DUE:

DUE: AT A TIME WHEN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING INVOLVES AN EVER EXPANDING FIELD OF SPECIALISTS FROM A WIDE RANGE OF PROFESSIONS, HOW DO YOU SEE THE AGENCY OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION CHANGING, ESPECIALLY THE ROLE OF PLANNING?

INTERVIEW WITH FINN WILLIAMS

DUE: IF ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IS TRADITIONALLY CONCERNED WITH THE EXPERIENTIALLY TANGIBLE DESIGN OF SPACE, HOW DOES PLANNING FOR GOOD PUBLIC SPACE INVOLVE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF DESIGN? HOW SHOULD ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION EVOLVE TODAY?

FW1:

You could probably follow how the agency of the architecture profession has changed by looking at the roles Architectural Association graduates go into. Back in the 1890s, a group of talented and idealistic AA graduates joined the Housing of the Working Classes branch of the newly formed London County Council with the aim of designing good buildings for ordinary Londoners. Owen Fleming was only 23 when he became project architect for the first publicly funded housing scheme in London – the Boundary Estate. Fleming wrote that they were driven by a belief that 'architecture should not be for the rich alone,' and worked round the clock to deliver decent housing on low budgets, showing 'an indifference to fatigue when public interests were involved'.

That political engagement and social commitment amongst AA students contin-ued through the 1920s and 30s, with pioneering women architects like Mary Medd and Elisabeth Scott going on to work for Hertfordshire County Council and Bournemouth Borough Architects' Department. Directly after the war, the first choice of many AA graduates was to work for the public sector. Brilliant students like George Finch, Oliver Cox and Rosemary Stjernstedt joined the LCC Architects' Department – which at the time was the largest architecture office in the world. Neave Brown, George Benson and Alan Forsyth were recruited to the Camden Architects' Department by Sidney Cooke. Ivor Smith and Andrew Derbyshire went on to work for Sheffield City Council. These architects worked relatively anonymously, but produced some of the most outstanding buildings of the 20th century; Alton West in Roehampton, Alexandra Road in Camden, Park Hill in Sheffield.

By the 1960s, AA graduates were starting to head in a different direction. Nicholas Grimshaw, Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones had brief but unsatisfactory spells in the public sector at the LCC and Milton Keynes Development Corporation before setting up their own businesses. Other students like Richard Rogers and Peter Cook were starting new forms of collective practices like Team 4 and Archigram. By the time Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, David Chipperfield and Amanda Levete graduated, success was beginning to be defined by individual prominence rather than public service. The globally celebrated offices they founded became where the next generation of AA students hoped to work.

The arc of the last century shows a clear shift in architecture's interests from public to private. But paradoxically, as leading architects have enjoyed more fame and economic success, the profession as a whole has seen its powers decline. Sixty years ago, architect-planners at the LCC had the agency to not only design and build large-scale public buildings, they wrote the policies and the briefs, they found the sites and the funding, and created masterplans for the wider area. As the costs, complexities and risks of construction escalated, the architect-planners' responsibilities fragmented into a series of specialisms which are now fields of consultancy in their own right. What was once the remit of one borough architect can now be divided between a project manager, landscape architect, executive architect, employer's agent, interiors architect, quantity surveyor, and separate consultants for planning, town-scape, sustainability, transport and access. Each role is important, but none have the agency on their own to really be transformative.

The architect's role in this roll call of consultants is increasingly marginal. Many of the most important decisions about a building will have been made long before they receive a commission. With the location, programme, scale and budget predeter-mined, the architect is left with the job of the decorator. Meanwhile the planner's role has become increasingly reactive. As responsibility for the delivery of social housing and infrastructure shifted from the public to the private sector, planners went from a position of making things happen to stopping things from happening. Systemic under-resourcing forced planning departments to retrench to the basics: writing planning policy and processing applications. A focus on delivering efficiencies and meeting target timescales left little room for creative or proactive planning. This trajectory looks bleak for both the architecture and planning professions. If we try to stay put and defend the little we have left, we risk cementing ourselves into a position that is both ineffective and outdated. If we abandon the discipline of 'planning' in favour of more fashionable terms like 'placemaking', we give up on the genuinely visionary, progressive and influential claims of the profession. Instead, I think we should be broadening the job description of the architect and the planner – even trying to reunite the two. Encouragingly, there is a new generation of practices like Architecture 00, Assemble, Forensic Architecture or REAL that aren't hesitating to challenge and expand their professional scope. These practices recognise that the forces that shape the built environment today lie beyond the reach of the traditional architect or planner – whether it is flows of overseas property investment, Airbnb and Uber algorithms, or radical shifts in the domestic life of house-holds. To really rebuild the agency of architecture and planning, the next generation of AA graduates now need to find a new set of powers and tools to influence and rede-sign these forces. I hope that some of them choose to do that by entering public service again through Public Practice.

FW2:

My architectural education lacked relevance to the reality of planning, but it also lacked relevance to the reality of architecture. Only a small proportion of the work of delivering a building relates to the design of space. The vast majority involves economics, politics, law, management, communications... How often do student briefs have a budget? Rely on negotiating approvals? Or even involve working in a multi-disciplinary team? Given that Part II's enter practice so underprepared, it's actually quite extraordinary that architects manage to learn these other dimensions of the profession on the job, and even get things built. Traditionally, architects have seen these administrative aspects of the job as 'bureaucracy' – things that get in the way of designing. But if we're going to expand the agency of the architecture and planning professions we need to stop seeing the realities of everyday practice as constraints, and start seeing them as fields for critical and creative design in their own right. This is one of the fundamental beliefs that underpins Public Practice: bureaucracy can be designed.

I teach an MA Architecture studio at the Royal College of Art with David Knight and Diana Ibáñez López. The workshops I run there try to ground students' projects in the legal, economic or political realities of practice, for example creating alternative viability appraisals that challenge traditional development models – what I call 'creative accounting'. We invite in guests from outside of the profession; politicians, policy-makers, lawyers, developers, activists and economists. Recent workshops have forced students to work exclusively with the tools of bureaucracy; Excel spreadsheets, Powerpoint transitions, or tracked changes in Word. Of course, this is no substitute for learning about the design of space – that's still essential. But if architects can become as fluent in regulations, viability or procurement as Creative Suite, we can use these processes to our advantage. We can learn how to design without drawing lines. If archi-tectural education can benefit from engaging with the realities of everyday practice, everyday practice can also benefit from the critical engagement of students. But academ-ic work is only relevant to the outside world if it shares some of the conditions of normal practice. Academic work that is disconnected from reality, or purely speculative, has little use after the end of an academic year – it just gathers dust in someone's portfolio. At a time when fewer people and places can afford to benefit from architec-tural expertise, I think that's a waste. The 750-or-so students at the Architectural Association produce about 460 years' worth of work every year (probably a lot more if you count overtime!). At an average Part I salary, that's over £9m worth of work. Academic institutions have a responsibility to make some of that output impact on the real world.