

Neophobes are always with us

'It hurts me when I see new buildings.' This statement of confidence in the present and future appeared in a Times interview with Lord Mendoza, appointed as head of historic England in the summer.

As provost of Oriel College Oxford, he knows a thing or two about troublesome presents, since the college's connection to colonialist/imperialist/benefactor Cecil Rhodes caused student protests who wanted his statue removed. And why stop there?

Resolution of the issues suggests that Lord M is a skilful diplomat, so his neophobe comments about new buildings are a little surprising. He wonders if retrofits and the sustainability benefits they bring should be part of the Historic England strategy for protecting buildings and places which might be threatened by development, good, bad or indifferent.

This is not a bad idea. It always seemed extraordinary that HE's predecessor body, English Heritage, was so keen on knocking down Robin Hood Gardens in east London, by Peter and Alison Smithson, given the huge amounts of embodied energy contained in the social housing block. But then at the time, the organization was bending over backwards to please its Secretary of State, who had made it quite plain that neither she, nor her constituents (who were completely irrelevant since they were not local to RHG), liked concrete.

Even former apostles of the new, like David Chipperfield, seem to be having second thoughts about the merits of new construction. At an Architecture Foundation event, to celebrate his Pritzker Prize award, he said he regretted the demolition of a slim 1960's building in Hanover Square, and its replacement with a more up-to-date building no doubt delivered for investors who simply saw profit to be made from increased land values. Well yes, but you couldn't help wondering what the 1960s building replaced. Message to Lord Mendoza: everything was new once.

Over-egging a bland pudding

Thomas Heatherwick is no neophobe. On the contrary, he wants everything to be whizzy and designerly. The worst thing you can say about a building, in his book (and he has just published one), is that it is boring – or bland, if there is a dis-

tinction to be made. Humanise: a maker's guide to building our world has some thoughtful arguments and insights within it. He argues among other things that we have been suffering from a 'global blandemic', flowing from the evils of Corbusian town planning and the 'cult of Modernism' which has stealthily infected every architecture student in the land. Up to a point, Lord Copper.

An accompanying BBC radio series (hats off to TH's marketing people!) was, however, a curate's egg. Among the claims made: people can die from heart attacks brought on by bland environments; the Syrian civil war was fuelled by boring buildings; architects were forced to be members of the RIBA at the end of the 19th century (in fact compulsory registration was only introduced in 1931, and did not require anybody to join the RIBA). It was also stated that the new president of the RIBA, Muiyiwa Oki, is the first non-white to hold the post. This will have come as a surprise to Sunand Prasad (RIBA president 2007 to 2009). I suppose facts can be boring too.

All eyes on the London Stirling Prize

Although this year's Stirling Prize dinner was held in Manchester, five of the six finalists were London projects, which looked unbalanced to say the least. No big architectural beasts this year, but a very worthy winner in Mae Architects' facility for the elderly. Alex Ely of Mae makes a good point when he argues that the standards they achieved with the project should be the norm rather than the exception; were that the case then the search for the truly outstanding would be that much more difficult.

This brings us back to another Heatherwick issue: the desirability the ordinary. It must have occurred to him that his often-extraordinary structures and designs have that quality because of the existence of the mundane everyday. Frankly, I would rather have boring housing which is decent in terms of space, volume and environmental standards, than something with immediate external visual appeal which may be a disaster internally.

Designing exclamation marks and putting them all together means none of them are exclamations any more. Question to Thomas: is quiet prose boring?

Paul Finch is programme director of the World Festival of Architecture and joint publishing editor of *Planning in London*



When retrofit is not the answer

The legal challenge to refusal of planning permission for a redevelopment of the Marks & Spencer store at the east end of Oxford Street continues to generate debate about carbon, concrete, intensification, land values and the integrity of the UK planning system. As readers may recall, Westminster Council and the London mayor supported the redevelopment proposal, but it was called in for public inquiry by the Secretary of State responsible for planning, Michael Gove. After a lengthy public inquiry, the inspector concluded that the development should be permitted. Mr Gove overturned that decision, but his own conclusions, which are fuzzy and certainly do not focus on carbon as an issue, are now being challenged legally by a furious M&S.

Having founded and launched the Architects' Journal Retrofit Awards a decade ago (they are still going strong), I am all in favour of this form of architecture, and I agree that an analysis of retrofit/re-use/recycling options should be part of any architectural analysis.

However, this does not automatically mean that it is always appropriate. The inquiry inspector said the retrofit proposed by Save Britain's Heritage 'is so deeply problematic, even for Oxford Street that no-one would be likely to pursue it or fund it'.

At Para 13.70, the inspector's letter says this: 'I find that there is no viable and deliverable alternative and that refusing the application would probably lead to the closure of the store, the loss of M&S from the Marble Arch end of Oxford Street, and substantial harm to the vitality and viability of the area. This is a material consideration of substantial weight.'

No wonder M&S are going to court. ■