

# Fulcrum

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## we will tell you what it is.

q. terry

**Fulcrum:** *You've mentioned the idea of pursuing the timeless, by "designing a building that looks like it's always been there." This suggests, perhaps, the erasure of the architect as an ego, and the use of architecture as a type of universal cultural expression.*

**Quinlan Terry:** There is nothing to be proud of. As architects, we're struggling to get something right that our forefathers were also struggling with and I find the ego thing really very unattractive. I get all sorts of people, elderly aunts and so on, saying "you must be proud of all you've done" and I think, well, you may be lucky or fortunate to have had an important or an interesting job to do. But pride is a very unattractive characteristic, and I try to avoid it.

**F:** *You're describing architectural lineage, culture, ideas and techniques that have developed over a long period of time, and this jars very much with the Modernist revolution, in which, historically speaking, the baby was somewhat thrown out with the bathwater...*

**QT:** I came to study architecture at the AA a little over 50 years ago simply because I liked the house I was living in, which was a Regency house in north London. There were a number of us like that. We could draw, we could do maths, so it seemed perhaps architecture was for us.

**We were told on day one "forget everything you thought was architecture, and start listening to us. We will tell you what architecture is. And if you liked Georgian buildings, remember, that world has now been phased out. If you think stone and brick and timber are the materials of the future, you're wrong. It's steel and glass and concrete and plastics." It was a complete brainwashing process.**

Fortunately I was accompanied by two others, Andrew Anderson and Malcolm Higgs, so we would back each other up. We were clueless about which way to go, but we knew that what they were telling us to do didn't stack up. If there weren't three of us I think I would have been reluctantly somehow convinced otherwise. It wasn't as if we knew better, we just felt that learning from the past, which is such a rich field of knowledge, would serve us better than looking only to the future.

LeCorbusier wanted to pull down half of Paris, which in those days they thought would be a great thing to do. We were watching Georgian London being torn down after the war — lovely squares just bulldozed, and rows of tower blocks put up in their place. I remember the Euston Arch being pulled down. The architectural community thought this was perfectly fine. They believed in the idea that the working classes didn't have to live in a terrace house with a muddy backyard, but could live 20 storeys up, taken up in an electric lift to look out over a wonderful future... and we just thought this was childish.

The other thing was that the people who were teaching us weren't very successful architects. They couldn't get a job, so they ended up teaching two days a week, and the moment they got a real project they disappeared. We didn't really feel we were getting the best people to advise us. But that was the AA in the 1950s.

**F:** *I wondered what your hope for architectural education might be today, whether you hoped that your approach might become a more popular one, or whether you thought Modernism had definitively crushed Classicism. When it comes to the social acceptance of Classicism, I would argue the public have never really been the problem. In a recent BBC survey, about 40% of Britons said they would prefer to live in Georgian architecture. Other epochs ran close seconds, the Victorian, Edwardian, and so on. However, only 4% of people said they would want to live in a modernist building or a tower block. Given this, one might say RIBA seems deaf to the will of popular demand.*

**QT:** I frequently hear real estate agents say "don't give me a modernist house, I can't sell it", so I think we're

making some roads into the modern world, but it's only because Classical sells. The Russians want Classical. The French want Classical. Americans have always had the approach "If I like Classical, I'll have it", whereas the English tend to feel "I would like Classical, but I don't think I'll get planning approval for it." It's become a lot more popular, but of course we would still never be commissioned for a public building. The political establishment is committed to Modernism, and, as you say, the AA and the other schools are equally committed.

You're absolutely right about the public. They aren't taught anything. Rather, the people that control the media about architecture have an almost religious conviction that Modernism is right, and they must therefore continue. And it really is a sort of moral or religious conviction. They feel, as long as people believe in modernism it will always come right.

My parents were well-heeled, left wing, Hampstead socialists. My mother was an artist, and I can remember her saying "it's wonderful to be young after these two terrible wars, and now we have a future where there will be no wars, and it's wonderful to be alive now and all very exciting." And I said, I didn't feel that way. I felt there might be more wars, especially with the way the Americans and Russians were carrying on.

**I didn't have the same excitement for the future, and they said, "never think like that, never look back, only forward, because the past is terrible." I was sceptical and thought they were gullible.**

And I thought, what is there to look at to tell us what the future will be like? There are no books, there are no words, there is no history of the future. And when I felt my parents were no longer able to guide me on such things, I then went to the AA. I came from a good family, and they were kind and friendly, and everything was fine otherwise, but once you realise your parents can be wrong, and you come to the AA and hear the same sort of rubbish from your teachers, you think they're gullible too. It was then that I saw parallels between classical architecture and the Christian faith.

I began to believe there was something seriously wrong with the whole attitude of the sixties. And you're right, it's not the public. The public hasn't really got a view, it needs to be guided by those who can point the way. But the people who were pointing the way were pointless, stuck in a world of make-believe, without history, and which could not be trusted. But I do think, as you say, people are starting to wake up — it certainly sounds like you are.

**F:** *I'm increasingly sceptical of the education I've received, I like to keep an open mind, and I like to think that if you can see what you're doing isn't working you should be flexible enough to adapt to what you think might work better. The problem is, you cannot, in a way, remain modernist and also believe in many of the other things I think are important, namely, a certain responsibility to future generations.*

*At an economic level, modernism is incompatible with that idea. I interviewed Leon Krier several weeks ago, and he said something funny, that the modernist experiment can only result in hell on earth. I was very pleased to be able to publish that. I think it's a very important point to put forward, especially within the AA, which has become so obsessed with digital experimentation and computational design that a lot of the time it only has a coincidental relationship with architecture at all.*

**QT:** It's good you're seeing this. Leon Krier is a good example of a man who's been worked on, and who can see how wrong it is. I think he's been a great help in many ways. But in the end, if you're a practising architect you have to know how express your opinion. It helps if you've got a sense of humour, like Leon Krier.

The debate is out now. The trouble is that the RIBA is still worshipping Foster, Rogers, Stirling. It's high time they were told "grow up, you can think of something a bit better than that."

Quinlan Terry is an architect working in partnership with his son Francis He is a Fellow of the RIBA and in 2005 won the Richard H Driehaus Prize for Classical Architecture.



The destruction of Euston Arch, 1961.