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New culture secretary says PFI will not compromise good design and praises 'uplifting' nature of beautiful buildings

Jowell makes PFI pledge

Robert Booth

The new culture secretary Tessa Jowell pledged this week to defend design quality in private finance initiative procured public buildings.

In an exclusive interview with *BD* after just a week in office, Jowell promised to carry on the policy of her predecessor, Chris Smith, who ordered a pre-election rethink of the rules for awarding PFI contracts.

Asked if she would tackle fears that PFI rules are jeopardising the design quality of hundreds of new school and hospital buildings, as well as the involvement of local architects, she said: "I would want to pursue that and



Norman Foster with culture secretary Tessa Jowell at the launch of Architecture Week. Photo: Brian Benson.

ensure that PFI, which is a highly effective way of funding desperately needed buildings, should not mean you compromise your standards of good design."

The pledge from the minister responsible for architecture was

welcomed by RIBA president-elect Paul Hyett, who was recently asked by Smith to report on the problem. "I welcome her arrival on the scene," he said. "Selecting the right architect on PFI deals, either locally or from

further afield, is a crucial issue for communities for their self-expression."

Officials close to Jowell stressed that although her top priorities in the job will be ensuring "something happens" at Wembley and avoiding further controversy over the lottery, she is already aware of the concern about the impact of PFI among architects.

But if the minister pursues her concern, the issue could set her on a collision course with the Treasury which sets the rules on the procurement of government buildings.

Jowell, 53, who used to be a psychiatric social worker before becoming an MP, also stressed

the uplifting power of public buildings. "I think we have made clear that good design is good, not just for functional reasons, but also for the spirit," she said. "What a difference a beautiful space or a beautiful building can make in areas where people can feel ground down by the drudgery of their lives. To go to a new school or health centre is uplifting."

Jowell said her favourite building was Foster's Great Court scheme at the British Museum. "If I was to spend 10 minutes anywhere I would go to the Great Court. It is just the sense of being in that space."

She also mentioned Kew Gardens, parts of the House of Com-

mons and the Lowry Centre in Manchester as other favourites.

Speaking later at the launch of Architecture Week, Jowell highlighted her concerns at the dearth of female architects, saying that while there were plenty of male role models for children such as Bob the Builder, there was also a place for a few more "Alison the Architects".

And she has also suggested that good architecture can even increase election turnouts.

"In my own constituency [Dulwich & West Norwood], the lowest turnout was on the most run-down estates," she said. "It has been revamped, redesigned and this time the turnout was much better."

Queen's speech snub to cities bill

An urban regeneration bill to follow last year's white paper will not be tabled in this new parliamentary session, after this week's Queen's speech identified the government's legislative priorities as education, health and crime.

The omission was lamented by RIBA president Marco Goldschmied, who expressed disappointment at the decision: "The quality of our built environment plays as important a role as tough policies on law and order in preventing crime and encouraging tolerance. It is disappointing that the government has not used this opportunity to introduce an urban regeneration bill that

would have cemented the work of the Urban Task Force."

The anticipated overhaul of the planning system was also put on hold. The government intends to publish a green paper on the subject this autumn but changes would require new legislation, which was not included in the speech, and seems unlikely to get parliamentary time before 2003.

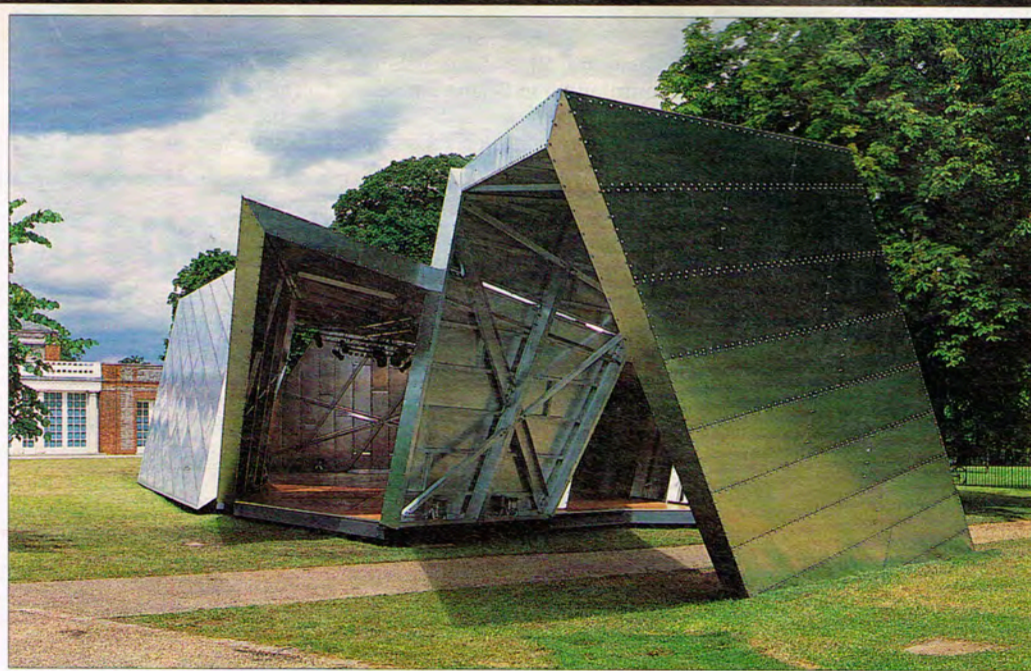
The proposals include changing planning procedures so parliament rather than public enquiries would decide whether major infrastructure projects should get the go-ahead. These would be downgraded to looking at the "detailed" or "local" issues.

Fears over insurance collapse

Insurance cover for at least 1,000 architects looks set to be hit by the collapse of Independent Insurance which went into liquidation on Monday.

This week the RIBA advised architects across the country to check their professional indemnity insurance policies regardless of their broker. Those likely to be worst hit are architects who have outstanding claims. It is hoped that others will be able to transfer their cover to another insurer with little problem.

One broker, RIBA Insurance Agency, covers about a third of architects' policies, of which some 10% were with Independent.



The tumbling aluminium boxes of Daniel Libeskind's Eighteen Turns have been installed on the lawn of the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park, London. The 35m open-sided structure, the second in a series of architectural commissions planned by the gallery, will house a café and host a series of debates on urban design until September when the structure will be sold off. Eighteen Turns cost £120,000 to install. Photo: Morley von Sternberg.

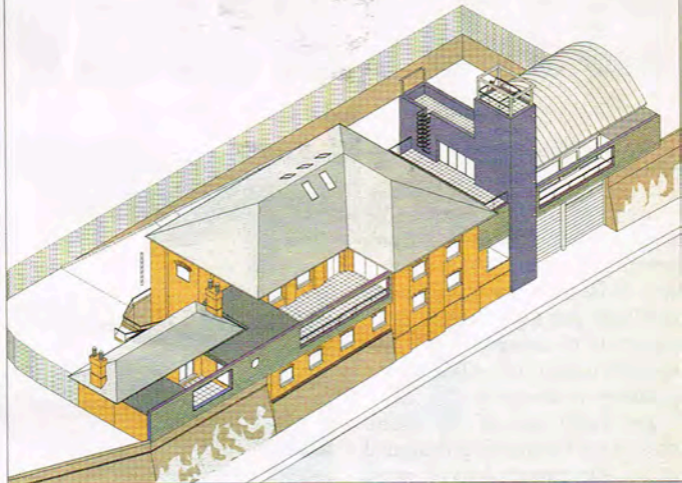


the art of spirals...



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Husband-and-wife team Theis & Khan has unveiled plans for its £2.2 million Jubilee Waterside Centre at King's Cross, London. The lottery-backed scheme involves the conversion and extension of a former brewery pumping station into an urban watersports centre. A wooden screen unifies the mixture of building types which front the canal, and a new abseiling tower will divide the new from the old structure. The project already has planning approval and goes out to tender next month.