thorough design process, culminating in a design presentation of our building. This also involved weekly critiques by tutors, which could reduce students to tears. Not surprising perhaps, when students had worked days without sleep to complete their masterpiece, only to be "chastised" in front of their peers if the result was not to the tutor's liking (I always managed

to hold back the tears until I got home). It was a "sturdy" way of learning that seemed to work for me. Perhaps further knowledge of the range and depth of the training architects complete would increase people's confidence in using their services.

On starting to work in a practice I quickly learned how many other aspects an architect must cover. Contract law, health and safety and charring meetings were perhaps the biggest shockers, especially when you'd just left the university on a high, eager to get torn into your first real design project. Surprisingly for most architects, designing actually forms only a small part of the job, but this makes designing all the more fun when we get the opportunity. Co-ordination is a large part of our daily work, as the architect traditionally leads the design team of engineers, quantity surveyors and contractors. Contract administration is the other main activity, which consists of approving large amounts of money on behalf of their clients. Our work is certainly varied.

With regard to those members of the public who have worked with architects, I would hope they've found us to be fairly normal people who have great enthusiasm for their work. The construction industry is fraught with pit falls and unforeseens that make steering a project through it like clenching a wet bar of soap. Part of the architect's role is to be your "guiding light" through all of this, and my experience is that people are always glad of the assistance.



Cartoons by Louis Hellman

I've noticed how people, including architects, can be critical of buildings or designs while ignoring the fact it is often a product of multiple inputs such as client desires, planning policies, building regulations, end user's must-haves, a funding body's stipulations, or whether an essay kerr can reverse right to the door. To bring all of these together in a way that satisfies everyone can be no mean feat, and achieving a visually pleasing building is sometimes no more than a bonus.

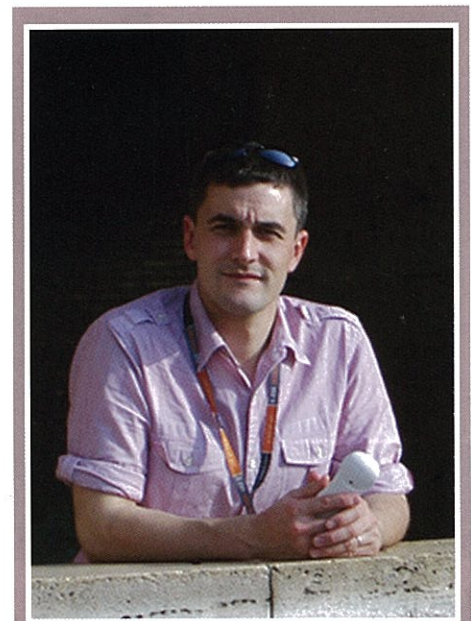
A more trivial but interesting observation I've made is of architect's own homes. Typically we fit these scenarios: those lucky enough to have designed and built their ideal house as a show piece for their style; those who live in a traditional house who have torn the innards out and replaced it with unconventional interiors based on ideas gathered over the years. Others seem to live in transient homes, where they bide their time until their many thousand ideas have been boiled down to one that could actually be built. One thing is for sure: an architect's house will have plenty to nose at if you get a look inside.

I think what can be drawn from this is that architects are well aware of how they are perceived. They should however challenge their public image to help show that whether it be your extension, house, workplace, school, hospital, town or city, architects have the ability to improve buildings and places which each of us interact with in some way every day.

Finally, I think it is true to say that a major part of the satisfaction we get

from being an architect is seeing people successfully use and interact with buildings we have created or improved, even more so when they have successfully achieved the desired style, and if it can eventually gain a timeless appearance within its surroundings.

The celebrated cartoonist and architect Louis Hellman MBE has kindly let me use another of his cartoons, "The Image of the Architect" (first published in *Architect's Journal*) to illustrate the many perceptions of the architect. Whilst the cartoon is possibly very accurate, I have hopefully challenged it for the better. Let me know on the Power of Place phone. ■



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The February Power of Place question:

What is your perception of Shetland architects or of architects in general?

Text / phone to the Power of Place phone **07503596635**. Or you can also email your thoughts, opinions and photographs to **powerofplace@yahoo.co.uk** or by post to **Power of Place, Toll Clock Shopping Centre, Lerwick.**

