

RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT

Democracy at the RIBA takes a new turn as ballot papers go out to members.

Graham Rimmer examines the radical shift and reviews the candidates.



This week, for the first time in 50 years, ballot papers have gone out from RIBA headquarters to all members in the vote for a new president of the institute. The occasion marks the end of half a century of tradition whereby the man selected by the institute's council was not opposed by any other member. The announcement five weeks ago of two last-minute candidatures put an end to all that.

The scene seemed to be set for an election that would rivet attention on a profession notorious for its eagerness to wash its linen in public.

But they, and the sensation seekers, have been disappointed. Issues of burning importance have been noticeable only by their absence.

Why then are the institute's hard-pressed funds being dented by the £3000 the election will cost?

The reasons behind the election are not being spelt out by the candidates. For the real cause is a challenge to the normal process of election of the presidency, which is being questioned for the first time in a decade.

The three candidates actually represent the aspirations of three contending groups within the institute and within council. Each sees the presidency in a different light.

The man whose "natural right" to succeed is being challenged is Andrew Derbyshire. He is the candidate of the mainstream establishment. He has been active in RIBA politics for over 20 years and is council's own choice for the post.

It is this aspect of his candidacy that has provoked the declaration of opposition. Rightly or wrongly, the ginger groups which back his opponents believe that an inner "magic circle" is selecting potential presidents, grooming them, and then presenting the membership with them as a *fait accompli*, and this, they say, is not good enough.

The recent crop of presidents, ranging from Alex Gordon, Gordon Graham and Fred Pooley to, currently, Bryan Jefferson, the radicals maintain are earnest, hard-working and committed to the institute. But they are not public figures. And they have begun to ask, is this enough? They ask; Do we want as president a man who has worked his way from branch committee to the national council and committees, almost certainly with the sole aim of

being president? Are there not other qualities for the presidency than a commitment which means you are prepared to spend almost three years full time in the institute's service?

On the point of what to do about it, the radicals separate, for they come from two different camps. The group which started the fuss, by persuading Owen Luder to stand on its behalf – headed by Michael Manser and Max Hutchinson – is a loose association of like-minded men who, while sharing the opinion that something had to be done, are unlikely to form a permanent grouping in the future.

They view the challenge to the system as being one of the most important aspects of the Luder campaign. For they know that in Luder they have a man who is in many ways the antithesis of those who have filled the presidential position in recent years.

A man who has had no little success in architectural and business terms with the practice that bears his name, Luder is nevertheless a wild card. Extrovert in a way that few architects are, he made his mark on institute affairs as a powerful treasurer who pulled the RIBA back from a disastrous overspending period.

But his forthright and

demanding presence in policy committee did not last long and he has since resumed his role as a purveyor of alternative ideas that have seemed to be too advanced for many of those who sit on council. Above all, for the radicals, he could make the presidency important in the eyes of the public again. They look for the institute to have an important place in affairs, and they see the presidency as a key element in achieving that aim.

For their part, the supporters of the third candidate, Jake Brown, are probably less concerned with the external aspects of the institute's affairs than with its internal health and its membership. Basically, the Brown candidature is supported by the Salaried Architects Group. Vigorous supporters of those architects who work at drawing boards rather than management desks, the SAGs look to a Brown presidency as a way to bring the institute back to its roots – the ordinary member.

Brown himself is a figure of great presence and undoubted intellectual ability. As an architect with the Greater London Council who still leads a design team he undoubtedly is able to speak for many disaffected members of the profession in both public and

private sectors. His candidacy was announced in haste in the wake of the announcement by Owen Luder. And the fact is that the SAGs have contemplated such a move for several years – only to be pre-empted by Luder.

The outcome of the election cannot be easily forecast – if only because no one has any experience of such an event happening before. The chances are that Derbyshire will succeed because, at the very least, the others would represent a step in the dark that many members will not wish to take.

A powerful argument being advanced in favour of the Derbyshire candidacy is indeed that he has been able to spend a year as senior vice-president preparing for the presidency and observing the workings of the Group of Eight.

Experience of high office apart, however, there is little to separate these candidates as achievers. Derbyshire is a senior partner with Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall, one of the largest British practices.

Luder heads his own practice and while he is some way from being an "architects' architect" has nevertheless gone some way to overcome his early image as a brash go-getter.

Brown for his part has chosen to immerse himself in his architecture and has become an acknowledged expert in the design of law courts. His work in the public sector has also been noticeable for the encouragement he has given to adventurous concepts for the dullest of public projects.

As personalities, however, they have little in common. Derbyshire is at heart a quiet man. An earnest rather than a captivating speaker, there is no doubting his good intentions.

Luder the extrovert has nevertheless shown himself to be a man unafraid to put forward unpopular ideas ahead of their time – often to be proved right in the long term. As he clearly enjoys the public gaze, the counterpoint is that he is a natural speaker.

For his part Brown has a public presence that few architects can match. His continuing problem is, however, that he addresses his audience rather as if he is verbalising a Fabian pamphlet. His saving grace is that when he speaks he often makes an incisive point – if his listeners can discern it.

Whether, as the radicals claim, RIBA politics are never going to be the same again is perhaps putting the case a little strongly but architects have once again proved to be a lively breed.

THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The three presidential candidates have differing views on the role of the president of the RIBA. This is how they explain them in excerpts from their election addresses:

Jake Brown

This election, a significant shift towards a more democratic leadership selection, results from widespread dissatisfaction with the style, pace and discernment of the institute's policy stances.

I see the president as a catalyst for analysis and action – a vital agent in reaffirming the essential social role of architecture. The RIBA council needs fresh impetus – as the first RIBA salaried architects' president I would involve members more directly while retaining a working architect role.

Andrew Derbyshire

I have served the RIBA in many capacities over the last 20 years and have seen it grow in authority as it has become more democratic. It is our collective voice on matters affecting architecture and the

profession through which we act to influence the often hostile forces around us.

... I was elected senior vice president last July by a Council drawn from all parts of the British Isles as their nominee for the presidency. Since then I have enjoyed the privilege of meeting many of the people inside and outside the profession with whom the president will have to work and learning about the issues with which he will have to deal in the difficult and challenging time ahead.

Owen Luder

The profession is at its lowest ebb. A strong president with clear objectives and authority from the membership is essential if architects are to begin to recover the position we have lost.

If I am elected, I will give top priority to the main role of the president promoting architects and architecture in every possible way. I have wide experience of promotion, public speaking, writing, radio and TV. My intention will be to close the gap between us and the public.