

LOBBY

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Defiance

Blow Your Own Trumpet

FILLING GAPS AND CREATING SWELLS

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We believe that as architects we should pop our heads above the parapets of our pre-defined roles and responsibilities. Even if saying it out loud feels somehow naive, as a practice we always seem to find our way back to the words we wrote in our original mission statement (all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed) almost a decade ago:

"What do we stand for? Well, there are a few things we won't stand for; we won't stand for the lazy, the obvious or the mundane. We stand for a sense of uniqueness. We stand for delight and enjoyment, truth and mystery, honesty and deception, texture, colour, light, humour, wit."

Alongside budget constraints, minimising risk, and maximising the value add, we have somehow managed to keep this idea sewn into the inner lining of our projects, looking to breaking down long-established boundaries and traditional ways of doing things. We've all been in those meetings—you know the ones: 20 white, middle-aged men in suits sitting around a giant conference table (that one with the hole in the middle, creating one big doughnut of conflict), all facing each other, slowly stinking out the room with their hot-air and stuffy-guff. We see

the ridiculousness in this but also have understood the opportunities that lie within. We've found that the way to play the game is not to seek to tear this system apart, but just to pull at it slightly; you must stand in the gap in the middle and gently create a swell.

We stand in this gap. For one thing we don't really look like that Ayn Rand illustration of the white, male architect, standing proudly in silhouette in front of a skyline, smoking a cigarette in his Mad Men suit. Being a practice with an equal opportunities LGBTQ ratio of 100% at director level, we are perhaps a little different than most, and we take pride in the idea that we might be a role model for others. There does seem to be a lack of visibility in terms of LGBTQ people in architecture and construction. It's only really when senior gay architects and directors start bringing their partners to office outings, client dinners and even contractors' Christmas parties, that there will be a greater acceptance—one created simply from the commonplace, everyday situation. It might be unusual for an architecture practice to be headed up by a gay woman and a gay man, but hopefully this will gradually change and people will see—that for us at least—it's *not really this difference that makes us different*.

What makes us different is the way we approach our projects, simultaneously looking back as well as looking forwards. In every project, at every scale, we look for what's come before just as much as what's about to come. Clues from the site history or the client's personal story are carefully woven into



the project so that end result is somehow firmly embedded in the cultural and built environment of the site, while also proposing something that is new and invigorating—always distinctly contemporary but somehow distinctly familiar, in a search for new tradition.

We'd like to believe that the days of the star-architect sitting in his ivory tower, stroking a white cat, back turned to the camera, feeding his ego with every flick of his design-flair-filled pen, will soon come to an end. But the desire for this kind of brand architecture and what it can bring, in terms of a Bilbao effect, does still exist and even thrives around the world—particularly in new and emerging 'cultural' quarters in the middle and far east, for example. It's hard not to feel anything but an embarrassment, when images of the latest parametric snot-monster, plonking itself down on an unsuspecting desert somewhere, are plastered all over the pages of the latest glossy webzine. There's something painfully alien about this kind of approach to design in that it appears to have no bearing on the place, the local community or culture, but rather simply on the shape-making tools available to the designer at the time.

Some clients are thankfully taking a more enlightened view to procurement, seeking out different approaches to large building commissions. Finally, small practices are being included in larger competitions with clients explicitly encouraging collaborations between larger and smaller architecture practices, seeing the benefits of balancing seasoned experience with emerging talent. This can be a hugely powerful combination: the former bringing with it a wealth of wisdom and experience, the strength of resource and of course the all important PI cover. On the other hand, the latter brings a more youthful and playful approach, more in touch perhaps with emerging changes in the micro-cultures of the city, new technologies or materials, and the willingness to test new boundaries of what is possible.

The principle of a changing attitude to the traditional perception of the roles of the architect and the definition of practicing architecture is welcomed and well overdue. We urge the architecture discipline to become more open, more free; less naval-gazed and more horizon-broadened. Only then will we all—slowly but surely—start swelling out from behind conference tables, spreading ourselves tentatively outside the definitions of our own stereotypes, while blowing our trumpets as we go. ♣