

Design champions

Peter Stewart

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Tessa Jowell, re-appointed as Culture Secretary in the new cabinet, is, we are told, bidding to become a new 'über-champion' for good design across government departments. Until now, there has been, as part of Labour's Better Public Buildings initiative, a ministerial design champion to speak up for design quality within each government department. Design champions have also been appointed, with CABE's encouragement, in local authorities, health trusts and elsewhere.

We can deduce from the changes proposed that the system, in central government at least, is thought not to be working. And this is supported by the evidence of our eyes. Travelling along Euston Road recently, I have been shocked by the crudeness of the new University College Hospital tower building - surely one of the least acceptable additions ever to our capital's skyline. The most prominent visible sign of close to half a billion pounds' worth of public spending tells a depressing story about how far we still have to go with public sector architecture in this country.

That design was an early product of the PFI. There have been successes as well as failures: Brighton Library, for example, and some court buildings. In many departments, though, the design champion role is simply added to a minister's list of things that have to be put one side until the demands of the day have been dealt with - in other words, indefinitely. A lot of new hospital and police buildings are not as good as they should be.

When our government builds in places where it knows it is 'on show', it usually manages to get things right. Embassies and British Council projects abroad go to first-rate architects, and things are done properly. When it comes to

providing public services for its own citizens, however, different standards apply. Affordability rules: design and build detailing, and lots of that nasty 'PFI cladding' - the new vernacular of the public sector.

I am sure that it is better to have champions than not to have them. Good architecture needs patrons, and it is not easy for an institution to be a patron. A champion is a surrogate patron for modern bureaucracies - someone embedded in the procurement process who gives a damn. The effectiveness of a champion, however, relies on two things: personal commitment to the role, and being in a position to do something about it.

So what can we hope for from Tessa Jowell? With the renewal of the BBC's charter and the Olympic bid on her 'to do' list, will architecture get much of a look in? I was encouraged to read of her view that politicians 'have enough reasons to support culture on its own merits to stop apologising for it by speaking only of it in terms of other agendas' - a refreshing counterpoint to the gobbledegook of 'best value performance indicators' and so on. But even if we assume the commitment is there, and that she has a mind to take her own advice, will she be able to convince her colleagues, particularly at the Treasury, that spending on architecture is a good investment - in its own terms or otherwise?

As champion of champions, she will have to concentrate on the big picture. My suggestions:

- Demand that higher quality standards are set for PFI bidders. When this happens they rise to the challenge - as at Brighton Library.
- Challenge 'affordability' criteria. The budgets are just as much invented as the designs.

- She has, in CABI, a good source of expert advice about architecture. She should listen carefully to what it says. If the Government had been more inclined to do so in the past, we might have had a less problematic Diana memorial, and a Wembley which could host Olympic athletics.
- Finally, with John Prescott still in charge of ODPM, she has a cabinet colleague who cares about architecture. She should remind him that the normal rules of the planning system still apply to PFI projects - though many local authorities behave as if they don't - and suggest he calls in one or two rubbish schemes *'pour encourager les autres'*.

And if London is chosen for the 2012 Olympics, please can we have the 'impressing the foreigners' model of public procurement?