

AECB 2012 Annual Conference

Evening debate: “Sustainability is more than just Energy”

The 2012 AECB members’ conference featured an evening debate under the heading ‘Sustainability is more than just Energy’. This packed session began with contributions from a panel, with AECB’s Chief Executive, Andy Simmonds and long-standing AECB members Neil May of Natural Building Products and Pat Borer from the Centre for Alternative Technology.

Andy Simmonds set the scene by summarising the current priorities of the AECB as “climate change, energy security and equity”, and asked where AECB might go next, both in terms of focus, and style of operating. “Do we widen out, for example to take in transition and DIY agendas? Do we continue to have the conversation with ourselves, or go out wider and be more relevant, reach out? Can we regenerate ourselves to keep ourselves going, at the same time as we are increasing our relevance outside?”

Neil May and Pat Borer then put their arguments for an expanded vision. Neil May made it clear he felt that the focus needed to widen right out, and that perhaps there has been a tendency to let energy push other considerations out of the picture.

“I’m a value pluralist, different things are equally valuable, you can’t draw up a list of priorities and impose a programme to find “the solution” – there is no perfect solution, there are lots of equally valid ways of tackling a situation.

“What about the value of beauty in design? And the place of the craftsman, revealing the beauty of the materials and creating something of lasting value. It’s as important as energy. We need reciprocity and engagement, rather than dehumanising and alienating people from their buildings. And there is a danger that the crisis mentality leads to panic reactions and loads of unintended consequences.”

Pat Borer said he tried to follow Vitruvius’ maxim that buildings should offer ‘commodity, firmness and delight’ – and suggested that low energy and comfort were part and parcel of commodity, and that durability and healthiness were integral to firmness – ‘and delight speaks for itself’.

The crisis is wider than energy in buildings – and wider even than resource depletion

Once the debate was opened to the floor, the financial crisis was immediately conspicuous in the discussions.

Andy Hamilton summed it up: “We’re facing a radical challenge - we are effectively bankrupt, all the money is in the East. While for example Korea invested their fiscal stimulus into renewables, which means they have a future, we invested in things like cars – we just don’t understand our situation. “Giving money to the banks is pointless. We should be using our money effectively to get a gear change.”

Neil May agreed that there were structural problems with the economy, not least in the way that it influences construction: “So much of what happens is driven by land

values. Users have no traction on the construction industry, because developers have no interest in the building part, it's all about buying and selling land."

But the very depth of the crisis – in the environment and in the economy – has led Andy Simmonds to wonder how much can be achieved by engaging directly with national power structures: "Can governments deal with this crisis? - I don't think they can." He warned of the frustrations of trying to fit into programmes developed by 'delusional' governments. Neil May expressed similar frustrations: "We have spent years refining and ameliorating within this paradigm which is f***ing up everything," he said.

While many members seem to agree that the combination of energy, environmental and financial crunches means everything about us is going to change, it was less clear how much of this agenda AECB could meaningfully take on. Yes, we need a complete change in the prevailing culture – but can AECB do much towards bringing this about?

Dangers of widening too far?

Several members expressed the anxiety that by diluting its emphasis, the Association would lose its "USP", and risked getting bogged down in trying to agree what that wider agenda actually might be. Andrew Farr drew an analogy with the British political system: "You've got the right wing, effective and focused on exploitation to create wealth, but the left wing tends to take on disparate issues, and ends up hampered by infighting. If we drop the focus, we risk losing the cohesion we have."

Paul Jennings was sympathetic to the appeal of taking on a wider agenda, but had a warning: "I live in a co-housing project, which is wonderful – but if you try to widen out to encompass everything, watch out - you might end up with so many meetings that not much can get done."

There was also a concern that, although these issues were political, directly addressing the political agenda might be divisive, as well as a distraction.

Getting the message out

Whatever the agenda however, it was clear that the AECB needed to maintain and, if possible, increase traction with the wider world. "What are the change mechanisms? How do we become more influential?" Andy Simmonds asked. "One way is to become very big, influence by weight – or should we be incredibly clever with ideas?"

Dennis Wilkinson felt that the current manifold failures of the government's approach to sustainable building justified head-on challenge "Are we going to bumble on, or are we going to be in the Government's face more of the time – be ambitious?"

However others warned of the limitations of this route – not only because those in power seem incapable of taking in the scale of the challenge, but also more practically, you might get the ear of a politician or public servant only to find they move on. They have a very short shelf-life.

Mark Elton, Danny Lee and David Sharpe were among those suggesting that better engagement with the media could help to shift the culture, and thereby shift the constraints on politicians.

And the membership itself influences the culture both through their practice and through group activities. While there did not seem to be an appetite for ‘diluting’ the AECB by widening membership willy-nilly, it was agreed that the current membership was narrow and – dare it be said – getting long in the tooth. “It was mentioned we want to widen the audience to get a better age and gender spread – and looking around this does seem to be needed,” was a typical comment.

Danny Lee was particularly concerned by the lack of formal engagement with education. “There are no universities represented – why ever not?” He urged the Association to streamline its website and make much more skilful use of social media, to open up the conversation with students and young practitioners.

Social equity

Andy Simmonds had stated in his introduction that equity was an established theme in the AECB, as reflected in the combined interest in cutting emissions from buildings but also making them comfortable, healthy and affordable to run. The importance of delivering decent housing to those most in need had been underlined by the keynote talk from Penney Poyzer and Tina Holt.

The theme was picked up by Andrew Farr, who was concerned about space standards in social housing. “Passivhaus is supposed to be about comfort, yet how can you live comfortably when so many people are crammed into such a tiny space, with no chance of any privacy? Should we be discussing minimum space standards – and at the other extreme, where you have the middle-aged couples building their mansions, perhaps maximum ones too?”

Sue Wolff referred to the British Socialist tradition to improve the built environment, to address how it’s built, and who it is built for. She said there was no need to fear being political. “There’s no necessity to be polemical. In no other period has the general population been so critical of the status quo – we have to take that opportunity to be truly radical.”

AECB’s “USP” – fearless bullshit detection

What was so distinctive about the AECB was not really discussed until later in the debate. For Mark Elton the Association’s “USP” was clear: “AECB is about lack of bullshit. It questions the mainstream. The mainstream says that something is so, AECB says – that’s not necessarily the case. It’s the place to ask the questions that nobody else is thinking about – and has the greatest collection of expertise.”

This was warmly endorsed by David Sharpe – a structural engineer who said this was the exact reason he had joined the AECB. “I can understand why there has been the focus on energy, because CSH is bullshit, and we can do it properly.

“Now – where’s the next pile of bullshit? AECB will find out and tackle it.”

Mark Siddall also felt questioning and testing was at the heart of the Association: “AECB takes best practice from everywhere; we examine and test it among ourselves, then disseminate it out - into an embryonic body to take that practice forward.

“I think that’s why we are starting with IAQ now. The regulations are useless, and danger is lurking; we must get it cracked, and help to set standards for health and wellbeing.” Off gassing from materials would also benefit from more examination, he felt, and noted that Finland has some very interesting Indoor Environmental Quality standards.

Pat Borer also wanted the AECB to take a more systematic look at building materials “Passivhaus has been an amazing success which AECB played big part in. Now I am putting in a plea to do the same with materials. They are full of poisons, loads of them -- can we find alternatives to these harmful materials, from plentiful sources?

He wanted to see AECB’s analytical, no-bullshit strengths brought to bear: “You can do anything you want to with benign materials, but you can also get obsessed with certain materials too, you can easily do something silly. “I think we are looking for a strong metric for building materials, but it’s not going to be simple.”

Sue Wolff was clear that the ‘energy bullshit’ battle was not over – there was huge greenwash still going on, the ‘climate change industry’ wastes billions of pounds. “Zero carbon – completely useless. It’s just one of a succession of pointless exercises - AECB has something to say about modest things that do work.”

To Marianne Heaslip, practicality was both the AECB’s strength, and the best form of outreach. “In Anfield the Liverpool housing market renewal programme has failed massively – we are trying to build up from the bottom, developing a community land trust and delivering good quality retrofit, showing what can be done – this is the best PR.”

But of course the AECB is not just about buildings – or even as Neil May suggested, about *building*, but very much about people too, and as one delegate said: “The technical side is not too complicated. The human components are the challenge!”

Community, within and without

People and relationships are central to what makes the AECB tick – as Chris Herring put it: “AECB is about fermentation, network, friendship,” – and as many pointed out, this was really what made the annual conference and the local group events so rewarding.

But of course relationships are just as important at work. Bill Butcher is convinced that unless there can be a revolution in the culture both within construction and, thereby, around construction, excellence will remain out of reach for the mainstream.

“In contracting, the issue is risk – whoever takes the risk ends up the bad boy, because they are the one who is stressed. With pioneering buildings there is going to be more risk. Once the builder knows how to do it, it isn’t pioneering, and quality ceases to be expensive to the contractor. So to ease this process, we need to take

the comfort of the builder's vernacular, and make it work for the buildings we want. If this fails, it is to do with the way it has been procured."

Bill Butcher's views were echoed by another contractor at the conference. "As a builder it's really important to me to make the client happy, not least because I know that so much business comes through word of mouth." He hated the idea of having to underquote on price, then trying to make up the profit by constantly trying to get 'one over' the client. "It can't be healthy. It would rot you."

Bill Butcher believed that if AECB could support the development of more effective, co-operative forms of contracting, it would help deliver excellence in construction, which in turn would bring social benefits: "The culture of the construction industry needs to change, to upgrade the standing of the building industry in society."

"Young men have been disenfranchised – most new work is communications based and it doesn't suit a lot of young men. The motor industry came right up in people's estimation, and we need to do the same with builders, so they are not the cowboys, but someone who is seen as useful, with a lot of influence, delivering quality. We know what we are doing. We are all master builders, offering craftsmanship in building. And the AECB is an open church for better building."

Eric Parks believed the AECB members should engage directly with their communities, even as the Association focuses on what it knows about and does best. He picked up on the possibility of working with the Transition movement, raised by Andy Simmonds at the start.

"By what we do, including the local group activities, we are opening people's minds and eyes locally. I think we should all be making more effort with local activity like local groups, helping local resilience by showing people what really works. We need the community to be robust when the proverbial hits the fan."

How can AECB Support members?

Paul Jennings was clear that there was too much 'reinventing the wheel' still going on, which made 'decent' projects effectively into one-offs, and thereby expensive. "We must widen the reach of the existing AECB 'USP' – can we create bigger structures to share our approaches more effectively?"

This theme was taken up by Tim Hulse, who pointed out that members cannot 'teach by example' without informed clients: "I was attracted to the AECB because of all the knowledge it gives me access to, but I would really appreciate help in sharing that knowledge with potential clients."

"I would like AECB to support me in selling the idea of green retrofit to customers. We need to get across the benefits -- different people perceive different benefits, but it generally isn't energy bills, its more often comfort and I would like to be supported in talking to people about this."

In summary

Andy Simmonds concluded: “Maybe this is the end of economic growth. We do need resilient communities. We need intellectual skills and craftsmanship, access to land and capital – and we need to understand existing buildings.”

So: is there a contradiction between challenging the horrific anomalies in the system members are (nearly all) part of, and getting on with developing and delivering decent buildings?

Pat Borer quoted AECB Trustee Nick Grant’s recent blog in Building Design magazine¹. Having referred to George Monbiot’s very despondent summary, at the AECB 2010 conference, of the prospects of ‘saving the world’, Nick wrote:

“I’m an optimistic pessimist. As individuals we are all going to die anyway and as a species we will soon have been an insignificant blip compared with the dinosaurs. But that doesn’t stop most of us getting up in the morning. It’s my nature to try and fix things so I’ll do my bit to help make buildings work better with significantly less resources.

“This is part of the human condition: to be able to know where we are heading and yet to carry on as if what we do matters. I’m heartened to see others excited by the challenge of doing the same. Tackling any big problem needs an obsessive attention to detail but we also need the harshest critics to shake us when we lose the bigger picture or are wasting our short lives heading down blind alleys.”

While there was some justifiable self-congratulation about just how much AECB had already contributed to pushing the agenda, many delegates saw the gap between where we are, and where we now realise we need to be, as widening. Perhaps it is the combination of sharper than sharp technical knowledge, with an unusually wide political and philosophical vision that what makes the AECB, and makes it more relevant than ever?

Members were reminded that the Association only supports a modest staff, and all the trustees work voluntarily. As Trustee Jo Saady pointed out so eloquently: “When people say ‘Why doesn’t the AECB do such and such’, I say – well, you tell me! You are the AECB!”

¹ <http://www.bdonline.co.uk/why-bother?/5035452.blog>