



Christ Church Woodhouse CE NI & J School Media Suite, Huddersfield

THIS MONTH : JACKS OF ALL TRADES & HORSES FOR COURSES

As a grudging acknowledgement that the holiday season is upon us, we bring you a combined July and August newsletter.

One of the things most architects are acutely, (not to say painfully on occasion), aware of is the vast amount there is to know and understand about building and construction. And just when you think you've got to grips with something, along comes some new legislation, product or technique, and that particular chapter of your wisdom and expertise (ho! ho!) needs revising.

Then there's the painful lesson every architectural student soon learns: just because you can draw something in the comfort of your office, it doesn't automatically translate to a clean, simple construction process several floors above the ground in freezing drizzle and failing light. That's assuming anyone has bothered to take your elegantly crafted drawing up the scaffold with them.

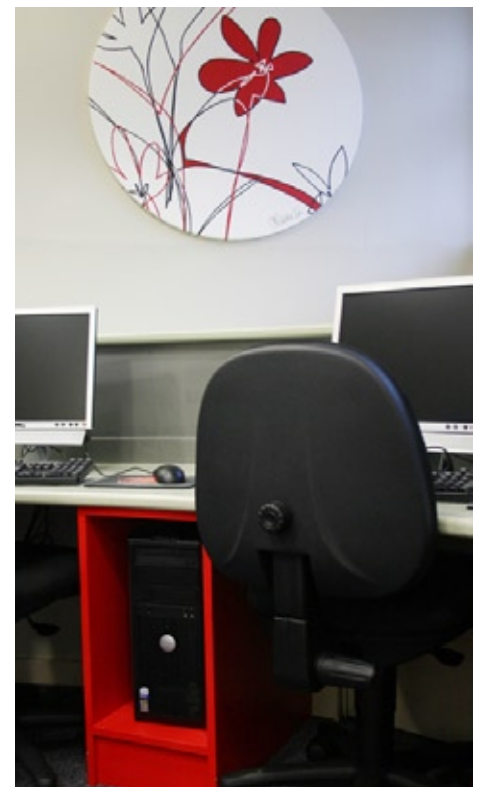
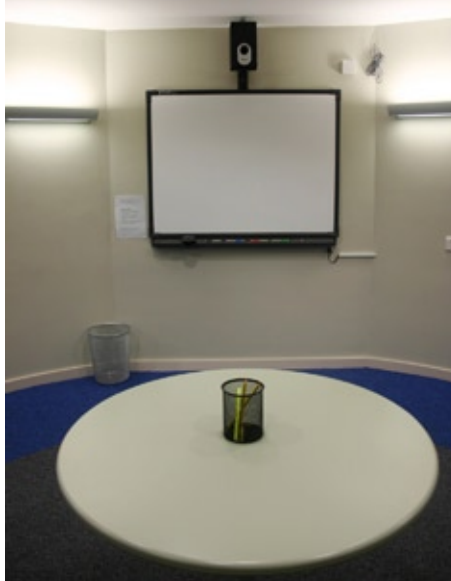
So there is the problem of developing and maintaining your knowledge and the separate but critical skill of communicating your intentions to others.

Which is more important: having

a grasp of the overall planning requirements for a mixed-use development, or knowing at what centres and with what type of screw you should fix a particular type of chipboard in a given situation?

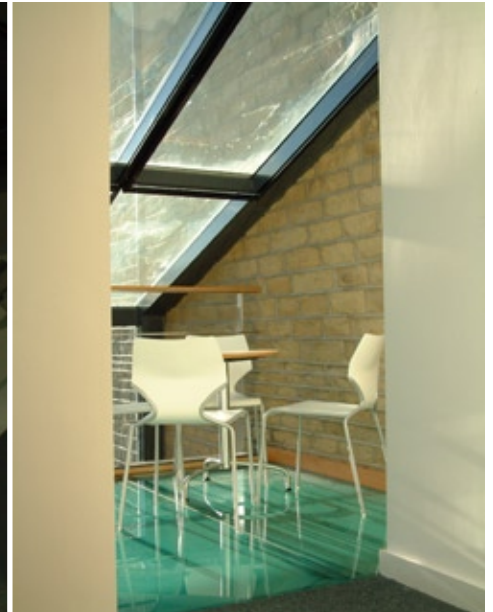
Or perhaps its making sure that everyone on site has the latest issue of drawings and the computer typeface used is big enough to ensure no one confuses a 3 with an 8. Whenever we take site dimensions of a partially built scheme, there is great excitement to find out how close it is to the dimensions we had shown on the drawings...

But, as usual, I digress. The fact is that striking a balance between the different types and scales of knowledge is what counts. I will never know as much as an experienced tradesman about his or her special area of expertise. The trick is to know just enough in the first place and to recognise when you need help and where to go for it.





Glass floored meeting area in office refurbishment scheme



How do you detail the junction between a whatsit and a doodah? You go and find an example from an earlier job and copy it. But should you?

Foster & Partners, arguably the most successful architectural practice in the world, had never designed a building over three storeys high when they were commissioned to design the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank headquarters (seen below), one of the most celebrated high-rise buildings of the twentieth century.



Foster & Partners combine vision, technical expertise and a terrific ability to communicate what they want to the rest of the construction team. With that combination, not having already designed a high-rise building didn't really matter. Plus, of course, they are incredibly lucky....



The team working on the Honkers and Shankers, as it is affectionately known, will have brought to bear the collective experience of a whole range of different building types and circumstances to produce their masterpiece. Just as they did when they approached an airport scheme for the first time, at Stansted. What they did not do is start with a preconception of what the building would look like.

Failing, or refusing, to look at a problem afresh can have serious pitfalls. Construction, as much as any other area of life, needs constant questioning and invention, not doing what we've always done.

Germaine Greer (yes, you did read that correctly) writing in The Guardian during July bemoaned the neophobia of the British housing industry i.e. the irrational terror of the new and the insistence on 'going green' whilst producing houses that don't look any different. She says "Eco-housing will have to work differently without looking different." "So far, the difference is in hidden extra cost; if less energy was spent on faking sameness, the costs could be kept down."

The government itself has just released figures which suggest that, for a typical home built to present-day Building Regulations requirements, to upgrade that same house to level 6 of the Code for Sustainable Homes (the highest standard) will add between £19,000 and £47,000 to the cost.

A relatively small price to pay for the knowledge that such a home will still look like its energy wasting predecessors, thanks to the industry's fear of the new.