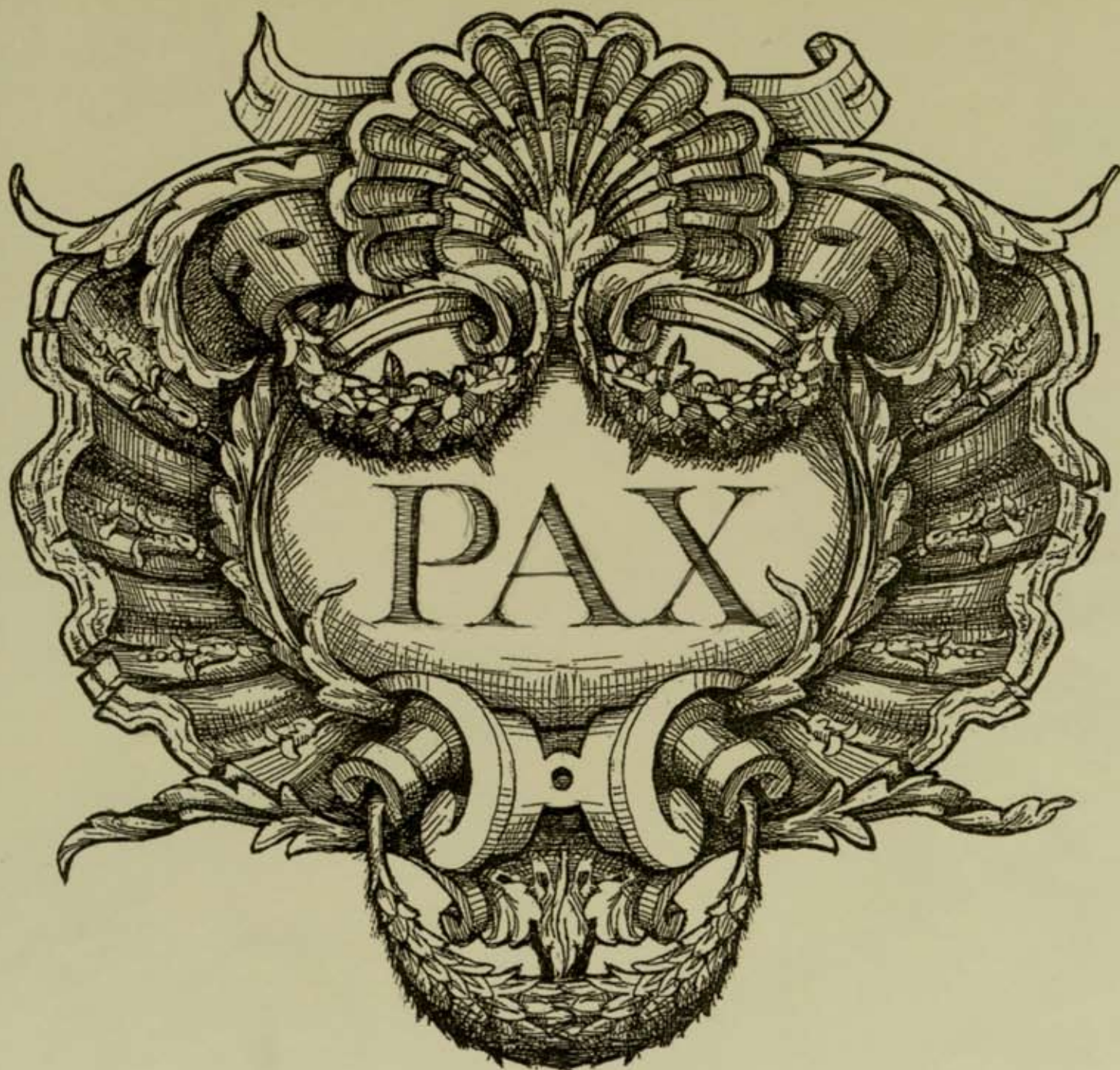




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At peace with tradition

New classicism is alive and kicking

Prize draw: Three classicists show off their skills with the pencil

Cambridge footlights: Downing College's theatre revives William Wilkins

No impediment: Robert Adam on why there's room for all tastes

Romancing the stone: Bath's Southgate centre aims to blend in

THE HISTORY BOYS



IMAGE | INCK CARTER

The battleground of modernism versus traditionalism is old hat now, as a new generation of **young classicists** storms the RIBA with confidence, self-belief – and a great sense of fun

Words Hugh Pearman

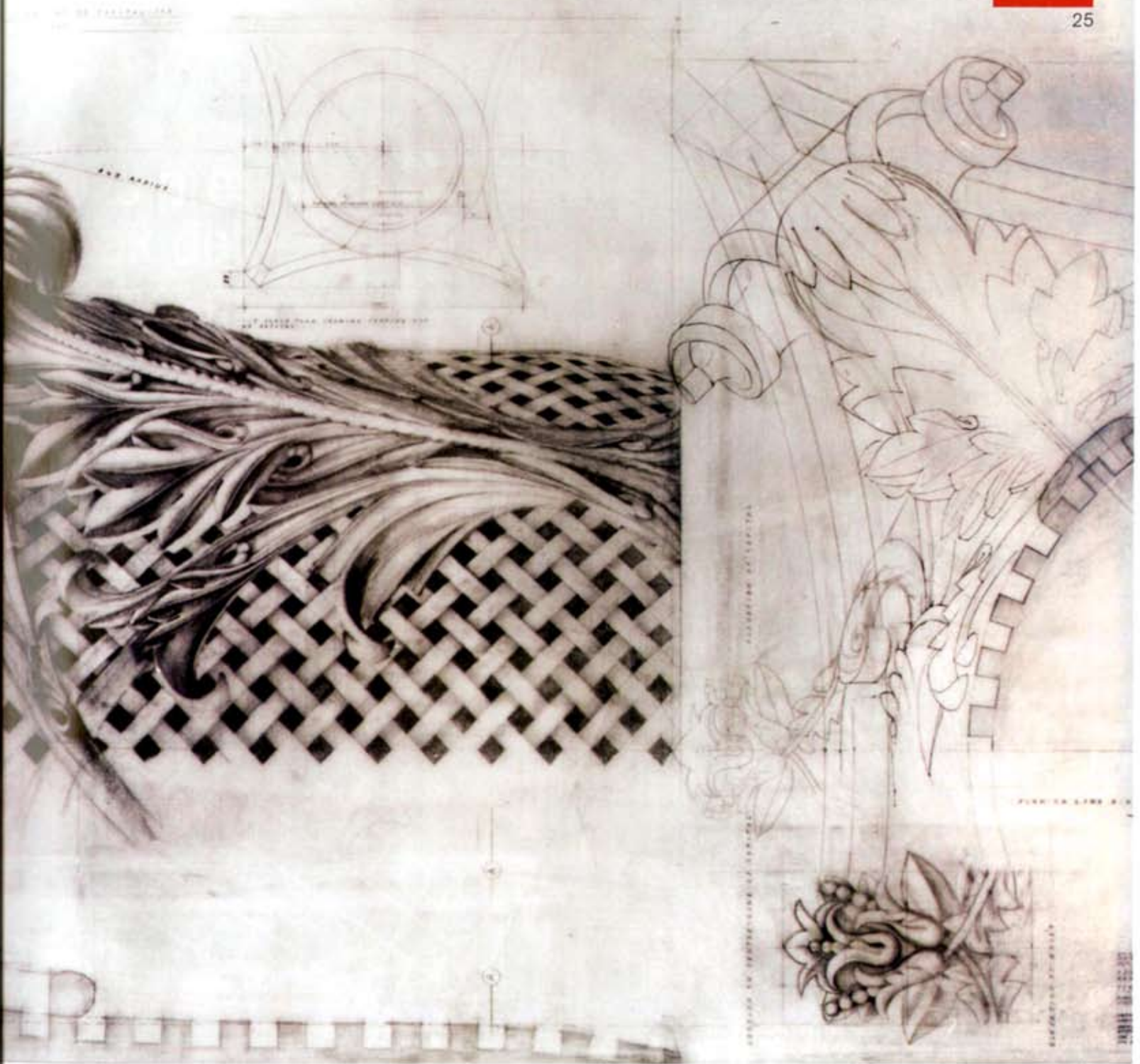
THERE IS A LOT of goodwill towards the Young Athenians I'm talking to in the downstairs cafe at the RIBA. Doubtless there'll be some adverse criticism of their exhibition this month, but there's not been nearly so much of the kneejerk modernist outrage that used to greet the public outings of the older generation of traditionalists. Is the war over? Certainly there's an approachability to be found here. Partly this is because the three who together make up the 'Three Classicists' exhibition are genuinely friends, despite working for rival firms. The relationship between their

immediate forbears was and is usually rather distant, not to say frosty at times. Whereas one can easily imagine Robert Adam down the pub – in fact, no need to imagine it, I've been there – it's harder to imagine Robert Adam down the pub with Quinlan Terry and John Simpson. The impression is that Adam likes to engage with other architects, while Terry and Simpson prefer to keep themselves to themselves. Demetri Porphyrios, meanwhile, whom some regard as the best of them all, seems to be in the United States most of the time. Besides, they all do different kinds of neoclassicism.

RIGHT: Francis Terry's drawing of a Corinthian capital.

BELOW: From left, Ben Pentreath, George Saumarez Smith and Francis Terry.





The three (relative) youngsters in question are Ben Pentreath, who is not strictly an architect but an architectural designer (which is not uncommon in this field, not least because of the unease parts of the architecture education system seem to feel for traditionalism) and who learned his trade through apprenticeships; Francis Terry, son and partner of Quinlan; and George Saumarez Smith, a director in Adam Architecture. Saumarez Smith's grandfather, incidentally, was the notably eclectic neoclassicist Raymond Erith, whose practice Quinlan Terry joined and later inherited, and

'It's deadly serious, but at the same time, kind of poking fun at ourselves. The kind of work that we do, there's inevitably a kind of fogginess to it. But at the same time, we're all quite aware of that'

where George himself worked for a while. But while there is an appropriate sense of historical continuity to be found in the trio, one thing you just don't get much of is solemnity. Although distinctly self-mocking however, they believe with absolute seriousness in the rightness and quality of the work they do.

Their slightly irreverent attitude is nothing new. Robert Adam himself, as a youngster in the 1980s, was considered hip enough to appear in the otherwise wholly modernist Blueprint magazine, for instance. At the time he was seen as a 'progressive classicist', in contrast to what



IMAGE: JOHN CRITCHLEY

was then pigeonholed as the reactionary Palladianism of Quinlan Terry: not least because Terry's work was championed by the very conservative and viscerally anti-modernist Professor David Watkin of Peterhouse, Cambridge. There was a style war in progress, remember, which was not only modernists versus classicists, but hipsters versus fogeys. And the fogeys weren't always the classicists.

Given all of which, I was at first surprised to find that the catalogue to 'Three Classicists' has a forward from Prince Charles. I know he's said we're all friends now, past president Sunand Prasad signed up to greater collaboration, and there's a thriving Traditional Architects Group at the RIBA, chaired by the excellent Alireza Sagharchi. Even so – doesn't Charles come with the wrong kind of associations from the bad old days? Seemingly not. Bear in mind that the Prince, especially his Duchy of Cornwall, is an important patron for their practices, plus the fact that Pentreath trained partly at the former Prince's Institute, and all three have connections with its successor, the Prince's Foundation, the director of which, Hank Dittmar, writes the Afterword... in truth, it would have been



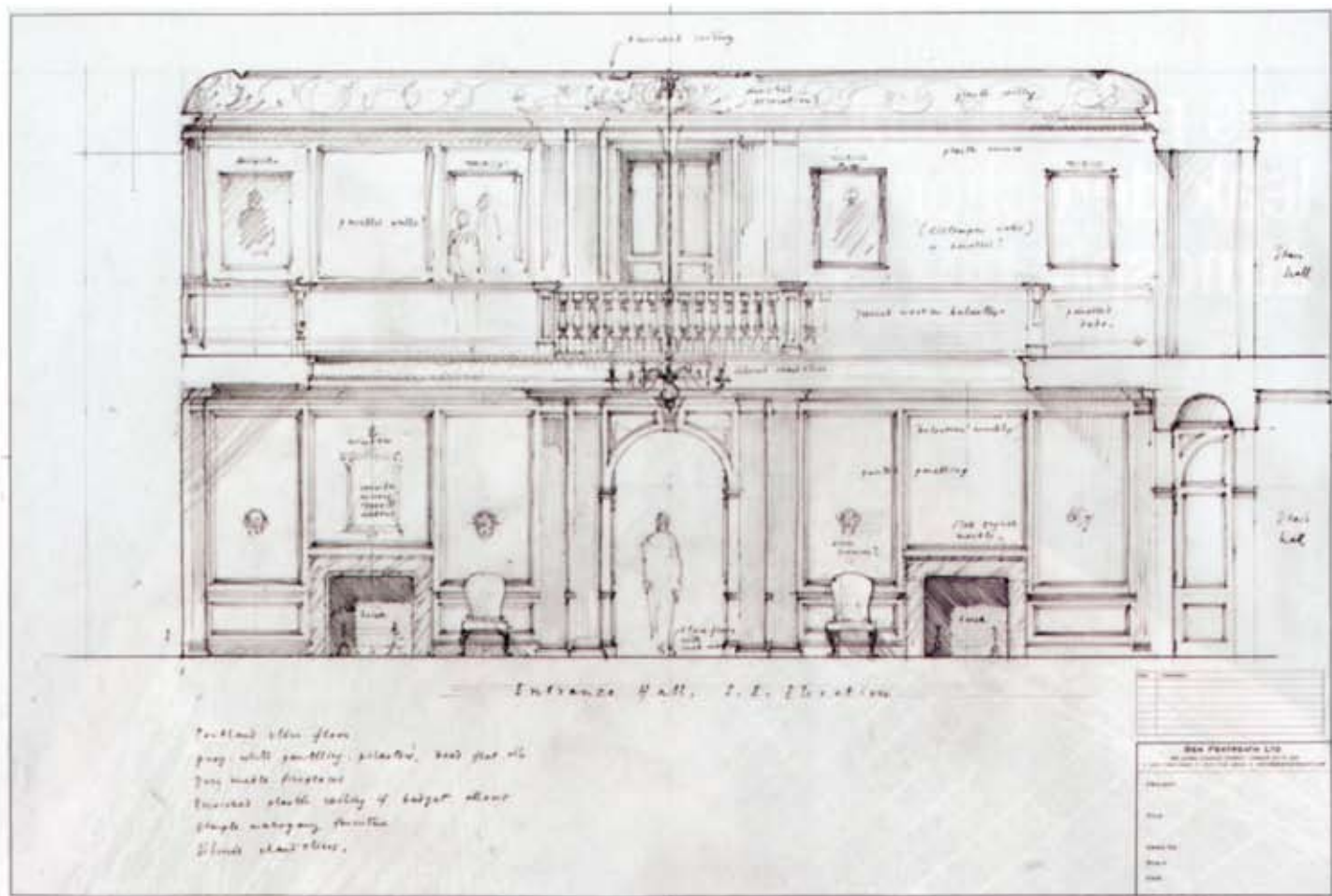
ABOVE: The singing pencil – George Saumarez Smith at work on a Bond Street Art Gallery.

LEFT: The country house tradition – Saumarez Smith detail of a Wiltshire project.

professional suicide not to have had Charles' name on that forward, such are the ways of 18th century style patronage. Besides, the forward is light-hearted, rather sweet. Charles, like anyone who's seen the work – rush to see the exhibition, it's excellent – is impressed by the remarkable drawing skills of these men.

Then again, there's more than a touch of tongue-in-cheek about the way they present themselves here: take the photo of them before the Elgin Marbles, Francis with his father's Royal Fine Art Commission civil-service issue briefcase, and all (as they gleefully admit) channelling the spirit of besuited Gilbert and George. And then, for a few days only, they have turned their exhibition venue, Gallery 1 of the RIBA, into a country-house drawing room, complete with antique furniture. It's a deliberate wind-up of those who see this branch of architecture purely in terms of one-off country houses for the filthy rich. They do those, of course: but all three are working on both large housing developments and in tight urban sites, on commercial as well as residential projects.

'It's deadly serious, but at the same time, kind of poking fun at ourselves,' says Saumarez



Smith. 'The kind of work that we do, there's inevitably a kind of fogginess to it. But at the same time, I think we're all quite aware of that.' These three are saying they don't just sit around all day drawing Corinthian capitals.

Well, maybe Saumarez Smith does, I don't know. If you go to the Adam website, you'll find a YouTube clip of him drawing and talking, and he's in the Cullinan mould of the architect who can communicate brilliantly with a pencil. And Pentreath is not just an architectural designer – he runs a separate practice, Working Group, for that – but also a retailer, with a real shop selling choice if pricey nick-nacks. He is interested in what being 'modern' means, and contributes an essay on the subject to the catalogue. It's one of their 'nine observations on architecture'. You see? They're doing it again. That's a sly reference to Vitruvius' Ten Books and Palladio's Four Books. Anyway: 'Is it enough to say that I prefer Mies van der Rohe to the Beaux Arts, Henry Moore to today's figurative sculpture, Hockney to Alma Tadema, or peaceful European democracy to an Imperial dictatorship?' Pentreath asks rhetorically of critics who accuse him of living in the past.



ABOVE: Ben Pentreath drawings. Study for an entrance hall (TOP), and design for a thatched cottage at Tisbury, Wiltshire.

He's also good on repetition (better than look-at-me one-offs, especially in terraces he thinks), taste, and brings in Terence Conran. 'He's on our team,' he remarks, meaning – modern but comfortable with the best aspects of the past.

Terry contributes observations on drawing, cooking as parable for architecture (he's a fan of Masterchef) and on what he sees in classicism. 'More minimal architecture may be laudable in its way, but I never feel that the architect has had much fun.' In this write-off, it is Saumarez-Smith who comes over as most serious: he talks about patience – his kind of buildings are best when they've got a bit old and crumbly – measurement, and economy ('the key thing is to understand the value of restraint').

This is not just an exhibition and a book on modern neoclassical architecture. That would be interesting, but not especially revealing. What Pentreath, Saumarez Smith and Terry are up to here is something much braver. They are saying, we are people, we like each other, this is what we do and this is how we choose to present ourselves to the world. And then – you look at the quality of the drawings, and are amazed and entranced. Don't miss this show. ■

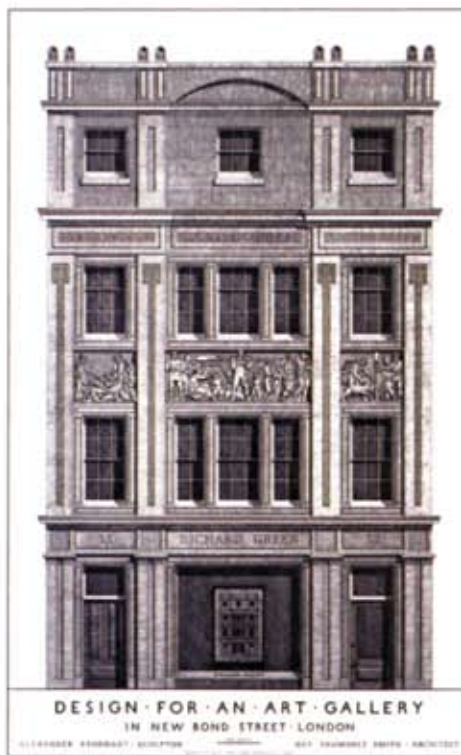
PROGRESS ISN'T ALWAYS MODERNIST

Traditional architecture is preferred by the vast majority of the public, says **Robert Adam**, yet its practitioners are at best ignored by the architectural establishment, and at worst derided. He argues the case for classical design and urges a move away from a world split between new localism and kowtowing to fashion

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE makes an explicit display of its origins and its line of descent from a sometimes ancient architectural past. This distinguishes it from the architectural mainstream, where literal historic imagery is restricted to early 20th century modernism and originality and invention are celebrated. Architects who claim to be traditional number at most 2% of the UK profession, their work is rarely published in the professional press or by professional commentators and they hardly ever win peer-judged competitions or awards.

In spite of a tendency to factionalism, architects share more than their differences. All have to manage fees and clients, programmes and regulations and all buildings have to stand up and keep out water. While at the radical extreme extraordinary forms, extravagant costs and impractical layouts are enjoying a vogue, for the larger part, buildings of all styles have relatively simple forms and straightforward layouts. Some mainstream architects believe that it is traditional buildings that are expensive, impractical and hard to execute, but in reality there is no necessary difference in build costs, functionality or ease of construction across the design spectrum. Furthermore, to the surprise of many, traditional construction has turned out to be particularly sustainable. To the casual observer differences between mainstream and traditional design seem to be only in the outward expression of the building form and use of materials. Indeed, some developers see facades as stylistically interchangeable, much to the dismay of many architects.

Notwithstanding substantial common ground, the architectural establishment either disapproves of or studiously ignores the small numbers of traditionalists in their midst. This



Adam Architecture
(George Saumarez
Smith): new art gallery,
London.

goes much deeper than distaste or stylistic preference. The chances of passing through an architecture school with traditional projects are close to zero and most students, being ambitious but intellectually vulnerable, quickly fall into line. Attacks, both public and behind-the-scenes, by successful architects on traditional schemes have been a feature of some recent high-profile developments but are only the tip of an iceberg that runs to Cabe, local architects' panels, competition and award judgements and even professionally drafted planning policies. The condemnation of traditional design even has its own specialised vocabulary: 'pastiche'; 'retrogressive'; 'not of our time' and so on. Where support can be found in the profession it lies somewhere between an in-principle toleration in the interests of variety and a conditional acceptance provided projects remain safely in the realm of scholarly facsimile.

Puzzled public

Traditionalists have become accustomed to and are sometimes bemused by their professional exclusion but members of the public often find it puzzling and even disturbing in an apparently liberal profession. Despite a belief since the early 20th century that the public would come round to modernism (the underlying and original philosophy of today's mainstream), this has not been the case. Survey after survey, including two by Cabe (the latter suppressed), indicate a remarkable consistency over time of a public preference for traditionally designed houses of somewhere around 85%. As houses are products for sale on the open market, this has a direct influence on the built outcome. In public and commercial buildings, however, the guiding commercial principle is the rental of space and

the market is not the public but committees, developers, agents and tenants, many of whom have come to subscribe to the theoretical link between progress and mainstream design. As a result there is no background of public surveys and this has led to a belief among architects that public tastes in housing and other buildings are different. A survey commissioned by my firm this year from YouGov, while limited in scope, indicated the more likely position: that the public preference for traditional design is consistent across all building types, even producing the same figure of 85%.

Logical mismatch

This relationship between traditional architecture and the professional mainstream poses two questions. How can a directly inverse proportion of design preference between the public and a profession be maintained? As architecture is a reflection, rather than a generator, of trends in the broad social, political and economic context, how does its current condition relate to the wider world?

As part of the culture of the fine arts, most architects subscribe to the dominant view, dating from the 19th century romantic movement, that art need only be justified by the self-expression of the artist. At the end of the 19th century this became the avant garde movement, where the artist was free to invent unconstrained by society, which would in time come to recognise the genius of the work. This liberated the artist (or architect) from any need to satisfy the tastes or preferences of the public. Indeed, to be reviled by the public became and remains a badge of honour as proof positive that the artist is genuinely avant garde.

The theory of the avant garde has been joined by the Enlightenment belief in the inevitability of progress driven by change. Essentially a historical theory formed in a period of rapid development, this has led to a conviction that all that is important about any historical period is that which makes it different from any other historical period (never mind that similarities always outweigh differences.) From this it is but a short step to assert that the defining characteristics of your own time lie only in those things that are unique and that to be true to your own time you must strive to create this uniqueness and difference. Anyone

who does otherwise will be judged not just to be in poor taste, but betraying the very process of history. In spite of the fact that everyone unavoidably participates in the composition of the modern world, the belief that traditionalists are not genuinely of their time clears the ground for an exclusive claim to the concepts of modernity and the contemporary. This allows the artistic and architectural mainstream to gather about it the politically and commercially potent symbolism of progress.

These theories lie at the heart of mainstream architecture today. They enable architects to work outside public approval and to continue to do so on the basis that time will prove them right. And by casting a tiny non-threatening minority as traitors to the future they can be elevated to a serious opposition, to be united against and singled out for opprobrium, condemnation or even suppression.

The claimed link between mainstream architecture and progress, combined with its historic association with Western democracies, has now made it the symbol of the new global liberalisation of capital. The instruments of



Adam Architecture (Robert Adam): New Grafton Hall, Cheshire – successor to an unbuilt modernist project.

'As architecture is a reflection, rather than a generator, of trends in the broad social, political and economic context, how does its current condition relate to the wider world?'

commercial globalisation – consumerism, global corporations, international travel and international hotels – have their universal architectural counterparts in shopping malls, office blocks, airports and hotels all serviced by a new breed of global architectural firms and star architects.

Global dimension

Globalisation, however, goes much further and is more complex than just the liberalisation of capital markets. It is the most significant social, political and economic phenomenon of our time and also encompasses electronic communication, fashion, travel, migration, environmental damage, the conduct of warfare and terrorism. The consequences can be unexpected. As national autonomy and control of communication and trade are lost by the large nation-states, there has been an upsurge in regional and local autonomy and identity. This re-assertion of local political and cultural identity is the flip-side of global homogenisation.

In the developing world, outside high-profile urban projects, stylistically post-modern versions of traditional architecture are commonplace. As with the predominance of traditional speculative housing in developed countries, this is never revealed in professional publications. The only way that the new localism impinges on mainstream architecture is in the new and influential field of traditional urbanism, (known in the USA as new urbanism) which has a direct, if occasionally uneasy, relationship with traditional architecture.

While political and commercial clients accept the premise that mainstream architecture does indeed represent the modernity and progress that they enthusiastically promote, it will continue to dominate this sector. It is clear, however, that worldwide there is significant public demand scarcely represented – and even denied – by most architects. Many traditional architects are content to make a good living out of this situation but this sharp division of interest cannot be good for architecture and fails to serve the public. If the establishment could make a more welcoming moral and intellectual space for traditionalists and if traditionalists could come in from the cold, who knows what each could learn from the other? ■