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The Royal Fine Art Commission and 75 years of English design review: the final 15 years, 1984–1999

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the second of two linked papers that focus on the work of the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC), which for three quarters of a century held the mantle of the UK Government's advisor on design in the built environment. This paper tells the story of the organization's final 15 years when, under a new and charismatic leader, the Commission substantially changed its *modus operandi*, and came out of the shadows, although without ever fully embracing the modern era of government. Analysis of the archives are supplemented by what the limited available literature tells us about the RFAC and by a small number of interviews with key stakeholders with first-hand experience of the operation of the RFAC; those who either worked for it, were responsible for it within Government, or were reviewed by it. The experience offers valuable insights into the practices and problematics of design governance that today, internationally, forms one of the keystones of modern day planning.


KEYWORDS

Royal Fine Art Commission; design review; design governance

Watchdog or guard dog, a new broom

A first paper in this pair explored the period from the creation of the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC) in 1924 to its 60th year. By the 1980s, after decades of earnest, important, but often invisible work, a gear-change in the role of the RFAC was arguably long overdue. Reacting to criticism in the press that the RFAC was 'a toothless watchdog', in 1971 the Commission had argued: 'This is a true description because it is a watchdog's function to bark, rather than to act as a guard dog which can be expected to bite'.¹ But looking back at the period and continuing the canine analogy, JM Richards observed that the 'the first duty of a watch-dog is to bark – especially if it has been given nothing to bite with – rather than try to persuade the burglar to take only a little of the silver'.²

Entering the 1980s and the first turbulent years of the Thatcher governments, the work of the RFAC had gone largely unnoticed precisely by continuing to keep its metaphorical head down. By 1985, however, a new Chairman was required, and the post was filled by Norman St John-Stevas MP (later Lord St John of Fawsley), the charismatic Conservative politician and former Leader of the House of Commons and Minister of State for the Arts. As a 'one nation' Conservative prepared to speak out against Margaret Thatcher's economic reforms, St John-Stevas did not last long as a

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¹RFAC, *Twenty-First Report*, 9.

²Richards, *Memoirs*.

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Minister and, in January 1981, was the first of the so-called wets to be sacked from the Cabinet.³ Despite this, his ongoing loyalty to the Prime Minister, who was said to have a soft spot for him, was rewarded with the unpaid but prestigious role at the Commission. Indeed, it may have been this relationship that saved the Commission when later in that decade the notoriously free-market Nicholas Ridley took over as Secretary of State for the Environment and declared ‘I really don’t think there’s a role for arbiters of taste. We all have our own taste and it is not right for a publicly supported critic to be laying down standards’.⁴ Thatcher nevertheless showed her support for the organization directly by penning an introduction to the RFAC publication, *A New Look for London*,⁵ even though the report was implicitly less than complimentary to her administration.

On awarding St John-Stevas the role, an earlier Secretary of State – Patrick Jenkin – gave him the explicit remit of boosting the profile of the Commission and bringing a greater influence to bear on the patrons of architecture.⁶ As reported in his obituary:

It was hoped that his appointment would inject a bit of panache and excitement. It did, and he changed the public image of the Commission considerably. But critics accused him of turning it into a personal publicity vehicle (one annual report featured no fewer than six full-colour photographs showing the chairman striking one pose after another in the company of the great and good), and of allowing his own wayward preferences to take precedence over the views of the experts (Figure 1).⁷

Thus, whilst the day-to-day work of the Commission was carried on by its secretariat with the characteristic professionalism and continuity of the civil service (of which they were part); the personality and drive of the Chairman strongly influenced a new style and profile at the RFAC that represented a major departure in its latter years. It reflected a power of individual agency on the work of the Commission that had never featured before.

Yet despite his style, in the second half of the 1980s the Commission did begin to significantly influence the course of the country’s governance of design through its pronouncements and lobbying.⁸ Arguably, this was remarkable given the times in which they now found themselves. Thus, in 1980, the new Conservative government committed to unfettering private enterprise issued Circular 22/80 (*Development Control*), which set the pattern for governmental views on design for the next decade. The overriding emphasis was that design was essentially subjective and that any attempt to control it by the public sector should be restricted to environmentally sensitive areas.⁹ The instruction to the RFAC to ‘raise their game’ clearly ran against the prevailing neo-liberal political tide and coincided with a further government circular, this time 31/85 (*Aesthetic control*) that powerfully reinforced the ‘hands-off’ messages in 22/80.

It is difficult to explain this contradiction in government policy, supporting on the one hand the work of the RFAC whilst on the other discouraging aesthetic control. Most likely it stemmed from associating the Commission’s work with the limited remit of one-off exceptional schemes and with safeguarding design quality in historic areas. Thus, whilst critical of attempts to control design in ‘ordinary’ places, Conservative governments had long been supportive of state sanctioned

³Kavanagh, “Lord St-John.”

⁴Quoted in Ballieu, “Architecture.”

⁵Hillman, *A New Look*.

⁶Chipperfield, *Financial Management*, 26.

⁷*The Telegraph*, “Lord St-John.”

⁸Punter and Carmona, *The Design Dimension*, 16.

⁹Carmona, *Housing Design*, 28.



Figure 1. The London Eye was the subject of a blistering public attack by the Commission, even though at least three commissioners strongly supported the design. ‘After a bad-tempered meeting at which Lord St John was reportedly rude to the architects concerned, the Commission’s Secretary, Sherban Cantacuzino, wrote to the architects saying: “I am sure that he enjoys putting people down, all of us have suffered from his bullying”’ *The Telegraph*, “Lord St-John.” Source: Matthew Carmona.

conservation, at least since the passing of the 1967 Civic Amenities Act that introduced conservation areas (where many of their supporters lived) for the first time. This assessment seems to be confirmed by the further codification of the RFAC’s role in Circular 8/87 (*Historic buildings and conservation areas*) which gave special mention to the Commission for providing advice on design in historically sensitive areas;¹⁰ advice reinforced in 1994 in the Circular’s sequel – PPG15 (*Planning and the Historic Environment*).¹¹

¹⁰DoE, *Circular 8/87*, para 26.

¹¹DoE, *PPG15*, para. 3.13.

The RFAC itself had criticized the turn against design in government policy in its long delayed Twenty-second Report; in doing so it took issue with the Government's assertion that design was essentially subjective and that its control amounted to interference by the state which could be selectively abandoned as a form of market stimulation (e.g. in Enterprise Zones). For the Commission, each building ought to be judged in relation to its context and none should be above planning considerations. It argued,

There was no doubt in the Commission's mind that, over the country as a whole, the effect of aesthetic control had been to raise the general standard both of layout and design. Developers ... now knew that they had to satisfy the planning authorities on this score, and the fact that the majority now started with a higher design standard was proof of the value of aesthetic control.¹²

This critique of government policy continued in the Commission's next report (the first under the Chairmanship of St John-Stevas). Whilst it agreed with government that planning should not be the guardian of good design and argued 'there can be no substitute for good architects and good patronage', it also contended that 'local government, through the planning process, is the proper forum for reflecting the climate of opinion and for focusing the community's vision of its developing heritage'. For the Commission, such a vision 'can be quite coherently expressed in terms of urban pattern, building height and scale';¹³ in other words, it could be objectively expressed. The Commission was also clear that its advice should no longer be confined to London and the 'finest historic towns' but should also extend to key sites in the 'ordinary towns of England and Wales'.¹⁴ This role, however, was never reflected in national planning policy guidance for the large majority of the country that was not protected by a conservation designation.

A more assertive commission

Whilst policy was slow to change, by the 1990s, the RFAC had begun to be more assertive regarding its views on design. It did this largely through a programme of publications. Some of these were commissioned pieces, some the result of seminars or exhibitions held at the RFAC, and others were generated internally, drawing on the experience of commissioners reviewing schemes. Between 1980 and 1999, 16 titles were published (Figure 2). Some of these dealt with specialist topics that at various times were seen as significant challenges by the RFAC, for example the state of design under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) or the design of light rail systems. The majority, however, fell into three main categories: the management and regeneration of urban areas and their streets; design in the historic built environment; and, principles for effectively and objectively evaluating aesthetic quality.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of these reports, although Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield,¹⁵ in his review of the work of the RFAC (see below) was less than impressed. He argued:

It is not clear to me how the papers relate to the Commission's detailed work, nor that practitioners and planning authorities have found them of value in considering individual schemes. Their weakness is that they do not evolve from the Commission's real work in the detailed examination of schemes, and so do not carry the authority which the conclusions of such examination would give.

Certainly, many of the reports sank without trace or impact, but others, particularly those dealing with issues of urban management and regeneration as they relate to design were widely read and

¹²RFAC, *Twenty-Second Report*, 21.

¹³RFAC, *Twenty-Third Report*, 12.

¹⁴RFAC, *Twenty-Second Report*, 21.

¹⁵Chipperfield, *Financial Management*, 5.

1980 *Building in Context*
 1986 *Designs in the High Street*
 1988 *Inner City Urban Regeneration and Good Design* (Tony Aldous)
 1988 *A New Look for London* (Judy Hillman)
 1989 *Building in Towns, The Importance of Architectural History for the Successful Developer*
 1989 *Conservation Today*
 1990 *Planning for Beauty*
 1992 *Medics and the Millennium? Government Patronage and Architecture*
 1992 *On the Side of Angels, The Work of the Royal Fine Art Commission 1924-92*
 1993 *Bridge Design*
 1994 *Lighten Our Darkness: Lighting in Urban Environments*
 1996 *Design Education for Engineers*
 1996 *Design Quality in Higher Education Buildings*
 1997 *Design Quality and the Private Finance Initiative*
 1997 *Improving Design in the High Street* (Colin Davis)
 1999 *The Design of Light Rail Systems*

Figure 2. RFAC publications 1980–1999.

referenced, and represented early statements on these issues before the association between design and regeneration became more mainstream (in the 2000s).

Likewise, the Commission's statements on aesthetics were the only positive 'official' statements on the subject during the 1980s and 1990s and unashamedly argued the case for the importance of beauty in the built environment and for a public-sector role in helping to guarantee it. The Commission's first toe in the water in this regard had been in 1980 through their publication *Building in Context*,¹⁶ followed by the influential report *Planning for Beauty*.¹⁷ This advocated:

- Adoption by Government of a more positive stance towards design control (the term aesthetic control began to slip from common usage at this time);
- The wider use of design guidelines to emphasize the visual impact of buildings and the importance of public realm concerns; and
- Establishment of a national network of 'Architectural Advisory Panels' to relieve pressure on the RFAC and to help raise design standards locally.¹⁸

The report echoed and amplified a wider groundswell of concern, most notably from the Prince of Wales, towards the end of the 1980s about the poor state of the built environment in the UK and the highly constrained role of planning in tackling it.¹⁹ In response, the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Chris Patten, in a ground breaking speech to the RFAC, accepted the need to redefine government guidance on design and that local authorities should provide guidance to architects and developers. The result was a joint statement by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to replace the advice in Circular 22/80 (that had been restated again in 1988 in PPG1 *General Policy and Principles*).²⁰ After minor amendments by the Department

¹⁶RFAC, *Building*.

¹⁷RFAC, *Planning*, 30–34.

¹⁸This was not a new idea as a sporadic network had been in existence since the 1920s, but most had ceased to operate in the 1980s, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/b0e6dc99-3c8f-461b-8685-0f7d4669f756>.

¹⁹Punter and Carmona, *The Design Dimension*, 30.

²⁰Tibbalds, "Planning," 72.

of the Environment (DoE), the statement was incorporated into government guidance as Annex A to a revised PPG1, released in 1992.

The Annex was markedly more positive about design and its governance than its predecessors with design recognized as a material consideration about which authorities ought to enshrine their expectations in development plans; tempered with warnings against excessive design interference and over-prescription in policy and guidance. No mention was made of the role of the RFAC, but the Commission had played an important part in bringing the guidance about and, in 1994, went on to issue their most authoritative report, *What Makes a Good Building*,²¹ tackling the thorny issue of how to evaluate the quality of architectural design. The report itself was written by Sherban Cantacuzino, Secretary to the Commission, and drew on the RFAC's decades of experience in making such judgements. Consequently, it remains one of the clearest articulations of architectural design criteria for making impartial aesthetic judgements.²²

Reviewing projects

In the midst of all of the publishing, the Commission was examining less than half of the designs submitted for review – 139 out of 331 in 1994 – roughly two-thirds of which were located in London.²³ Commenting on this situation, Youngson argued ‘That a great deal of attention must be devoted to London is certain’,²⁴ although this left ‘insufficient time, or no time at all, for the many small but important developments that take place in the numerous small towns and villages of ... the other English counties, as well as Wales’. In large part, the figures reflect the constraints of a still small organization located in the capital with an obligation to advise on significant developments throughout England and Wales that was all but ‘an impossible task’.²⁵

Managing the process

To help with this, in its final years, the Commission set out more clearly how it chose which schemes to review. Thus, whilst it still advised ‘on all matters affecting the visual environment’,²⁶ in reality schemes had to satisfy at least one of four criteria:

- A proposal of national importance?
- A site of national importance?
- A substantial impact on a sensitive environment?
- An opportunity to upgrade the quality of the surrounding environment?

The criteria helped to manage expectations on the Commission whilst its evolving practices helped to further manage its workload. By this time the Commission had more than doubled in size from its original 8 commissioners to 18, all appointed by the Secretary of State in the rather secretive manner of British Government's at time, after consulting the Chairman and ‘taking soundings’. As before, half of these were architects with, typically, one civil engineer for enquiries, such as bridges, that

²¹RFAC, *What Makes a Good Building*.

²²Carmona and Tiesdell, *Urban Design*, 179.

²³RFAC, *Thirty-Second Report*, 12.

²⁴Youngson, *Urban Development*, 114–115.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 112.

²⁶RFAC, *Thirty-Second Report*, 43.

involved engineering matters. The group remained dominated by white male establishment figures, and never the avant-garde, which went some way to explaining the ongoing attachment of the Commission to modern yet contextual design. Women were now represented, largely in the non-architect category, with, for example, four women included in the 1985 Commission, one of whom was an architect.²⁷

To handle the workload, schemes that were received were first reduced in number (typically by half) by the Secretary to the Commission,²⁸ before being presented to a 'Preparatory Committee' that would meet once a month to prioritize submissions. The Secretary or Deputy Secretary and representative Commissioners would then visit the site with the full Commission meeting occurring ten days later. On these days, the Commission would divide into two groups in the morning, with each 'Examination Committee' reviewing up to six schemes before reporting back their findings to the full Commission in the afternoon at which formal decisions would be made.

Typically, projects were presented to committees by their architects in the presence of the relevant authorities. This included the planning officer (who was always asked to give a view) and the client. A letter with the views of the Commission (including identification of any design deficiencies and, if appropriate, remedies for action) was then sent as soon as possible after the meeting. These letters remained private except in circumstances where the Commission felt that a public airing of their views was necessary, and then only after notifying all concerned. Projects were divided into four types:²⁹

- Immediately and enthusiastically approved;
- Acceptable but without any special commendation;
- Acceptable if certain deficiencies in design are made good;
- Unacceptable.

In its Thirty-Second Report,³⁰ the RFAC reported that the vast majority of proposals were amended in some form at the behest of the Commission (78%) – which the Chairman called 'heartening in view of the Commission's lack of any formal powers of compliance'.³¹ Regarding those projects that fell into the fourth category, for which rectification was not possible, the Commission wrote:

Such cases are distressing and usually occur because the design task has proved beyond the capabilities of the architect or designer concerned. In such cases the Commission may recommend the engagement of a consultant, or that a completely fresh start should be made.³²

On this front, from 1985, the Commission was increasingly less inclined to pull its punches, with letters often penned by the Chairman himself. One, for example, denounced a scheme as 'a blot on the landscape' and an 'architectural disaster'. Another argued: 'Surely London deserves better than this architecturally incoherent building, more suitable to a Midwestern town in the United States than to a prominent shopping and commercial centre in one of the greatest cities of the world'.³³ The architecture critic of *The Independent* agreed with the approach, arguing that 'On

²⁷RFAC, *Twenty-Third Report*.

²⁸Chipperfield, *Financial Management*, 5.

²⁹RFAC, *Twenty-Second Report*, 11.

³⁰RFAC, *Thirty-Second Report*, 13.

³¹Ibid.

³²RFAC, *Twenty-Second Report*, 11.

³³Quoted in Fisher, "Architecture."

the whole' the Commission's 'decisions help to improve the quality of British public design and buildings', including 'stopping the Government from building a banal new headquarters for the Inland Revenue in the shadow of Nottingham Castle';³⁴ eventually leading to the appointment of a RFAC commissioner, Michael Hopkins, to redesign the scheme.

The projects

During this period, projects seen by the RFAC remained diverse, including public art, public space, lighting, and major infrastructure, alongside master planning and architecture. Notably, however, the Commission's involvement in planning ceased, reflecting the culmination of processes that had been underway since the 1960s whereby planning had become increasingly a technical and regulatory process, rather than a physical one, whilst the role of design generally had been marginalized in planning education and practice.

Some of the larger projects in which the Commission was involved related to London's transport infrastructure, including early plans for what became Crossrail. Here the RFAC reviewed the emerging station designs, viewing them in terms of key public spaces. With respect to public works such as this, the RFAC were always critical of visible attempts to cut costs resulting in 'crude structures' as they saw it.³⁵ In street spaces, they continued a long-term critique dating back to the 1950s and the work of the British townscape movement that bemoaned the proliferation of street 'clutter' such as traffic islands, traffic control signage, and bollards. On these grounds, in the early 1990s, they criticized the plans for Victoria Square in Birmingham, a scheme that (despite its bollards) quickly became a national icon of the reviving interest in British urban design. Here, and elsewhere, the Commission was always prepared to admit its mistakes and declared Victoria Square a great success upon visiting the finished scheme (Figure 3).³⁶

Cost cutting by the public sector was at the forefront of the RFAC's concerns during the 1990s when the PFI was launched in the UK. Whilst the Commission avoided commenting on the political and economic rationalities underpinning PFI, in its 1995 report the Chairman argued that through PFI 'too low a priority is given to design quality (by which I mean not just the outward appearance of building but also its fitness for its purposes)'.³⁷ The Commission believed that design quality conflicted with PFI because good architecture was too often seen as 'expendable' when costs needed to be pared down and when, to maximize their profits, the developer 'crammed commercial uses into every spare cranny'.³⁸

The City of London remained a concern for the Commission in its later years and it argued that 'the City must offer a diverse and stimulating environment, as well as a high standard of office accommodation and services, if it is to remain an attractive location'.³⁹ For the Commission, the spread of 'Monolithic office buildings' was of particular concern as such development contributed 'little or nothing to the streetscape and townscape' of the City.⁴⁰ A key issue was how the bulk of the building was distributed within its form. At 168 Fenchurch Street, for example, the Commission praised a design for achieving the same floor space in fewer storeys than its predecessor. Elsewhere the Commission lent its support to Richard Rogers' design for the Lloyd's Register of Shipping,

³⁴Ballieu, "Architecture."

³⁵RFAC, *Thirty-Second Report*, 37.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

³⁷RFAC, *Thirty-Third Report*, 8.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*



Figure 3. Victoria Square Birmingham, criticized by the Commission at the design stage, but later lauded as a great success. Source: Matthew Carmona.

which, by contrast, grew from a height of 5 storeys to 12 through the use of 2 towers that the Commission viewed as unobtrusive and providing the potential to serve as local landmarks (Figure 4).

Height, as in the past, remained an ongoing concern, although the Commission's response was somewhat less formulaic than in earlier years, perhaps accepting that London was now a far more diverse city, height-wise. This flexibility was illustrated by the Commission's opposition to the redevelopment of an unremarkable office block in Lambeth. The proposal suggested an additional two and half storeys on top of the existing bulky building whilst the Commission recommended the building be demolished and that a new more slender, yet taller, tower be built in its place.⁴¹

At a different scale altogether, Norman Foster's proposal for a 386-metre tall Millennium Tower in the City on the site now occupied by Foster's 'Gherkin' 'demonstrated the need for an agreed policy against which to judge the visual and environmental impact of tall buildings'.⁴² As they later commented: 'The Commission had no doubts about the brilliance of the design; the crescent shaped plan, bifurcating tower and glazed skin created a dramatic and striking profile', but was nonetheless clear that that the scheme should not go ahead. In its view, the wish to combine large individual floor plates with an elegantly proportioned tower produced something simply out of scale, not only with the City, but with London as a whole.⁴³ In this case, they argued, sheer quality of architectural design should not be sufficient to guarantee planning permission and a more contextual approach was required. Whilst the scheme was later shelved, ostensibly for air traffic control reasons, the townscape-led approach to high building location that the RFAC advocated (beyond the protection of view corridors) was never adopted.

As for historic buildings, the Commission maintained its support for adaptive reuse so long as it maintained the character of the original structure. For example, when the design of Herzog de

⁴¹Ibid., 16.

⁴²RFAC, *Thirty-Fourth Report*, 13.

⁴³Ibid., 14.



Figure 4. Lloyds Register of Shipping, London, praised by the Commission as contributing to the overall architectural composition of the area through its eccentricity. Source: Matthew Carmona.

Meuron was chosen for the Tate Modern at Bankside Power Station, the Commission gave strong support. They did, however, find issue with the holes that the design called for in the original chimney in order to make it into a viewing tower, and this element was subsequently dropped from the scheme (Figure 5).⁴⁴

At the same time, proposals to redesign the British Museum's interior courtyard and reading room were under scrutiny. Foster and Partners had proposed a scheme that would have floors surround the original drum of the reading room with the most dramatic addition being a new glass dome. The ribs of the original proposal for the dome created a rectangular pattern which worried

⁴⁴RFAC, *Thirty-Third Report*, 21.



Figure 5. Tate Modern gained the support of the RFAC who recommended against the use of black brick in the alterations given the historic red brick of the structure. Source: Matthew Carmona.

the Commission. The design also called for bridges to link the upper levels around the drum with the upper exhibition spaces. The Commission disapproved of the bridges and asked Foster and Partners to reconsider the rectangular ribbing. The amended design ‘satisfied every detail’,⁴⁵ leading to the presence of only one bridge and to the iconic triangular pattern in the glazing of the dome that is seen today (Figure 6). Such interventions, some small and others large, were the bread and butter of the Commission and the archive is replete with case upon case upon case.

Policy turns and problems mount

Whilst the everyday work of the RFAC continued throughout the 1990s, much as it had done since 1924, a momentous change was underway that would ultimately lead to the demise of the RFAC as well as to the sort of political environment for better design that the RFAC had long hankered after. Although Chris Patten might, arguably, be said to have begun a slow policy U-turn from outright hostility to the positive embrace of design in public policy, it was the arrival of John Gummer as Secretary of State for the Environment, in 1993, that gave the process a new and significant momentum.

Gummer was personally interested in conservation and the environment and quickly came to see design quality as part of this agenda. In 1994, he launched his *Quality in Town & Country* initiative, setting out the Government’s changing thinking on issues of design and the local environment; moving away from the previous focus on aesthetics. On launching the initiative Gummer railed against: ‘the relentless homogenisation which has eroded so much local colour’, against ‘monotonous building which is designed for nowhere in particular’ and against urban design as ‘a neglected profession’.⁴⁶ This was the first time that ‘urban design’ had been directly addressed by Ministers

⁴⁵Ibid., 25.

⁴⁶Gummer, *DoE Press Release*, 8; 13.



Figure 6. The British Museum Great Court with its iconic dome on a triangular grid, a direct consequence of RFAC intervention. Source: Matthew Carmona.

and it was followed up by an *Urban Design Campaign* the following year to encourage wider debate and attention to design considerations at an earlier stage in the development process. A year later, Gummer opened the *Urban Design Exhibition* of case studies and argued: ‘Urban design is a key part of the solution for it recognizes that the quality of the built environment is not determined by buildings alone’.⁴⁷

In time, the initiative flowed through into policy with a revised PPG1 (*General Policy and Principles*) issued in 1997. The revised policy was certainly mould-breaking,⁴⁸ bringing design to the fore as one of three themes ‘which underpin the Government’s approach to the planning system’. Unequivocally it stated: ‘Good design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process and should be encouraged everywhere’.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Quoted at <http://www.rudi.net/books/4872>.

⁴⁸Carmona, *Housing Design*, 72.

⁴⁹DoE, *PPG1*, para.3; 15.

Above all, the period from 1985 to 1977 demonstrates the power of national politicians in the UK to steer the agenda and just how much policy is shaped by the interests and political judgements of those key individuals. Whilst it took a good deal longer for practice to begin to change on the ground (in local government and in local development practices), it was clear that a corner had been turned on design. So where was the RFAC in all this? The answer, too often, was nowhere to be seen.

The commission under fire

In his obituary in *The Telegraph*, Lord St John is credited with giving the Commission a new public image and direction, and at the same time moulding it too much in his own image and for his own purposes. Problems first mounted after he was elected Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1991. Whilst his position at the RFAC was unpaid, it was also central to steering the Commission's work and priorities and so when academic politics began to prove highly diverting 'his frequent absences from the Commission's offices in London raised eyebrows'.⁵⁰ Making matters worse, this happened at a time when the Commission's role had been widening, in significant part due to Lord St John's earlier commitment. The expectation now was on the RFAC 'to exercise some "general influence" on aesthetic design and architectural standards',⁵¹ for example through its various seminars and publications, through its links to other important bodies, regular visits to local authorities around the country, and via a new role advising on the design of foreign embassies in London and British embassies abroad.

With an enhanced role and a higher profile also came greater public scrutiny, and this 'caused the RFAC to make real enemies for the first time',⁵² including over plans for the redevelopment of Paternoster Square in the City. In the 1980s, a broadly Modernist scheme designed by Arup Associates had won the international design competition for this important site in the shadows of St Paul's Cathedral before an intervention by the traditionally minded Prince of Wales ensured that the scheme was abandoned. The RFAC set itself against the classically inspired scheme that came in its wake, master-planned by Sir Terry Farrell, raising considerable disquiet that the RFAC had become too wedded to Modernist ways of thinking. Farrell commented 'I think there probably is still one school of architecture represented on the Commission. ... They should mix it up a bit'.⁵³ Despite the Commission's concerns, the Farrell scheme eventually obtained planning permission before being killed off by the recession of the early 1990s. When the economy recovered, the next scheme, master-planned by Sir William Whitfield (a RFAC commissioner), was something of a compromise in order to avoid controversy and ensure that a development happened.⁵⁴ This project also obtained planning permission (in the RFAC's final year) and in the process secured the Commission's support, if not its enthusiasm (Figure 7). The experience illustrates the dangers of too many hands in the design process, of which the Commission was just one, and plays into a long-term critique of design governance processes that they can unintentionally lead to 'design by committee', rather than to original and creative responses to place, whether Modernist, Classical, or anything else.

The undue influence of the Chairman was also raised including his own particular architectural prejudices, not least against international architects: 'American firms are threatening London with a

⁵⁰*The Telegraph*, "Lord St-John."

⁵¹Youngson, *Urban Development*, 113.

⁵²Ballieu, "Architecture."

⁵³Quoted in Ballieu, "Architecture."

⁵⁴Carmona and Wunderlich, *Capital Spaces*, 99.



Figure 7. Paternoster Square, the final scheme, more compromise than conviction. Source: Matthew Carmona.

rash of quite unsuitable buildings'.⁵⁵ For Ballieu,⁵⁶ the organization could not afford to make enemies, and she argued that if the RFAC wanted support for its views, it needed 'to open up to public and press alike. It cannot afford to operate in the shadows. ... It needs to be seen to draw expert opinion from more than a self-referential coterie'. Reacting to the anxiety, in 1994 the government called in the retired civil servant Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield to examine the Commission.

Chipperfield's inquiry did not get off to a good start, and in his final report he alluded to a general ambiguity in the Commission's mission, and a lack of 'a collective view from the Commission on their powers and functions'.⁵⁷ He reported that a wide body of opinion believes the work of the Commission adds value, and importantly that the Government itself valued the role as an independent evaluator of the design of major developments. At the same time,

there are also those who say the Commission acts in an arbitrary inconsistent manner and is not respected. Significant criticisms are that the Commission does not pay sufficient regard to the wishes of users or occupiers, of the commercial realities; that the criticisms made are too sweeping, given after insufficient consideration, and do not allow for any response; that the comments reflect certain architectural prejudices which not all share; and that nostalgia, rather than an awareness of present day needs governs the Commission's approach.⁵⁸

His conclusions were hardly glowing, but were couched in the terms of an experienced civil servant merely putting options to the Minister, whilst gently steering the Ministers' hand. Thus, Chipperfield recommended a scaling back of activities not explicitly linked to the task of reviewing schemes (such as research, publications, and publicity relating to the work of the Commission) whilst there should be a strengthening of the links between the Commission's core reviewing activities and that of the

⁵⁵Quoted in Ballieu, "Architecture."

⁵⁶Ballieu, "Architecture."

⁵⁷Chipperfield, *Financial Management*, 6.

⁵⁸Ibid., 6.

statutory planning process.⁵⁹ On the latter, he recommended strengthening guidance on when schemes should or should not be considered by the Commission, and what the consequences of failing to refer an appropriate scheme or otherwise failing to take the advice of the Commission into account would be, namely a Ministerial ‘call in’.⁶⁰

Running through the report was a sense that Chipperfield regarded the Commission as having grown beyond its remit as established in its Royal Warrants and as profligate. *The Telegraph* later reported that ‘His conclusions were devastating’ and that Chipperfield was of the opinion that ‘the Commission acted arbitrarily and was not respected’. It concluded: ‘Any other chairman would probably have had to resign, but Lord St John defied all predictions and was reappointed for a third term in 1995’.⁶¹ In reality, these comments significantly overstate both the substance and impact of the report, the main finding from which was that the Commission should not be abolished, but instead should be made more effective by cutting it down to size. Chipperfield recommended that its budget, some £722,000 in 1994/1995, could be dramatically slimmed down by reducing its staff compliment of eight, getting rid of the Chairman’s car, and moving to smaller and less lavish accommodation (he likened their accommodation on St James’ Square to an “exclusive club” which “inhibits free discussion during presentations”).⁶²

The response of the Department of National Heritage,⁶³ under whose ambit the RFAC now fell, was somewhat dismissive of Chipperfield’s report. It strongly supported the Chairman and argued that ‘the wider projection of the Commission [through its public relations and publications] is an important element of its overall impact’. On that basis, it was not so surprising that Lord St John of Fawsley was re-appointed, although some of the mud raked up by Chipperfield clearly stuck and played into the narrative around the RFAC when just three years later its role was again called into question. In hindsight, also, the Chairman did not seem to register the Chipperfield report as a serious shot across the bows of the organization, and with government acquiescence seemed more than a little complacent about its findings. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the near invisibility of the RFAC in the various activities of John Gummer’s Quality in Town & Country initiative; arguably a once in a generation opportunity to raise the importance and profile of design within government. Consequently, the Commission might have been expected to play a key role in driving the initiative forward as a means to both advance the design agenda and to re-stake its claim to be the national voice on such matters; as the press had put it 70 years before: to be active in the beautification of England.⁶⁴

Whether through lack of capacity, because Quality in Town & Country was being led by a different government department to that which sponsored the RFAC, or because the Chair was simply distracted by other matters, this did not happen and instead increasingly the RFAC came under attack for being elitist, secretive, reactive, and susceptible to cronyism,⁶⁵ all accusations vigorously denied. For many, whilst it was seen as performing an important function well in a technical sense, the Commission failed to respond to the increasing urgency of issues or to the changing context within which it was operating. For Sir Stuart Lipton (who had been a commissioner of the RFAC and who later chaired the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment (CABE)), this was as much a matter of style as anything else: ‘Norman, running a particular style and needing to be

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁰Where a Minister rather than the local authority determines whether planning permission should be given.

⁶¹*The Telegraph*, “Lord St-John.”

⁶²Chipperfield, *Financial Management*, 20.

⁶³DNH, *Financial Management*.

⁶⁴RFAC, *Minutes 8 February 1924*, 2.

⁶⁵Ballieu, “Architecture”; Fairs, “Rogers Blasts”; Fisher, “Architecture.”

much more diverse, more open, more approachable' instead of 'dusty, patrician and detached' as described by one former employee. Consequently, even before they came to power in 1997 the RFAC was in the sights of New Labour as an easy target: 'an undemocratic, elitist, pompously titled quango, run out of stuffy St James's Square by a Tory peer who served as a minister under Mrs Thatcher'.⁶⁶

The downfall

At the turn of the twenty-first century there was a zeitgeist of change. Like all new governments, Tony Blair's began with a fundamental review of public expenditure, and in the process the RFAC came under scrutiny.⁶⁷

The subsequent emergence of CABE was undoubtedly part of a watershed in the history of support for design in government policy in the UK, but it built upon the work of John Gummer who had linked design quality with addressing acute town centre problems through the redevelopment of inner cities. Urban issues and design were on a journey to the forefront of political thinking and in the words of a commissioner from the first days of CABE, 'when the Labour party was elected in '97, there were an awful lot of people who were in the cabinet or in positions of power who'd got the design message, it wasn't a new thing to them'.

Above all New Labour was a pragmatic force and John Prescott who took over as Secretary of State for the large new Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) was a savvy politician who immediately saw the success of Gummer's initiatives on design. Consequently, he adopted the pursuit of good design as one of his key means to drive a larger ambition around the 'renaissance' of English cities. Tony Blair was open to this new urban agenda and other key figures such as Mark Fisher followed by Alan Howarth as Ministers of State in the sponsoring department (now the Department for Culture Media and Sport – DCMS), were highly influential. This interest was received with enormous enthusiasm by the professional world, and in the words of one urban designer: 'we were all very encouraged by the energy and the change that they wanted to bring about in the design of the public realm, and urban design in particular'. There was clearly fertile ground for organizations and professionals who had been working together to raise urban design up the policy agenda.

For the RFAC the first sign of real change came with the publication by Chris Smith, the new Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, of a consultation paper on the arts, in 1998, in which he announced a review of the Commission with views sought on several scenarios including: abolition, relocation into the Arts Council (the Government sponsor for the arts), reconstitution as an advisory secretariat within DCMS, or a revamped and renamed commission. At this stage the RFAC remained optimistic about outcomes, with the final Secretary to the RFAC, Francis Golding, commenting 'We can't see that they can come up with anything other than the option we want',⁶⁸ namely the retention of a strong independent body but with the new power to call in planning applications that raise design issues of national significance.⁶⁹ But whilst few were prepared to speak up against the RFAC on record (for fear no doubt of their work being less favourably reviewed by it), behind the scenes the knives were being dug in.

⁶⁶Fisher, "Architecture."

⁶⁷Simmons, "Constraints on Evidence," 408.

⁶⁸Quoted in Fisher, "Architecture."

⁶⁹Lewis and Blackman, "New Body."

The proposals for a more radical solution received particularly enthusiastic support from two key organizations, the first discretely, the second, less so. In the UK, a patchwork of urban design-related bodies had long existed with various levels of influence. Whilst individually they constituted an important force within the design governance landscape, it was not until, seizing the moment created by Quality in Town & County, that they came together to form the Urban Design Alliance (UDAL); a loose federation spanning the RTPI, RIBA, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Institution of Civil Engineers, Urban Design Group, and the Civic Trust. Through UDAL the professional Institutes had finally woken up from a deep sleep to recognize their joint responsibility for the thing that both united (and too often divided) them, the urban design. Whilst this shared commitment (and UDAL) lasted less than a decade, its existence proved to be critical in two ways. First, by making the case for a cross-disciplinary approach to understanding and shaping the built environment; for example, UDAL played a vital role in persuading Chris Smith that CABE's remit should extend beyond architecture to urban design. Second, and reinforcing this, by arguing that a rarefied view of design (as aesthetics) was no longer appropriate (if it ever was), and when dealing with the complexities of the modern city that a more holistic view of the built environment should be prioritized.⁷⁰

This cross-disciplinary urban agenda was supported and further articulated through the work of the Urban Task Force led by Lord Rogers of Riverside (Richard Rogers) which from 1998 had been constituted by John Prescott to identify the causes of urban decline and to suggest ways forward. The resulting report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, concluded that the quality of urban design and strategic planning in England lagged 20 years behind practice elsewhere in Europe and advanced a wide range of recommendations based on two central convictions: that 'regeneration has to be design led';⁷¹ and that government leadership was needed. Whilst the report itself was not published until 1999, the Urban Task Force previously submitted their views on the RFAC to DCMS, and in a letter to Chris Smith, Rogers argued that 'We explicitly do not support simply tinkering with the architectural functions of the RFAC which has proven to be reactive and remote in dealing with the advisory needs of local authorities, developers and others'.⁷² For them, a clean start was required.

In December 1998, Chris Smith announced that from autumn the following year the RFAC would cease to operate, with its functions inherited by a new organisation with a broader and more proactive remit. His consultation paper had revealed a strong preference for a new architecture champion (60%), that three quarters of respondents felt such a champion should remain independent, and near unanimity (95%) that it should have a strong regional presence.⁷³ In fact, the details of the new body were somewhat sketchy at first, prompting Lord St John Fawsley to express 'deep regret' at the announcement which he described as 'rash and ill thought out'.⁷⁴ However, the general direction was clear, with Smith arguing that the new body should be 'a real voice not just for architecture, but urban design generally' (quoted in Lewis and Blackman 1998), whilst Alan Howarth (Minister for the Arts) argued that the body needed 'to spread the promotion of good architecture to a wider constituency',⁷⁵ with an educational role stretching beyond the hallowed halls of London aesthetes.

The new body was to absorb the annual RFAC grant of £705,000, as well as the Arts Council's architecture grant programme (£220,000) and Royal Society for Arts funding for Art and

⁷⁰UDAL news at <http://www.rudi.net/books/11431>.

⁷¹Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban*, 7.

⁷²Quoted in Fairs, "Rogers Blasts."

⁷³Fairs and Lewis, "Architecture Council."

⁷⁴Quoted in Lewis and Fairs, "Architects Need," 1.

⁷⁵Quoted in Baldock, "Architecture Commission."

Architecture (£105,000), and was promised a £300,000 uplift in funding from the following year. Like the RFAC, it was based in London without (initially) any separate regional presence, and would not be led by an architect, to avoid the charge of the new body becoming associated with a particular architectural style,⁷⁶ or by a politician. Instead it was led by a developer, Sir Stuart Lipton, and initially was set up as a company limited by guarantee, and not a formal commission at all. In CABE, ‘third way’ political thinking met neo-liberalism and the result was an agile, innovative, and (initially) rebellious body, that quickly grew to become a significant, serious, and high-profile part of the government machine. But that is another story.⁷⁷

The Urban Task Force,⁷⁸ when it reported in June 1999, strongly welcomed the new body, but argued that for it to succeed it needed to work closely with the DETR, as well as with DCMS. As for its name, that had to wait until the following year when lobbying, in particular from UDAL under the Chairmanship of Terry Farrell, convinced Ministers to add ‘& the Built Environment’ to the ‘Commission for Architecture’ the name that had initially been favoured by the DCMS. The RFAC ceased to exist on 31 July 1999 with CABE immediately taking on its staff and premises and continuing seamlessly its programme of design review.

Conclusion

Over the 75 years of its existence the RFAC made a significant mark on the built fabric of England and Wales, both on what was built and on what was not. It is difficult to quantify that impact because much of it went unremarked and uncelebrated in the day to day work of the organization commenting on projects, encouraging those who came before it to re-think when required, and unambiguously supporting good design when they saw it. Even Geoffrey Chipperfield, author of the 1994 inquiry, could see the value in the Commission’s work, although couched this in typically restrained terms:

There may be those who say that the Commission is a fifth wheel on the planning coach, imposing extra-statutory delay and expense, but there is some moderately persuasive evidence that, in the opinion of the decision makers in the planning system, its work has led to better schemes.⁷⁹

As Gavin Stamp argued,⁸⁰ long before its abolition was on the cards:

I would certainly not have the Commission abolished or reformed out of existence, we need every body that is a barrier to architectural barbarism. On the other hand, paradoxically, it could not possibly have the power to enforce its advice; if it did, the Commission would probably cease to command respect and possibly become open to corruption. Committees of taste can be dangerous things. The Fine Art Commission tries to strike a civilised balance; John Summerson [the architectural historian and commissioner] considers that as a whole it did a good job in a funny inarticulate sort of way ... I am now rather inclined to agree.

For Youngson,⁸¹ whilst the Commission’s judgments were never infallible, as indeed they could not be for questions concerning design about which there was typically no single right or wrong answer, he concluded ‘an experienced and not entirely professional body with no axe to grind is in a very strong and quite exceptional position’ to help resolve such matters, even if only by preventing the

⁷⁶Lewis and Fairs, “Architects Need.”

⁷⁷Carmona et al., *Design Governance*.

⁷⁸Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban*, 80.

⁷⁹Chipperfield, *Financial Management*, 10.

⁸⁰Stamp, “Official Aesthetics,” 30.

⁸¹Youngson, *Urban Development*, 109; 115.

worst forms of design illiteracy. This role, he argued, was facilitated by two key qualities of the Commission. First, its unique role, stretching across the design dimensions of professional remits – architecture, planning, and engineering – that have a tendency to see things in narrower terms than the holistic view of design that is required; and, second, its independence: ‘Pressure can be put on local politicians or officials, sometimes even on national politicians and officials, but not [he believed] on Royal Commissions’.

Chipperfield, the ministry man, disagreed, and in hindsight correctly argued that ‘The Commission does not, and cannot, stand wholly apart from the government of the day’, not when its members are appointed by the Queen on the advice of ministers and the government retains a responsibility to ensure public money is being well spent. In such a context, frustrating or otherwise embarrassing a government can be a dangerous occupation when, ultimately, the very existence of the organization is in the hands of ministers. A case-in-point was the RFAC’s highly critical view of the new City Hall building planned for London in the run up to the election of its first Mayor in 2000. As Nick Raynsford, the then Minister for Housing, Planning, and Construction recalled: ‘they were



Figure 8. City Hall, London, home of the Greater London Authority, designed by Norman Foster but opposed by the RFAC and since derided by many as, among other things, reminiscent of: Darth Vader’s helmet, a woodlouse, an onion, and a glass gonad. Source: Matthew Carmona.

solely interested in the potential adverse impact on the Tower of London, the other side of the river. There was no interest whatsoever in the new building' (Figure 8). For him, 'that made a very important point that the one body that was then supposedly acting as the watchdog for architectural design was interested in heritage preservation, but actually had no real interest in promoting good, modern architecture'. The impression may have been misconceived when seen in the light of the full body of work that the Commission was then engaged in, but the perception, at a time when the powerful new DETR were responding to the DCMS' consultation on the future of the RFAC, would not have helped their case.

The influence that the Commission was able to exert was largely done without formal powers and instead: on the basis of the reputation collectively and individually of its commissioners; its authority as a royal commission; and through its unswaying belief in what it was doing and that the design of the built environment would benefit. The calibre and experience of its commissioners was certainly very high. As one former employee commented, 'The average age at the Royal Fine Art Commission was quite high, it was a bit of a gerontocracy, but not necessarily in a bad way. There was a huge amount of experience and authority there', and during his tenure, Lord St John of Fawsley is reported to have calculated that the unpaid service of the Commissioners was worth half a million pounds a year.⁸²

Over the 75 years of its existence the Commission became increasingly bold, bolstered by slight tweaks to its warrant, such as the right to offer advice without waiting to be asked, and in later years was able to intervene more forcefully when required.⁸³ In its final years, it also developed, in a modest way, the use of design governance tools beyond design review, most notably through publications, open critiques of national policy, and via its seminars and outreach work around the country. Ultimately, however, as the Commission admitted: 'Control from without cannot turn bad architecture into good architecture, because it cannot turn bad architects into good architects; and good buildings need good architects'.⁸⁴ Consequently, the Commission's influence was always limited, not least because the review panel sitting in London (by far their most important tool) could only ever scratch the surface of the work that needed to be done, and even where it did intervene it had no power to enforce their decisions and no resources to offer anything but advice.

Even the principles underpinning the advice were relatively fluid and the Commission's views on matters such as building height clearly evolved, along with its willingness to comment on the detail of designs. In general, the Commission's claim to be less concerned with architectural styles that were ephemeral and more concerned with enduring qualities such as relative scale, massing, architectural honesty, and articulation can be verified both through its own deliberations and latterly in its staunch and repeated arguments to Government in response to the limiting policy frameworks of the 1980s and early 1990s. As Punter commented at the time,

The official [Government] view would seem to be that if one defines the building envelope, this is enough to ensure an acceptable aesthetic impact. It is an extraordinarily limited perspective, as the RFAC argued, that ignores the importance to aesthetic impact of solid to void relationships, fenestration, silhouette and shape, vertical or horizontal emphasis, colour and texture, modelling or decoration.⁸⁵

Unlike its successor (CABE), the RFAC was never shy of setting out its arguments in aesthetic terms, and this contributed to an impression that the RFAC was first and foremost concerned with a rather

⁸²Ibid., 115.

⁸³Delafons, "Democracy," 16.

⁸⁴RFAC, *Twenty-First Report*, 11.

⁸⁵Punter, "A History of ... Part 2," 550.

narrow view of design; a perception that remained throughout its existence and eventually contributed towards its demise. To some degree the impression belies its post-war influence on the re-planning of a war-torn England (particularly London) and its continued influence over three quarters of a century on the design of the public realm, key public spaces, and on infrastructure, which should not be underestimated. As the Commission stated in its Twenty-Fourth Report: 'The spaces between buildings are of crucial importance and public spaces need to be made habitable, enjoyable and pleasant places to be in'.⁸⁶ Despite this, it was primarily an aesthetic view that the Commission brought to its deliberations, and this was apparent across the scales of its work, from advice on city plans to critiques of public art.

For much of that time the Commission often seemed to row against the general zeitgeist in the architectural world, not least in their support for conserving important historical landmarks and townscapes and generally for supporting the careful fitting-in of development. Yet because its work was often discrete and behind the scenes, the organization largely went about it without comment or criticism, at least until the 1980s. In the 1980s, the RFAC was again rowing against the tide, but this time against the then government's attitudes to design, rather than any particular architectural movement. At this time the Commission played a valuable part in raising design up the agenda and generally in pushing back against a state bent on the primacy of the free-market. But in raising its head above the parapet it also became the target of more regular criticism, whilst the undue influence of its charismatic Chairman that so substantially shaped its last 15 years left it looking both out of touch (when a sudden turn in public policy on design finally came in the mid-1990s), and somewhat elitist and divorced from the realities of a now less deferential country (and politics) about to move into the twenty-first century. It was an easy target when the axe came and, despite its immense contribution to the nation, was swept away (or more accurately consumed by CABE) with few mourners to grieve its passing.

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⁸⁶RFAC, *Twenty-Fourth Report*, 17.

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