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British Monarch Charles III: Preference for "Community Architecture"

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As a prince, the new British monarch developed some curious attitudes to architecture. He also proved to be a dedicated meddler behind building projects he did not like. Combined, this led to a number of interventions that cast a shadow over his accession to the throne. What will Charles III do when it comes to the next grand building proposal to interrupt the London skyline?

On the evening of May 30, 1984, the then Prince Charles told leading architects assembled at Hampton Court to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects how exactly he felt about architecture, modern and past. At last, he claimed, people were "beginning to see that it is possible, and important in human terms, to respect old buildings, street plans and traditional scales at the same time not to feel guilty about a preference for facades, ornaments and soft materials."

A few bombs of accusation were also hurled at his unsuspecting audience. Many planners and architects had "consistently ignored the feelings and wishes of the mass of ordinary people in this country." They were the destroyers and rebuilders, not the rehabilitators.

His preference was for "community architecture", one that enabled "ordinary" people to express their views about how things should be done, breaking the "monopoly" architects had on taste, style and planning. He took the Mansion House Square project of the great modernist Mies van der Rohe to build an office tower in the City of London as one example of a program that could have done with "a community approach".

With a philistine's sentiment, the Prince of Wales let his prejudices be known.

> "It would be a tragedy if the character and skyline of our capital city were to be further ruined and St. Paul's dwarfed by yet another giant glass stump better suited to downtown Chicago than the City of London."

The proposal to extend the National Gallery also gave Charles his chance to utter those now famous words. The plan envisaged did not, he emphatically noted, complement the Gallery building, looking instead like "a kind of municipal fire station, complete with the sort of tower that contains the siren." Such a "high-tech approach" might make sense in the event that all of Trafalgar Square was abolished and built from scratch, "again with a single architect responsible for the entire layout, but what is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend."

The efforts by the Prince of Wales to scupper the Mansion House Square project proved outrageously successful. He received support from another quarter: the urban planners and government officials concerned about the creation of public spaces that might be used for protest.

His views were also expressed in an atmosphere of reaction and rejection – this was Thatcher's Britain, a time, as Jack Self writes, of "historical pastiche" allied with "an obsession with preservation". The attack on modernism as brutalist, inhuman and of poor quality was misguided but powerful.

In May 2009, in another address to RIBA, Charles apologised for his "monstrous carbuncle" remark, declaring that he had not intended "to kick-start some kind of style war between classicists and modernists", let alone wishing to "drag the world back to the eighteenth century". But the speech did little to conceal the fact that Charles was engaged in another enterprise of disruption, this time against the design of Lord Richard Roberts for the £1 billion redevelopment of Chelsea Barracks. While wishing for the project to be dropped altogether, Prince Charles had successfully convinced the developer to make adjustments, including using more brick and stone buildings at the expense of glass and steel proposed in the original design. Lord Palumbo's assessment of that effort was acerbic: "I can only say God bless the Prince of Wales, and God save us from his architectural judgment."

It was such behaviour that led to a spirited defence of Rogers by a number of architects, including five winners of the Pritzker prize, including Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron and Frank Gehry. Published in the *Sunday Times*, the letter, which was also signed by such luminaries as Ricky Burdett, David Adjaye and Renzo Piano, rebuked the Prince of Wales for his intervention. "It is essential in a modern democracy that private comments and behind-the-scenes lobbying by the prince should not be used to skew the course of an open and democratic planning process that is under way."

The parties urged that the Westminster planning committee be permitted to reach their decision without interference. "Rogers and his team have played their part in engaging with the democratic process. The prince and his advisors should do the same." If the prince wished to "comment on the design of this or any other project, we urge him to do so through the established planning consultation processes."

As things transpired, this was not to be. God, on this occasion, was not on the side of Rogers and his team, and Qatari Diyar, with links to the Qatari Royal family, duly withdrew the design.

In terms of architectural visions, Charles can point to Poundbury, his own faux-18th century, anti-modernist village project in Dorset, replete with its own stunning anachronisms. To aid his building projects in the Duchy of Cornwall, the prince secured the services of Léon Krier, a devotee of Nazi Germany's chief architect and armaments minister, Albert Speer. Krier was a perfect foil to Charles, both wishing to impose the re-invented past, in some form, on the present. It should then come as little surprise that Poundbury's realisation was of a project described by Stephen Bayley as "fake, heartless, authoritarian and grimly cute."

As a constitutional monarch, Charles may well have to shield the more combative side of his interventionist approach to policy. His fields of interest – in terms of hectoring officials to get his way – are many, a point revealed in the Black Spider Memos. The 27 letters he authored to various government departments between late 2004 and early 2005 point to an individual very much at ease with being a meddler. For a man who hates carbuncles, he is very willing for the world to have a few of his own.

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