Rod Hackney

Community architect and President of the RIBA.
Born 1942.

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This life story comprises extracts archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Rod Hackney's autobiography The Good the Bad and the Ugly, published by Routledge in 1990 and from the Daily Mirror of 8th May 2017.

1. Early Life

A scene from the Liverpool Blitz.

I was born in Liverpool, shortly after the height of the Blitz, in 1942. Like all major British town and cities, Liverpool suffered terribly from the combination of German bombs and wartime neglect. The resulting havoc and decay were to prompt some of the most significant changes ever to appear on the face of Britain. But as a small boy in the mid-forties I remained blissfully unaware of the way these changes would affect my later life.

My mother, Rose, was a dancer, and my father, Bill, was an hotel chef. As a family we soon left Liverpool, for my father's work took us all round the country. But when I was five he found a job in North Wales and bought a house in Bethesda, where we eventually settled. At school the lessons were given in Welsh, clearly a disadvantage for an English-speaking child, but the language barrier was eventually what led to my becoming an architect. I had to learn a whole new language, and not surprisingly, my written work suffered. But I always looked forward to art lessons, where there were no such problems; there, at last, I found a subject in which I could shine.

Before studying for my A levels there were the usual discussions about careers. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but my art teacher suggested that, because I was good at drawing and had an instinctive feel for perspective and colours, perhaps I should become an architect. In the 1950s and early 1960s architecture was still considered an art, and skill at drawing was seen as a good enough reason to enter a

course. Nowadays this has all changed. For example, maths is a requirement at A level; it wasn't for me. Indeed, I didn't even have maths at O level. My A level subjects were history, geography and art, and it was while studying for A levels that I decided to try my hand at an architectural career. I saw architecture possibly as an extension of the enjoyable and pleasurable art lessons at school.

Bethesda, Wales.

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2. Modernism

The young Rod Hackney.

When the time came I applied to Manchester University. At that time, at the start of the sixties, Manchester and Liverpool were considered to be the top two schools of architecture in the Britain, and so I knew competition would be tough. But I got a place, and in 1961 started my seven year course. I was among the first students to receive a training devoted entirely to Modernism which, with its revolutionary designs and use of new materials, seemed to provide the answers to so many current building problems.

The wonders of Modernism were revealed to us through illustrations of particular projects, such as the early steel-framed and concrete houses designed by Muche and Gropius. There were also the Fagus factory, constructed of brick, metal and glass, and the Bauhaus's Dessau headquarters - a massive building, completed in just over a year, which testified confidently to the success of new materials and methods.

The links was made between modern needs and the answers provided by modern design and technology. Everyone has heard Le Corbusier's adage that 'A house is a machine for living in'. Expanding his philosophy he went on:

'An armchair is a machine for sitting in and so on. Our modern life has created its own objects; its costume, its fountain pen and its plate glass, the safety razor and the briar pipe, the bowler hat and the limousine, the steamship and the airplane. Our epoch is fixing its own style day by day. It is there under our eyes. Eyes which do not see'.

'As to beauty, this is always present when you have proportion; and proportion costs nothing; it is at the charge of the architect. There is no shame in living in a house without a pointed roof, with walls as smooth as sheet iron, with windows like those of factories. And one can be proud of having a house as serviceable as a typewriter'.

I must say that as a student of architecture I had great difficulty understanding the furore created by Le Corbusier's thinking. I simply couldn't see the point of

publishing such complicated and untried methodologies for what should have been the simple task of erecting a shelter to keep the weather out.

I could see how impressive he was as a draughtsman but I felt that a lot of people at Manchester School of Architecture simply admired it as drawing for drawing's sake. To me, Le Corbusier seemed to be far better at idiosyncratic one-off buildings, such as the chapel at Ronchamp in eastern France. Here the use of sculptural form produced what I see as a Classical building of genius with tremendous sense of place - a truly religious structure. This is where his genius was best employed, in building that lent themselves to individual expression, and not in the dangerous area of trying to produce mass housing for ordinary people.

The mess of human activity irritated Le Corbusier. It didn't fit into the grand plan - he even described cafés as 'that fungus which eats up the pavements of Paris'.

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3. Serious Doubts

Apart from certain exceptions like Frank Lloyd Wright, I had started to have serious doubts about the architectural gods. I had seen that Modernist building was flimsy, badly built, and too often falling apart. The exclusive reliance on modern materials made no sense - it seem inevitable that office blocks or schools made with walls of glass or plastic panels would be difficult to heat, that poorly sealed flat roofs would leak, and that concrete would soon become stained and ugly. Added to which so many of the designs seemed bland, soulless, often nonsensical and even occasionally threatening.

I had also begun to feel particularly uncomfortable about the destruction of neighbourhoods and town centres. But there was no forum for my criticism, and there seemed to be no time for questioning or doubting. Lecturers continued to deliver the dogma that Modernism would provide a better environment and insisted that the populace, once it had grown used to the styles, would appreciate the enormous contribution that architects were making.

My reservations remained, and while my fellow students were claiming the founder Modernists as role models I chose Thomas Telford. He was a great Victorian engineer and draughtsman who could turn his hand to building canals, roads and bridge, as well as housing. I wrote a thesis on the way Telford had worked, especially his management and political skills in getting schemes off the ground. His A5 London to Holyhead road not only required visual designs skills and much innovation on the design of the Menai Suspension Bridge between Anglesey and the mainland, but he also had to acquire land, train his workforce and draft parliamentary legislation to get the scheme underway. Having such a blatantly un-Modernist hero was just thought of as old-fashioned and eccentric.

The Hulme Crescents.

My early doubts were reinforced by study trips. One of the first was to the vast concrete council housing complex at Hulme in Manchester, which, designed by Hugh Wilson and Lewis Wormersley with the City Architect's Department, was just

being completed. I had known the area as a child, and was shocked to see that 300 acres of old Victorian terraces had been flattened. The residents had been removed to Corbusier-style streets in the sky.

The Hulme Estate was divided into six zones containing a mixture of houses and maisonettes, but mostly dominated by enormous deck-access blocks and towers. The piece de resistance was considered to be Zone 5 - massive slabs of buildings arranged in semi-circles in an attempt to emulate the Georgian crescents of Bloomsbury and Bath. The crescents were named, ironically in view of their overwhelming ugliness, after great architect - Robert Adam, JohnNash, Charles Barry and William Kent.

The Loughborough Estate in south London was another enormous complex that we were taken to see. It had been laid out in a different style from Hulme: there were more blocks, smaller in scale than those I had seen in Manchester, and all set in less open space; but here again there was the deck-access idea of streets in the sky. Already signs of decay were evident - the Brutalist concrete was stained and unpleasant, several doors and windows were broken, rubbish bags lay uncollected, fences had been knocked down and the public areas were clogged with litter and fouled by dogs. The fortress design and concentration of huge numbers of people in such a small place gave the estate, even to a visitor, an intimidating feel. It had become a no-man's land in no time at all.

The Loughborough Estate, south London.

4. An Innocent Abroad

Canada

Upper Canada Village, Ontario.

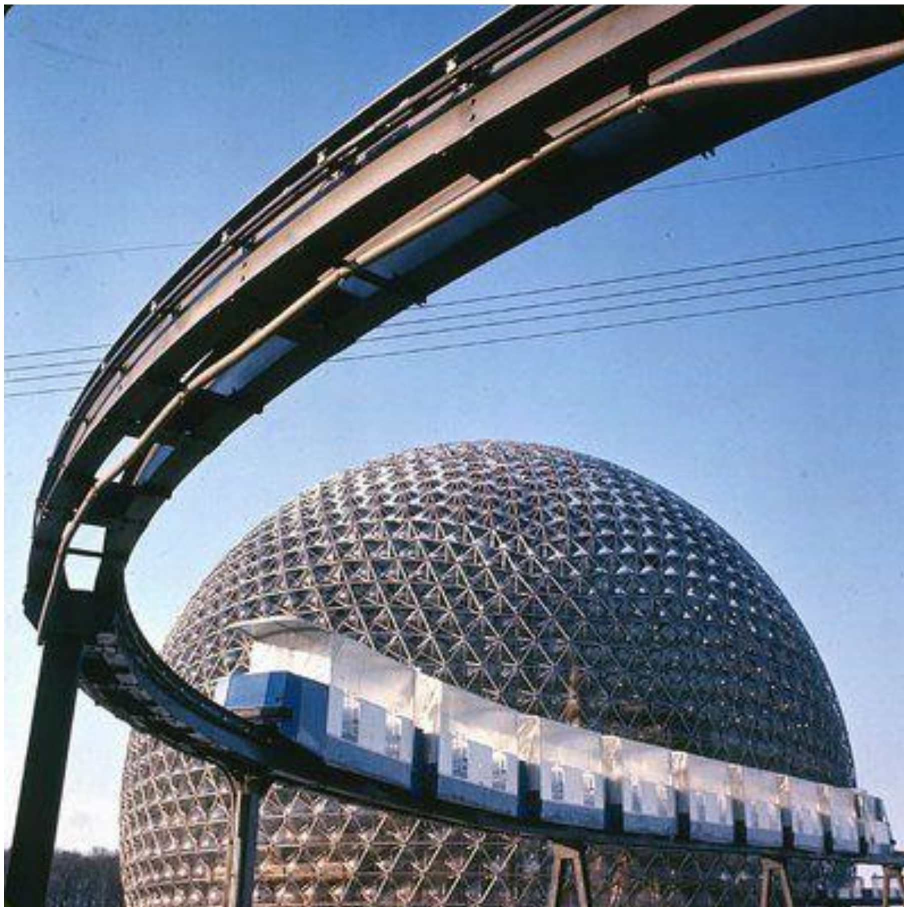
While still at university I had my first taste of working abroad, when I went to Canada in 1964. Cheap student flights were on offer in the summer holidays, and for £60 I set out for Ottawa. Before leaving Britain I had been promised a vacation job at an architectural practice called Murray and Murray. I was a fourth-year student at the time and, together with gaining some practical experience, I wanted to use my trip to complete a measured drawing exercise set by my tutors as holiday work. For this project I had chosen to visit Upper Canada Village - a timber-frame model village in Ontario which had been built to show visitors how the original pioneer buildings, such as houses and mills, had looked and were constructed.

However, when I turned up at the Murray and Murray offices they took one look at my long hair - which all British students had in those days - and told me there must have been some mistake. I didn't ever find out what they were expecting, but it clearly wasn't an English Beatle. I was given the sack before I had even started. Their reaction was a surprise and a blow - I was stranded in Ottawa with no money and had to find a job quickly.

After spending two weeks combing through the Yellow Pages I eventually found a job with a firm called Hart Massey. There I helped with several projects, including the building of a concrete-panelled university annexe. Massey and I got on well, and we worked together again when I returned to Canada at the end of my fifth year on the monorail station designs for the enormous Expo 67 exhibition project in Montreal.

During the Expo, stated in Montreal, I was based in Ottawa and rented an apartment on the eleventh floor of a high-rise tower. It had the great advantage of excellent views - particularly of a drive-in cinema: I saw all the latest films, silent, but for free. Canadian efficiency was clearly demonstrated when, within four hours of

moving into my tower, I was visited by the Bell Telephone Company asking me what colour telephone I wanted!



The monorail at the 1967 Montreal Expo, with Buckminster Fuller's dome behind.

My brief had been to design six monorail stations to last for the six-month duration of the exhibition - they are, in fact, still there more than twenty years later. The aim was to give the railway a feeling of lightness. The design was high-tech, and I used materials such as tubular metal for the columns, timber for platforms and canvas for the side panels.

Libya

My second and final year abroad was in Libya between 1967 and 1968. I was employed on a large, government-sponsored squatter resettlement programme. At that time the country was still ruled by King Idris, who was deposed by Colonel Gadaffi in a military coup shortly after I left.

Thousands of people from desert towns had made their way to the outskirts of the oil-rich cities of Tripoli and Benghazi, and the government had been unable to cope with such a massive influx. When I arrived in Tripoli the squatters had housed themselves in filthy conditions in an array of makeshift buildings - some lived in large drainage pipes, some in tin sheds and others simply under pieces of corrugated iron. Architects and planners were needed to bring a semblance of order and provide permanent homes.

The resettlement programme was divided into two parts - one provided industrialized building imported mainly from the Eastern Bloc countries, and the other, which I chose to work for, put up traditionally built homes. The job provided me with the best sort of training in the employment of building styles and materials but, most importantly, in understanding communities and people's needs. Faced with such a massive problem I had to forget large chunks of my training and adopt a completely different, pragmatic approach.

My work involved drawing up large proposals based on the usual Arab arrangement of placing homes around a central courtyard. They were single-storey, built with concrete blocks and then rendered; some were terraced and some were detached. The homes had to be designed to take account of other local customs, too. For example, the interior plan had to work in such a way that the women didn't have to mix with the men, and the courtyard had to act as an area for entertaining friends. Curiously, the only room customarily designed with an outward-facing window was the one reserved for guests.

My traditionally oriented housing designs contrasted strongly with the imported prefabricated buildings being erected elsewhere in the area, which paid no heed to local customs.

Denmark

After my year's work in Libya it was time to come back to England and find a job. On my return I spotted an advertisement for an English-speaking architect with Arab experience to work in Copenhagen with Arne Jacobsen, designing the Kuwait Central Bank. I sounded ideal. I was given a bizarre interview on the platform at King's Cross Station - the terminus where my busy interviewer arrived in London - and offered the job.

Denmark is a country with a solid design tradition, and it was plain to see that by educating people from early childhood an appreciation for good design stayed with them and paid off when they became consumers. Even in the most ordinary houses people had beautiful and carefully chosen rugs, furniture, and lamps. Their colour co-ordination was immaculate, and there was a tremendous inbred sense of style and sophistication. From the first day at school children were taught how to appreciate good design - they were encouraged to experiment with colours and really look at buildings and objects around them. By the time they reached secondary school, therefore, they had developed a strong design sense.

I was already familiar with the work of my new boss, Arne Jacobsen, since it had been shown to me at university as an example of what second-generation Modernists were producing; While he worked as a Modern Movement architect, he also had great respect for Classicism and tradition. Jacobsen was both talented and versatile; on one side of the street he could be designing a stucco and rendered flat-roofed house, while on the other side he could be working on a vernacular-inspired yellow brick equivalent.

The Soholm housing scheme (below), in which he himself lived, had received massive publicity throughout Europe and North America during the late fifties and

early sixties. The staggered form of the units, the section arrangements of the internals paces and the style of the building were copied in may schemes by other architects.

His Munkegaard School (below) also won great acclaim because it had been designed with children's needs specifically in min - light switches at low level, for instance, and easy-to-reach door handles. This also had its imitators.

The Kuwait Central Bank (below), on which I was to assist him, was at the time the world's most costly building, with its gold-leaf dome and vaults built to withstand nuclear attack. The structure was five stories high built in a combination of stone, granite, concrete, glass and aluminium. The interior was based around a central atrium running through four floors and sitting in a sea of light, above which was the top-floor conference room.

The banking hall was placed inside the base of the atrium, and from there rooms led off for staff. The massively reinforced basement held the vaults, and here security was at its most sophisticated; strategically placed mirrors ensured that guards could watch the entire space at once, and every conceivable electronic security device was installed. The armoured doors were the most expensive ever made.

Rod Hackney worked in the office of Arne Jacobsen, on the Kuwait Central Bank (above). It was at the time the world's most costly building, with its vaults built to withstand nuclear attack.

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5. The Disaster of Mass Demolition

I returned to England in 1971, intending to write a PhD thesis on Jacobsen's work, and with £1000 in savings I headed once again for Manchester University.

In Manchester at this time there was a substantial growth in activity by residents' groups, who were determined to keep their terrace homes and resist yet more slum clearance. They were in the prime target areas close to the city centre, adjacent to where the state bulldozers had already crushed almost ninety thousand homes.

The so-called slums had been neighbourly places.

Hitler hadn't caused a fraction of the destruction which followed in his wake under the guidance of Alf Young - Manchester City Council's energetic chief public health officer. Like most other city officials nationwide Young obeyed the letter of the law, which dictated that anything built before 1919 was by definition a slum and had to go. The buildings had reached the end of their useful life and had to be removed to make land available for the planners and their huge estates at Hulme, Moss Side, Ardwick and Beswick. This policy of mass demolition was meant to be halted with the 1969 Housing Act which, because of money shortages, was designed to encourage renovation of existing buildings. But is efficacy was not immediately felt.

The mood had changed at the Manchester School of Architecture. A group of students including Chris Taylor, who later became an architect in Leek, Staffordshire, Charles Knevitt, now architectural correspondent of the Times, and myself set ourselves up as advisers for residents' groups who wanted to save their homes. We made it publicly known that, if they were aggrieved about official policy and demolition, we would carry out informal surveys to be used at public inquiries, and help them in any possible resistance to the local authority.

We were also invited to visit some of the estates that had been built in the previous decade. I was horrified. The creation of a dependency culture, with more and more people relying on state subsidies and hand-outs had left them powerless. The dram had turned into a nightmare.

Hulme in Manchester was a typical example, and the early doubts I had experienced during my visit as a student seven years before were confirmed and amplified. Once the subject of praise as the largest urban renewal project in Europe, Hulme had disintegrated into squalor and decay - it had become a microcosm of all that was wrong with Modernism.

Street pattern typical of the Hulme Estate area before mass demolition.

Before the bulldozers moved n, the 300-acre area had been crossed by a network of Victorian terrace streets. It had been full of charm; the homes were well built and attractive, despite being run down. Being old properties they lacked modern amenities and had suffered from wear and tear. Very few had proper kitchens - most had only a Belfast sink and a wooden draining board; some had no electricity supply, relying instead on gas lighting; very few had bathrooms. Most houses backed onto a cobbled rear yard with a shared clothesline, shared washhouse and shared toilets. There was a constant problem with damp coming down from the roof, in through the walls and up from the ground.

To the local authority public health inspector they were simply a blot on his portfolio of properties, and to him the best way of dealing with the situation was demolition. The City Council pursued the Corbusian vision. It wanted to replace what it saw as the cramped mess of the terraces with vast concrete crescent-shaped blocks set in open, grassy areas where contented families could push their prams, walk dogs, and take picnics.

The Hulme Estate after demolition and redevelopment.

The reality now was very different. As with the Loughborough estate in London which I had visited when a student, time had taken its toll at Hulme. The outside areas were unkempt, frightening, windswept places strewn with litter, glass and broken furniture, and fouled by the dogs that people kept in their flats to ward off intruders. Inside there was a prison atmosphere. The concrete had become stained and unsightly, some flats had been burned out as a protest against the council, and he lifts, stinking of urine, frequently didn't work. The long corridors and dark corners were terrifying at night.

For the first few years in the new estates, life in the blocks remained more or less stable. This calm, in effect, lasted for just as long as the council managed to sustain adequate maintenance - ensuring that the lifts worked, the grass was cut and repairs were undertaken promptly.

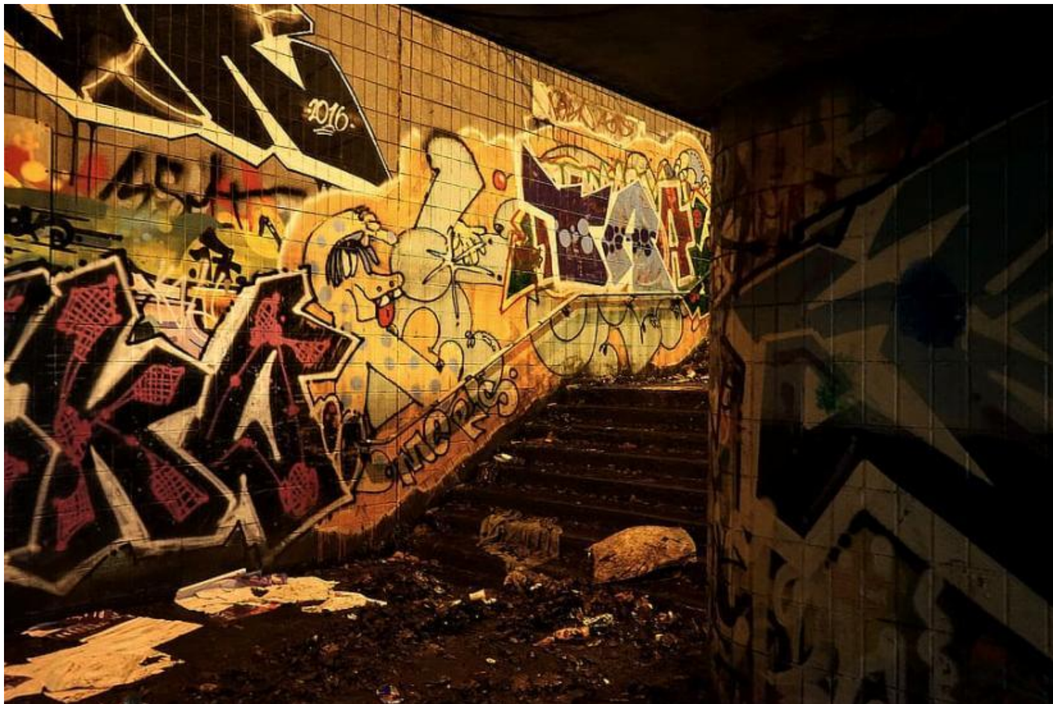
The rot really set in when the place acquired a stigma. With spates of break-ins, muggings and the general physical decline of the building and its surroundings, the quality of life was threatened and residents began to feel intimidate by bullies. They were insecure in the lifts and corridors, and even inside their own homes.

Certain flats became vacant. Problems with lift maintenance meant those flats at the top of the tower were least desirable - squatters or dossers moved in. The ground floor was also left empty because of its vulnerability to attack. Residents asked for transfers to the first, second and third floors because they were easy to reach by the stairs and allowed a quick escape in case of fire or violence.

Neighbourliness had disappeared. The old community had offered some support to those less well-off or ill. It was almost self-governing, because everyone knew their neighbour and somebody stepping out of line would be watched. The streets could cope with small-scale change such as one or two people moving home a year, because it still left the majority knowing each other. But at Hulme, as at estates elsewhere, the community had been so badly disrupted that people were wary of others. The feeling of hostility was so great that residents preferred to remain anonymous so as to avoid possible aggravation and confrontation. When people got out of the lift they made straight for their front doors and locked themselves away. Le Corbusier's notion that a street atmosphere could be created in the sky proved a desperate and tragic mistake.

Order and maintenance crumbled. Policing on the estates was always notoriously difficult, time-consuming and costly. Many councils were forced to hire private security firms; bust still vandalism and crime were rife. Councils took for ever to attend to repairs. The system had become ensnared in bureaucracy. First the local authority had to be called, then the message was passed to the maintenance department, and eventually the relevant engineers would be notified. Even replacing a window in a tower was a major task compared with replacing a window in a terrace house.

Refuse collection was frequently blighted. Chutes presented problems because they were often too small to take a full sack of household rubbish, and so alternative methods of disposal had to be found. Broken lifts left three choices - residents either wrestled with sacks down the stairs, left them on landings, or worst of all, threw them over the side to burst open and scatter on the ground. If the sacks did find their way to the collection points, there were still problems. Fires were common - often started by kids throwing lighted matches down chutes - and the collection points were so badly designed that it was difficult for drive refuse lorries up close. As a result, more spillage and mess were created.



The deterioration of the environment continued. Rain and wind battered the blocks and blew hard trough the tunnels created by the long passageways. Graffiti, usually spelling out pure anger, frustration and aggression, covered the walls. Urine and excrement fouled the lifts and walkways. Teenagers often used those walkways as racetracks and screamed along them on motorbikes, daring each other to clock up record speeds. People coming out of their front doors have been knocked down and killed by motorbikes ten floors up.

Noise had always been a source of complaint. Some block designs actually amplify sound, particularly where walkways are placed over bedrooms. The sound of footsteps echoed around floors; loud music also carried through the walls and

floors. Local authorities' noise control units were ineffective. By the time they arrived the disturbance was over. Privacy was constantly invaded.

Lighting was inadequate and bulbs were not replaced. Heating systems failed with predictable regularity; they took ages to repair because of the long wait for ordered parts. Condensation and dampness were unavoidable because the solid concrete walls rarely dried out. Burst water pipes on high floors wreaked havoc and lifts, once broken, remained inoperable for weeks.

There was widespread rat, cockroach and flea infestation. Rats seemed to thrive by eating plastic pipe insulation and were abundant in Hulme. Cockroaches live in the ventilation systems. Fleas spread behind wallpaper and timber skirtings. All were difficult to eradicate. Fumigation was easy in a Victorian house. But with large blocks all the flats linked together in one area had to be evacuated before any treatment could be administered.

Those residents who felt strongest set fire to their flats in a dramatic bid to be re-housed. Others refused to pay their rent. They knew that f they were taken t court they could explain their case and might stand a chance of being moved.

The bad name of Hulme was endorsed every time there was a crime in the centre of Manchester, because police immediately headed there as the most likely home of criminals. A ghetto atmosphere was generated, with police cars screeching round corners, light flashing and sirens blazing

Soon the estate became a no-go zone. Postmen refused to make deliveries, television engineers wouldn't call to make repairs, and residents became ostracized by shopkeepers and other local people.

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6. The Battle of Black Road.

The refusal of a simple request for a £20 grant to fit a washbasin inside my house in 1972 sparked off a chain of events which were to change my thinking irrevocably. I owned and lived in a basic, perfectly sound, terrace house. But the local council decreed that it was in a slum area and was likely to be pulled down to make way for new development. At that time homes lacking basic amenities were seen by the council as unfit for human habitation. And because of that pronouncement, there was no chance of getting an improvement grant. But I had the benefit of professional expertise, and with that as our weapon my neighbours and I embarked on a two-year battle with officialdom and blinkered thinking.

Buying a house for £300

My first task on returning to Britain from Denmark had been to find somewhere to live. My search started in Manchester, where I would be preparing my PhD thesis. It didn't take long to realise that my savings, totalling £1,000, would simply go towards paying two years' rent for typical student accommodation; that seemed like throwing hard-earned money down the drain. At that time housing in the area was cheap to buy, so I investigated the possibility of finding an old, run-down property. I had also returned from Denmark with a car, which meant I could easily live outside the city. After scouring the whole area to the east and south of Manchester, eventually I came across a reasonable property about seventeen miles south of the city, in Macclesfield. No. 222 Black Road was a simple two up two down house built in 1815 as part of a terrace for local brick factory workers.

This particular house was in better condition than others in the road, and it was being sold furnished. I didn't own anything, so it was a great opportunity. The house itself cost just £300, plus a further £700 for furniture and fittings. Although that meant all my savings were used up I decided that after two years, when I was due to finish my thesis the house could be either improved or resold.

There was one drawback. I had been warned by my solicitor that the property was subject to demolition plans. Macclesfield Council was busy with a project to knock down 800 houses as part of a slum clearance programme, and that included the Black Road area. I managed to get hold of a Maccclesfield Express cutting dated 1968 which mentioned that the council's medical officer of health had submitted a report on 140 houses in Black Road, stating that they were sub-standard. My house was among those surveyed, but at the time I was considering buying the council decision to demolish had yet to be declared.

The corporation was proud of its modern approach. In the previous five years it had completed a number of big block schemes, including two tower blocks at Hurdsfield and a deck-access scheme near the railway station at Victoria Park. The results had been hailed as a success by the local press, and the council was determined to repeat this great work. (Despite the accolades which greeted the Victoria Park scheme, it wasn’t long before it went the way of others around the country.)

I decided to buy the property in spite of the solicitor's warning. Even if the area was cleared, I reasoned, I could live there for two years while completing my PhD and then perhaps get some compensation.

222 Black Road in 2021. It is the house with the dark blue front door and window sills.

All the Black Road houses were basic, to say the least. My immediate neighbours had one outside toilet shared among six homes, and one washhouse shared among ten. Water was laid on to those few houses that had a Belfast sink in the kitchen. One or two houses even had the luxury of a hot water geyser. My house was one of the exceptions in that it had its own toilet fitted in the back bedroom; most of the others, like my neighbours', shared outside toilets. Such conditions were typical for Macclesfield.

Applying for a Washbasin

Having lived in some comfort in Denmark, it felt odd to be using outside washing facilities. After I had been in No.222 a few days I decided to apply for an improvement grant to install a washbasin. The potential demolition order meant that getting a grant was unlikely - but £20 didn't seem much to ask, so my letter was sent to test council reaction. Other residents were eager to see what would happen; they knew that if I could succeed in getting the money then others could apply too.

The application form was filled in and sent off in January 1972. I got a reply from the Town Clerk. The answer was 'No', and the letter went on to say that my house had 'an estimated individual life of only five years' and 'was likely to be included in a clearance area under the Housing Acts within ten years in any case'.

Although this reply confirmed what I had already discovered through my solicitor, the logic confused me utterly. My training had taught me that the old had to make way for the new; but my instincts also helped me to recognize a perfectly good building when I saw one. The structure of No.222 was sound. It had been standing since 1815 and it was now 1972 - almost 160 years.

I decided to make further enquiries about a grant, and thought I might have more success by passing the Town Clerk's Department. I wanted to know the reason for

refusing the grant. Although the council had decided the house had only five years to last, I couldn't see the harm in making a small contribution towards a basin that I could use until demolition.

Battling the Council

The first of a flood of letters to the council was drafted at the end of February; it said how disappointed I was with its rather negative attitude. The reply, which arrived a month later, clearly showed that councils suffered from confused thinking. They assumed that if homes lacked a few facilities they were also structurally unsound, and the letter reiterated that because of the property's 'general condition' the house had been placed in 'group one', which 'called for an estimated life to be no more than five years'. Even though subsequent improvement work might have been carried out since the chief medical officer's visit.

The challenge to the council was issued on the grounds that it seemed to be criticising the structure, rather than the lack of amenities such as washbasins and proper kitchens. I hoped there was a point to be won, and grants to be had, if only we could prove that our properties, having stood for 157 years, could certainly stand for a few more.

Our local Conservative MP, Nicholas Winterton, came to visit. The Macclesfield Express published his letter, in which he appealed to the council to change its mind about demolition - a Tory MP pitting his wits against a Tory council. He wrote:

'I hope that Macclesfield Borough Council considers making this an improvement area rather than a redevelopment area. to take advantage of the increased central government improvement grants. The land between Black Road and Smiths Terrace could be used for extension of properties, and these cottages could be brought up to date with modern kitchens, bathrooms and WCs. This could be a pleasant residential area. I've seen some extremely nice cottages which are a picture. It would be a tragedy to break up the community by demolishing the houses'.

The great advantage that Nicholas Winterton had over the council was that he had obviously read the 1969 Housing Act. This piece of legislation turned out to be our best friend. On closer examination of the small print we discovered it was possible for us to prepare a report on our area; recommending it for regeneration. The Act went to great lengths to explain that the document should be the work of qualified persons with local knowledge.

It was the first piece of government policy to attempt to acknowledge ordinary people and make them responsible for their own locality. This was too good an opportunity to miss. With the help of residents and Chris Hagen, a surveyor friend, I prepared a lengthy report running to 54 pages.

We also produced a supplementary financial report which indicated that the cost under our plan of improving 33 dwellings would be £74,250, compared to £207,800 for demolition and re-build.

After months of waiting our report was examined by the council and achieved he unusual distinction of winning all-party support. But no final decision on creating a General Improvement Area was taken.

Helping Tenants Buy

There had been enough talking, and residents wanted to see some action. So we set to work helping tenants buy their homes. There was a strong possibility that, once the blight was lifted and the scheme was under way, property prices would rocket beyond most people's pockets. It was therefore important for them to buy early.

A number of properties were owned by a landlady living in Colwyn Bay in North Wales. She was retired and couldn't afford the upkeep on her houses because she was as poor as the tenants. A package deal was devised through which a group of tenants offered £1600 for their five homes. It was not a great deal of money, but the landlady was pleased because receiving a lump sum was more useful to her than the rent, which, at around twelve shillings a week, barely covered the estate agent's charge to collect it. Other similar buy-outs followed.

A Show House

The weeks were flicking past and still there was no news from the council about a General Improvement Area. Eventually, on 22nd March 1972, news of the General Improvement Area declaration was leaked a couple of weeks before the official announcement. Against the odds, we had saved our homes and won a major battle.

A show house was needed, to give inspiration and demonstrate just how dramatic the changes could be. I had already started work on my own place and so, after I had moved temporarily to our site office at 214 Black Road, the job was completed as swiftly as possible. It took around three months and involved replacing or restoring virtually everything apart from the roof, which was to be repaired in one go with the others along the terrace. I had to knock down walls, replace the chimney, fit new windows, put new stairs in the front room, enlarge the kitchen, install a bathroom, replace the electrical wiring, replumb the entire house, carry out damp proofing, replaster, lay new floors and decorate each room.

On 13th September 1973 the task was finished. It had cost exactly what the report had stated, but I had to spend something like 1500 hours of my own time on it to keep within the budget. The building industry had seen a dramatic 60 per cent price rise, and that's what was to turn Black Road into a self-help scheme. Because of tight budgets, residents ended up doing the very things they thought they would have to pay builders for. Rising costs meant we simply couldn't afford the rates builders charge.

An open day was held to celebrate completion of No.222. It was attended by members of the public and all the local dignitaries - Councillors, the Mayor and Nicholas Winterton MP. The day was a huge success, with everyone patting everyone else on the back. I had brought in an Arne Jacobsen table and chairs which took pride of place in the kitchen, and the washbasin which had started the whole

saga was sparkling in the bathroom. The work on my house had finally demonstrated that the project was not a far-fetched fantasy.

Community at Work

I became the architect for the scheme, and we all had to work fast towards the deadline of June 1974 when new legislation was being introduced to cut grants. It was a far from smooth ride, with plenty of obstacles to be overcome - personality clashes, delays in getting materials and people making mistakes.

The work started with the demolition of the old outside toilets and washhouses. By this time most homes had had their own basins and lavatories installed, and so the buildings were redundant. Knocking down the hated sheds provided a good, therapeutic start, and everyone joined in. Some of the men in the road were already skilled labourers or were good at DIY, and so they were able to carry out their own repairs. Others learned by watching or by trial and error, and I was on call the whole time to offer advice and help. The women, too, were far from being bystanders. One, married to a builder, saw him plastering and then, much to his surprise and maybe hers, picked up the trowel and finished the job.

Team spirit grew as the weeks passed and people swopped skills - an electrician would offer to help with rewiring a neighbour's house in exchange for assistance with his own central heating, and so on. No one was left out. Pensioners were aided by their families and friends, and kept the entire workforce supplied with endless cups of tea and biscuits. During the year-long improvement period the residents put in an estimated 60,000 hours of labour.

Building Design magazine reported on the project in May. It wrote:

'Self-help improvement under GIA is cheaper, more effective and environmentally less polluting than the simplistic expensive local authority clearance renewal programmes… In Black Road the motto is small is beautiful. Participants, from pensioners to unmarried mothers, are happy. The contractors are happy. Rod Hackney is happy and Macclesfield is happy.'

Success

By the end of 1974 work on all 33 homes was complete. The Mayor planted a ceremonial tree and unveiled a plaque - the first of many commemorating such projects. There is always a big fuss about the plaque, which probably causes more problems than any other part of the scheme. Should the wording read 'His Worship the Mayor' or 'The Worshipful Mayor'? What colour should the velvet curtain be? In any event, the details have to be decided with great care to ensure everyone is satisfied.

We had to pay for both the plaque and the tree because environmental works were part of a trust deed. There were special legal arrangements, which included being granted a zero rating from the district valuer. This allowed us to control the upkeep of outside areas: we became the first residents in the country to collect our own rates, which we spent on maintaining the car parking spaces and the road inside the scheme, lighting, landscaping and snow clearance.

Politically, Black Road was a great success. The residents were praised by politicians of all complexions. The Socialists considered it a great victory for the working man, with residents all pulling together in a co-operative effort, while the Tories saw it as a great victory for those who helped themselves.

The real story was the triumph of the people. The scheme had boosted their morale and self-respect as well as giving them the responsibility of a mortgage. There had been 18 per cent unemployment in the area before work began; by the time it was completed many of the previously unemployed were able to use their newly acquired skills to set up their own businesses or find jobs - a feat which would have been impossible without the personal confidence acquired through the self-help structure.

Everyone wanted to know how we had won. I was asked to talk a conferences all over the country, and gradually our ideas spread. I was invited to work at Norhenden in Manchester, in the Woodvale area of Belfast, at George Arthur Road, Birmingham, at Clitheroe in Lancashire, at Creator Moor and Carlisle in Cumbria, in Leicester, Derby and many other places.

The interest was so great that I couldn't handle all the work and began to employ other people. My business took off and offices were set up at each scheme. The only way to make these projects really work was to have an architect living and working on-site twenty-four hours a day, and that became a condition of contract for all the architects I employed.

Meanwhile work on my PhD, which had led me to buy 222 Black Road in the first place, had been shelved. It was not until 1979 that I managed to complete it.

Rob Hackney welcomed back to Black Road, many years later.

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7. Community Architecture at the RIBA

In 1976 the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) spoke out in support of his fellow professionals but also conceded that changes were necessary. He said: 'I feel the profession has discharged its enormous responsibility to society very decently. The low status of the architect in Britain stems from a fashionable cult of philistinism. However, we must find better ways of solving building problems than those clumsy and inadequate measures of the past few years.

A glimmer of hope lay in community architecture. People liked to keep their homes. The extraordinary thing is that local authorities took so long to recognise the potential for solving their problems cheaply, with little effort, and with the support of voters. And so in 1976, after the almost complete professional dismissal, the RIBA formed the Community Architecture Working Group (CAWG). It was composed of designers from both public and private sectors who were interested in exploring a new approach to building and regeneration.

As a committee member I helped outline the group's main objectives. We needed to find out the extent o existing help available to community groups and to identify how it could be improved. It soon became clear that demand far outweighed supply. The group felt that because community projects represented good value for money in improving environments, more help should be offered, preferably funded by government, to enable self-help groups to derive maximum benefit from legislation to help projects get under way. CAWG's aim was to act as a catalyst, providing advice and directing funds to schemes around the country.

Among the first of the group's practical contributions was the founding of an 'urban workshop' in Newcastle. In 1977 it teamed up with students at the city's school of architecture to run a city centre advice shop which provided information and support services, in architecture and planning, to community groups and individuals. Money from the RIBA and the government job creation programme paid for a staff of three architects whose services were augmented by students.

In 1978, shortly after becoming CAWG's chairman, I commissioned a report called The Case for a National Community Aid Fund; its aim was to explain the role that the profession could play. We concentrated on the restoration of run-down inner city areas. The bulldozer was outlawed. CAWG outlined the need for a Community Aid scheme providing funds to pay for architects working with community groups. It hoped to introduce a type of street corner architect shop based on the lines of Legal Aid offices.

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8. Prince Charles Shocks

By the summer of 1984 the national economy had shown an upturn. Although council building was at a virtual standstill, the private sector, emerging from the doldrums of the recession, was beavering away. There was a rash of new construction sites around the country.

Councils had abandoned the construction of towers; the small amount of public housing being built consisted mostly of low-rise structures. The architectural profession had changed significantly. In response to the criticisms of the previous decade it was no longer populated entirely by elitists. And, through initiatives such as the community projects, the advent of the more widely appealing styles of Post Modernism and high-tech, plus the popular refurbishment schemes, architects had regained some measure of public respect.

But despite its new-found boost of confidence, the profession was to receive a blow from an unexpected quarter. On 30th May the RIBA held a gala evening at Hampton Court Palace to celebrate its 150th anniversary, to which all the leading lights of the architectural world were invited. The guest of honour and principal speaker was the Prince of Wales. The effects of what he said then have been deeply felt, and have undoubtedly been instrumental in initiating one of the most significant changes in the history of modern architecture by opening up public debate on designs for major new buildings. The Prince also used the occasion to give community architecture the royal seal of approval.

I was then still RIBA vice-president of public affairs and, because of the gala, was staying in London with the current president, Michael Manser. On the day Michael was noticeably anxious about something, but it wasn't until late in the afternoon that I realized his nerves were connected with the contents of the Prince's speech. Copies had been circulated to the press and embargoed for publication until the following morning. The first anyone at the RIBA knew of its details was when a reporter from The Times called the secretary, Patrick Harrison, asking for his reaction to the Prince of Wales' attack on architects. There was a flurry of activity, followed by panic.

Both Michael and Patrick were clearly amazed that the Prince, who had after all been invited to celebrate 150 glorious years of achievement, was going to stand up and criticize his hosts. A stream of telephone calls was made to the Palace in an attempt to persuade the Prince to modify his speech. No assurances of a change were forthcoming.

When the assembled company finally shuffled into the Fountain Court, there we a few anxious faces. As the Prince drew his notes from his pocket he smiled, and it was obvious from the expression on Michael's face that he feared the worst. Our guest of honour began:

'For at last people are beginning to see that it is possible, and important in human terms, to respect old buildings, street plans and traditional scales, and at the same time not to feel guilty about a preference for facades, ornaments and soft materials. At last, after witnessing the wholesale destruction of Georgian and Victorian

housing in most of our cities, people have begun to realize that it is possible to restore old buildings, and, what is more, that there are architects willing to undertake such projects.'

Then came his searing attack on the profession and the Modernist approach, followed by words of praise for community architecture:

'For far too long, it seems to me, some planners and architects have consistently ignored the feelings an wishes of the ass of ordinary people in this country. Perhaps it is hardly surprising as architects tend to have been trained to deign buildings from scratch - to tear down and rebuild. Except I interior design courses, students are not taught to rehabilitate, nor do they every meet the ultimate users of buildings in their training - indeed, they can often go through their whole career without doing so. Consequently a large number of us have developed a feeling that architects tend to design houses for the approval of fellow architects and critics, not for the tenant …'

'To be concerned about the way people live, about the environment they inhabit and the kind of community that is created by that environment should surely be one of the prime requirements of a really good architect. It has been most encouraging to see the development of community architecture as a natural reaction to the policy of decamping people to new towns and overspill estates where the extended family patters of support were destroyed and the community life was lost. Now, moreover, we are seeing the gradual expansion of housing co-operatives, where the tenants are able to work with an architect of their own who listens to their comments and their ideas and tries to design the kind of environment they want, rather than the kind which tends to be imposed upon them without any degree of choice'.

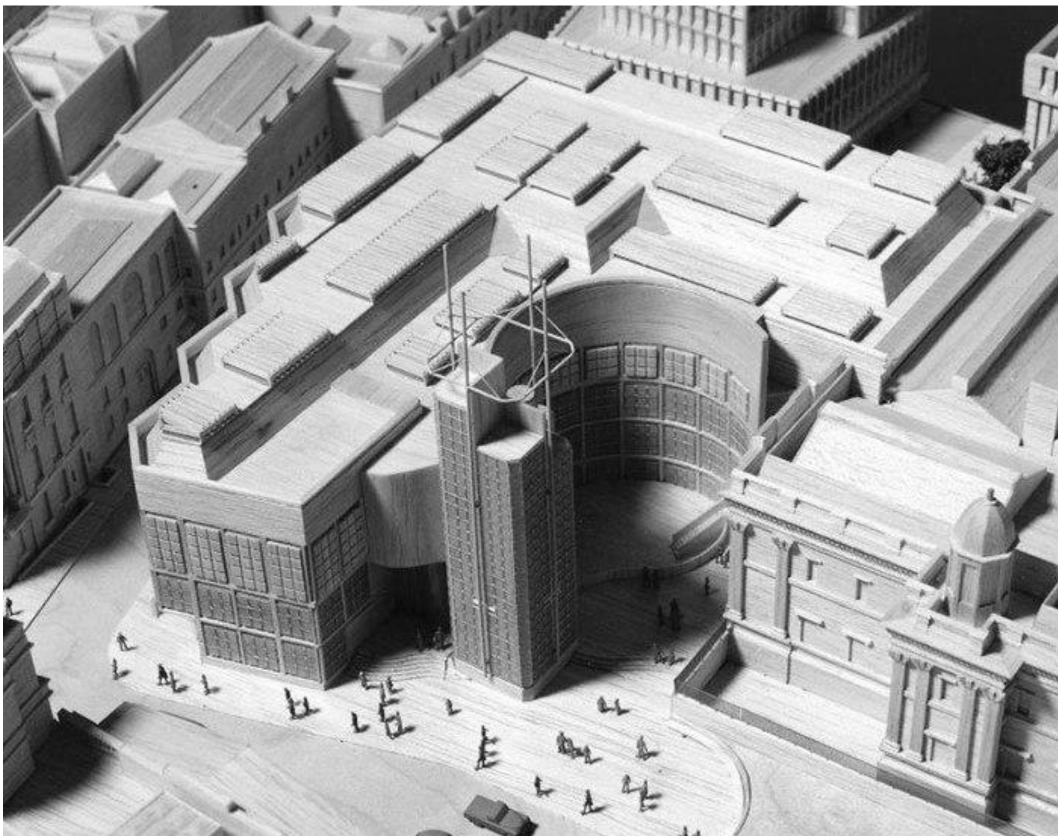
'This sort of development, spear-headed as it s by such individuals as a vice president of the RIBA Rod Hackney and Ted Cullinan offers something very promising in terms of inner city renewal and urban housing.'

He went on to criticise the proposal for a glass office tower designed by Mies van der Rohe at Mansion House Square, and the proposed extension to the National Gallery, of which he said:

'What are we going to do to Trafalgar Square? Instead of designing an extension to the elegant facade of the National Gallery which complements it and continues the concept of columns and domes, it looks as if we may be presented with a vast municipal fire station. What is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend … Why can't we have those curves and arches that express feeling in design? What is wrong with them?'.

The immediate reaction, after muted applause, was a mixture of surprise and some outrage. Dinner followed and much of the conversation for the rest of the evening centred of the Prince's attack. The following day the media were full of stories about Prince Charles' outburst. Michael Manser was quoted as saying he was 'a bit surprised', and many architects criticized the Prince for attaching the two major new proposals, which were subject to public inquiry.

The proposed, and unbuilt, office tower at Mansion House Square, designed by Mies van der Rohe.



The proposed, and unbuilt, extension to the National Gallery, designed by Ahrends, Burton and Koralek. It was described by Prince Charles as looking like a vast municipal fire station.

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9. President of the RIBA

The summer of 1986 saw the RIBA in the throes of an election battle. The official statement on the Broadwater Farm riots had sstirred up considerable resentment within a large section of the membership. They had displayed an arrogant disinterest and had been loath to accept criticism or admit that the design might have been at fault.

This determination to avoid confronting reality, not just at Broadwater Farm by in poor design elsewhere, was infuriating. Having been involved in the politics of the architectural profession throughout the previous ten years, I saw how outmoded the thinking had become. I had become bitterly disillusioned with the way the RIBA was running its affairs.

My patience eventually ran out during one particular debate, held in May, on reducing the numbers of architects coming into the profession and closing architectural schools. This showed just how far out of touch the RIBA was with current demands. I resolved to try and make changes. For some time I had been arguing that there were too few architects in Britain. Even during the recession only 2 per cent had been out of work, and, as we appeared to be entering a boom period, it seemed ridiculous to talk about reducing the number. It was one of the most important debates ever held in the council chamber, but to my dismay only 36 of the 62 elected members turned up to take part.

Ever since Lord Esher had been president in the sixties, the RIBA's council had treated the education debate with tremendous gravity. The government had made it clear it wanted cut-backs in the numbers of student places, but I couldn't believe that our professional body was kow-towing to those wishes.

My frustration made me realize that if I was to have a voice at all I would have to stand for the presidency. I drew up my manifesto and showed it to a few friends to gauge their response. I criticized the Institute for drifting under poor leadership, and said that no amount of marketing bluff would conceal its gross inadequacies. Proposals for these education cuts presented the profession with the most substantial threat for 152 years, and yet a discreet silence was being maintained. Research and excellence in design were being ignored, and the regions were suffering from financial starvation. There was clearly a desperate need for a radical new approach.

The support I received was enthusiastic, and came from all quarters - sir Hugh Casson; Keith Scott, head of Britain's biggest architectural firm, the Building Design Partnership; Bill Reed, head of Britain's largest public sector architect's office in Birmingham; Ben Derbyshire of Hunt Thompson Associates; Professor Riley of Nottingham University; Richard Rogers; and Norman Foster. It was with this sort of backing that I put my name forward as a presidential candidate.

Raymond Andrews was a tough opponent. He used the machinery of the RIBA to run his campaign and had the backing of senior staff. We rarely met during the

campaign, but he did agree to take part in a debate at the Welsh National Opera in Cardiff in November. Here he continued the slanging match, likening me to Arthur Scargill and Derek Hatton. 'If Hackney rocks the boat', he said, 'he'll rock it too hard and it could go over'. He added, looking directly at me, that 'ambition is the last refuge of failure'. And then my opponent described me as cynical, callous and a charlatan. His vitriol won him few friends, and the architectural press, including Architects' Journal and Building Design all came out in my favour.

The Andrews cap continued its attacks throughout the campaign, but after the largest-ever recorded poll I was elected president with a majority of 1500 in the late autumn of 1986.

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10. Humanism not Modernism

I ceased to be President of RIBA in July 1989. At the end of my two years its appalling financial position had still not been straightened out but at least we were one year ahead of schedule in pulling back the deficit. Otherwise I managed to steer the RIBA towards Europe to take its part with the eleven other countries in order that by 1992 there could be a free flow of architects working throughout the EEC, and I made sure that the Institute was closely involved with 'green' issues.

Without concentrating on community architecture to the detriment of all else, I would like to think that during my term it came of age and became accepted as one of the normal ways of practising rather than just a ginger group activity.

At the time of writing the end of the worst excesses of the Modern Movment are in sight. Mass public housing programmes have been stopped. Council housing stocks have dwindled and government is still purusing a policy of selling off these properties to tenants. Corbusian-style urban planning is being cast aside in favour of the small-scale. Uniform utilitarian styles have been replaced by the more familiar and traditional, and experimentation with new materials is now approached with considerable caution. Mass planning, mass building, mass spending and the presiding elitist architect are concepts that are dead and buried.

If a definition is required for the whole range of new architecture that s starting to be produced, then perhaps 'humanism' is a good term - an architecture on the human scale, sympathetic to the user and the viewer.

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11. Shaw Bottom Farm

The following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Daily Mirror newspaper. The article, by Henry Clare, was published on 8th May 2017.

The wild setting of Shaw Bottom Farm.

A converted 17th century farmhouse has gone on the market for almost £1million and although it looks traditional from the outside, it houses secrets in the basement The property, set in 23 acres, has been extensively redeveloped since it was bought by architect Rod Hackney in 1977.

Among the bizarre features of Shaw Bottom Farm in Upper Hulme, Staffordshire, is a secret basement swimming pool connected by an indoor flume. The heated pool is connected to the upper levels by a twisting water flume and is surrounded by carvings of Indian and Hindu gods, which Mr Hackney added after a trip to Calcutta in the 1980s. The pool also has optical lighting arched decorative windows and ceiling roses which Mr Hackney sourced from Clitheroe Chapel in Lancashire.

This 405-square metre property also comes with five Jersey cows. The mansion was bought by architect Rod Hackney in 1977. With nine bedrooms, the detached farmhouse is on the market for £950,000 and has a music room with a still-functioning Victorian pipe organ dating back to 1847.

At the centre of the property is a glazed garden room, which leads into the kitchen, cinema room, and sauna area. Mr Hackney, 75, designed the 20ft water flume which starts in the attic and snakes through the drawing and reception rooms before coming out in the basement pool. He said: "It's certainly a unique feature. It was a little bit of a spur of the moment thing. We were in the process of designing the pool, when I saw a flume at another house that I was looking at for work. As soon as I saw it I decided that I just had to have it. There was no other option. My wife Tina thought that I was absolutely daft when I told her about it, but I was able to talk her round in the end. You have to try these things.

A reception room in the mansion.

"There was a lot of talk with the manufacturers, because I had to make sure it didn't go too fast," he added. "There are lots of horizontal curves, which prevent people from racing down it and hurting themselves. You literally lie horizontally, switch on the electricity for the lights, push yourself down and four or five seconds later you're in the pool."

Mr Hackney has decided to sell the property following the death of Tina, who passed away in 2015.

The father-of-one added: "The whole house has been my experiment, really. I've been an architect all of my life, and I've always been of the opinion that it's best to try out bold development in your home to see how they work. It's been almost a life's project, redeveloping the home and making it what it is today. The swimming pool was the bravest change, I think. Before we first started working on it in 1985, there was just foundations underneath the house. He said he shudders to think how much the pool cost but what pleases him the most about it is its micro climate.

He added: "The pipe organ is quite a story. I was working on a property in Windermere, and the owner said to me 'there's something here that I think you might be interested in'. Almost as soon as I saw it, I wanted it in the music room. I can't play the organ properly - only a few odd notes here and there - but I adore it."

He said since Tina passed away the property has become too big for him and although he will miss it dearly, there comes "the time when you need a change."

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12. A Personal Footnote

Alex Reid compiled this life story in 2021 by archiving, with acknowledgement and thanks, extracts from Rod Hackney's autobiography The Good the Bad and the Ugly and from other internet sources. Alex Reid, when Director General of the Royal Institute of British Architects, got to know Rod Hackney as a Past President and member of the RIBA Council. Reid adds this personal footnote.

One of the many pleasures of working from 1993 to 2000 at the Royal Institute of British Architects was the opportunity to get to know Rod Hackney. He had an extraordinary track record as the pioneer of community architecture in the UK, which he promoted vigorously from within the RIBA. He was unfailing cheerful, and had wonderful sense of humour. He could not have been more supportive of our efforts to modernise the RIBA.

Rod Hackney very kindly invited me to stay overnight at his home at Shaw Bottom Farm, described above. It was a memorable experience. It was set in amazing wild moorland, with no other habitation in sight. He explained that, as it happened, the next farm to the north was the holiday home of another distinguished architect, Ted Cullinan, with whom he would exchange hospitality. Ted was perhaps a mile uphill from Rod, and Rod explained that they had considered building an underground flume between the two properties. The idea was that Rod and his wife Tina would walk up to Ted, then after a meal don swimming gear and return via the flume. And vice versa. It was not clear how the dinner party clothing would be repatriated. Perhaps it could be sent down the flume in a waterproof holdall.

This scheme did not materialise, perhaps because of wayleave issues. I am sure Rod would have been quite capable of constructing such a thing. I asked how he had constructed the swimming pool under his farmhouse. He explained that he had somehow propped up one side of the house, had hired a mechanical digger, and had personally driven it down and under the house excavating as he went. He clearly knew what he was doing and collapse was avoided.

Other remarkable features of the house, not mentioned in the article above, were a battle scene of modern naval warships, consisting of model ships fixed to a board perhaps four feet square painted to represent the sea. Rather unusual. But what was more unusual was that the battle scene was fixed, upside down, on the ceiling of one of the rooms. Also there was a system of secret passages, which enabled Rod's son (then aged perhaps seven) to make his way from room to room, and even ascend upstairs, via a system of narrow secret passages and hidden stairs much too small to accommodate an adult. These were accessed via tiny doors fitted into the walls of various rooms. I was concerned what would happen if his son became stuck in one of the secret passages, like an adventurous potholer.

Rod invited me to try out the flume, which ran from a cupboard door on the first floor down into the basement swimming pool. I politely declined on grounds of claustrophobia. Rod took no offence, explaining that while some of his guests enjoyed the flume experience others had found it deeply traumatic.