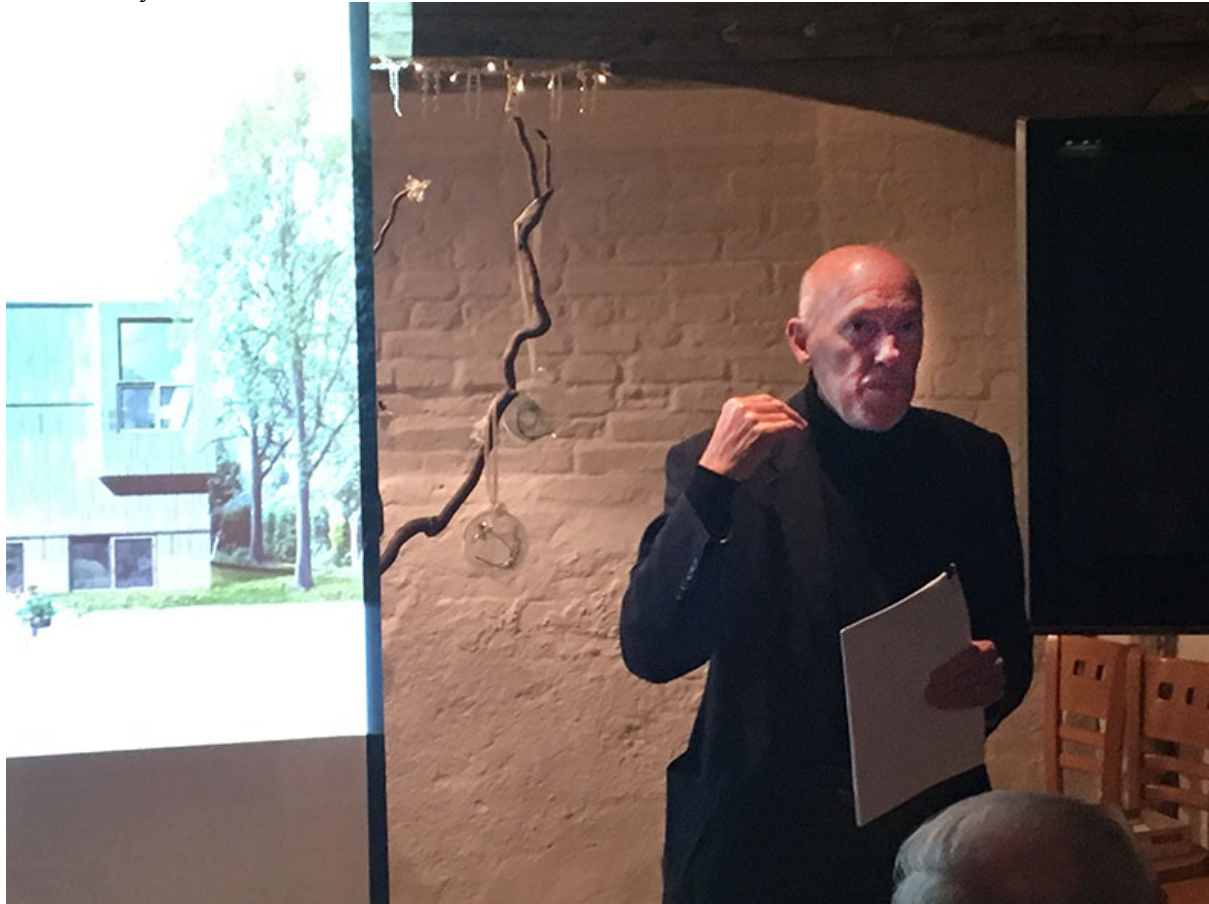


Ipswich Building Preservation Trust – 2016 AGM Review

“Build, build, build: Are planners, developers, and architects destroying the idea of excellent ordinary urban fabric?” Guest speaker, Jay Merrick - Ipswich-based architectural critic, journalist and novelist – for the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust AGM 19th October 2016

A review by Bob Allen



Jay Merrick announced his literary as well as his architectural credentials by flashing an image of W H Auden’s face on screen and quoting some key lines from his poem ‘After Reading a Child’s Guide to Modern Physics’. Auden describes the repellent impact of his craggy shaven visage but goes on to claim ‘it has/Thank God, sufficient mass/ To be altogether there,/ Not an indeterminate gruel/ Which is partly somewhere else.’ These key qualities of ‘sufficient mass’ and being ‘altogether there’ were presented as an *amuse bouche* to direct our palates to the main themes of Jay’s architectural cuisine: buildings should create their own identity in their contexts and should respond to the accumulated memories of the place and create a significant volume within their sites. Jay asserted that many modern buildings lack some or all of these qualities and thus may be considered ‘indeterminate gruel’. He explored this theme in two contexts: a heritage quarter in Doha, the capital of Qatar, and examples chosen to enable him to exemplify the potential for excellence in ordinary architecture – ‘good ordinariness’.

From its foundation in 1825 the population of Qatar rose slowly to reach 12,000 by 1900 and after the discovery of oil in 1940 rose to 500,000. Today there are 2 million inhabitants and

each day 800 million cubic meters of oil are exported. Within this context of immense wealth and economic growth a number of historic buildings from the period 1900-1924 have been selected for restoration and further development. They are all within a heritage quarter surrounded by significant civic and religious structures. Each building exemplifies traditional Islamic architecture which has developed specifically in response to the natural conditions of the site, the materials available (both locally and from trade routes), and the social and cultural requirements for shade, ventilation, and private family life. Each building will now have a specific new role in illuminating aspects of Islamic life and the history of Qatar. One, for instance, houses a museum of slavery. They are all single story flat-roofed courtyard buildings surrounded by high austere walls and separated by narrow alleys which can exclude sunlight. Arcades and collonades sometimes surround the courts; decoration externally is limited to the entrances, but is more evident internally and in both cases it can be seen to transfigure the solidity of the structures. There are ventilated parapets at roof level offering shade and funnels the available breeze. The building material is gypsum and the forms tend towards plain geometric shapes reminiscent of modernism. The rafters are generally of east-African mangrove wood whose span has determined the size of rooms. Split bamboo from India and reeds from the Euphrates are also used which reflect Qatar's historic trading routes. The buildings seem elemental: constructed from the earth and natural world they include pools of water to reflect light. The modern extensions and basements have attempted to respond to these elements with geometric screens and materials carefully selected to respect the traditions. Jay emphasised that this heritage provides a thought-provoking case study to help us to consider the way good architecture would relate to the buildings which already exist in the built environment.



The final part of Jay's talk was introduced as having a rather more bilious quality. The key note here was that 'no new building should leave the city worse off' and Jay immediately cited many modern buildings which in his view have achieved just that. Poole Methodist Church for instance acquired an ill-judged extension quite at odds with the original building – ironically a creation of a group calling themselves 'Intelligent Design'. The cuts to local government funding have added a final twist to the demise of design expertise in local planning departments – planning expertise has been 'stripped out' – and even if schemes are initially refused there is little funding to contest planning appeals. Altogether the process today is frequently a rubber stamp and it is the result of a long process of decline which has steadily progressed despite boom and bust economics in the construction industry. The housing situation today again is dire with excessive profiteering and room sizes cut to the meanest dimensions in Europe. 'Indeterminate gruel' is our daily fare. Jay proposed that the RIBA should offer a category to celebrate 'excellent ordinary' workaday design, and he illustrated some examples of good design including Impington Village College from 1939 and the recent Copper Lane scheme in Stoke Newington which involved the resident community as partners in the design process. Too much place making is 'place faking'. Volume house builders claim to offer the public 'what they want' but rarely consult and become partners in the process of design. Good architects are rarely employed for mass housing schemes – the 'gorilla' site owners devolve the design brief to 'chimp' designers who basically do what they are told. Jay argues passionately that we 'have never known so little about so much' – our ability to engage has been usurped in a process of 'pacification'. Many schemes are pale and ignorant versions of Poundbury...if we were French, he argued, we should simply bury the planning departments in rotten tomatoes.

Altogether it was a stimulating evening which challenged, provoked, and entertained in good measure. Several questions and comments followed Jay's presentation and his ideas will no doubt continue to inform our discussions as we strive to ensure that Ipswich retains the best of the old and promotes the best of the new, leaving the town as a veritable gourmet's vision of architecture – or at least of the duly seasoned ordinary.

Bob Allen