

If elected, RIBA presidential candidate Annette Fisher intends to back herself with corporate sponsorship and promises to challenge all preconceptions about the way the role of president should be carried out

by isabel allen. photograph by robert greshoff

fisher's price



RIBA president. While past presidents have used up savings, relied on a private income or been subsidised by their practice, Fisher is unabashed about petitioning others for financial support. Otherwise, she asks simply: 'How on earth am I supposed to do it?' She intends to approach a range of organisations, including client bodies and contractors, and is dismissive of the idea that this could compromise the integrity of the role: 'If I was paid by the RIBA, it could be very difficult if I had different views from them. Sponsorship, to me, is separate money.' Ideally, she argues, funds should be raised for the office rather than the individual, saying: 'If I've arranged

sponsorship but I'm not successful, there's no reason why that couldn't transfer to a different president.'

She is, however, confident of success. 'The nominations prove that people believe I can do it, and that they want me to do it.' She plans to woo the electorate with a four-pronged manifesto: increasing the profile of the RIBA; promoting the value of design; helping small practices; and encouraging diversity within the profession – issues which Fisher sees as interlinked: 'If the RIBA is more visible, it will make people ask, "Why haven't you asked an architect?" You want that question to be asked all the time.' Similarly, she argues: 'If you sell the value of

design you sell all architects, and architects will always be in work.'

For the strategy to work, she believes, both architects and clients are in need of re-education. She would like the RIBA to train members in running small businesses: 'I think the best value we can bring to the profession as a whole is to train architects to make a business effective: how to win work. And when you have the work, how to price it and how to make a profit. Profit is not a dirty word.'

This, she argues, is the only way to tackle the problem of low pay within the profession, but also an effective means of improving the service offered to clients: 'If we become better businessmen, we'll probably become better project managers as well.' Clients, in turn, have to learn that quality has to be paid for – 'that's always a battle. The vast majority are only driven by the nettable area' – and that 'if you deal with all the problems at the planning stage the rest will fall into place. The enlightened clients will pay properly for planning.'

Having served on the RIBA Council since 1999, and as current vice-president of communications, Fisher has had plenty of opportunity to observe the machinations of the RIBA. 'The frustrating thing is seeing how long it takes for anything to happen,' she says, 'Richard [Hastilow], Marco [Goldschmied], Paul [Hyett] – everything they've done has been about how to make the RIBA more fit for purpose. And that's exciting. It's just that, as with all these things, it takes time to filter through.'

Time is one thing which Fisher does not have. Aside from running her own practice, she is a single parent. Besides which, she says: 'I believe you have to give time to yourself, to your family, to friends.' Paul Hyett's *modus operandi* (a 60-70 hour working week allows him to combine three or four days of RIBA business with his duties as chairman of Ryder) is not for her.

'The presidential role is going to have to be more focussed. I don't have any hang-ups about holding onto things myself. I like to be kept informed, but I'm a great delegator,' she says. 'The good thing is that because I am different – and I prefer to use that word rather than mention gender or colour – people are going to expect me to act differently. I think I should capitalise on it and not try to conform. I'm not even going to try and do it the way anybody has done it before.'

people

When Annette Fisher announced her last-minute decision to stand for RIBA president, she took the profession by surprise. But few were quite as surprised as Fisher herself. 'I have to tell you, I was not thinking about doing this at all,' she says, adding that the idea did not cross her mind until she was called by journalists asking her whether or not she was likely to stand.

Encouragement from colleagues on the RIBA Council prompted a spur-of-the-moment decision to start garnering the mandatory 60 signatures of support. 'On Monday, I called the office and said: "Look, start faxing the forms," she recalls. 'By Wednesday lunchtime, we had 13 signatures, by Wednesday night, we were at 58, by mid morning Thursday, we had 72.'

As well as 17 signatures from Richard Rogers Partnership, there were more from – among others – Wilkinson Eyre, Hawkins/Brown, Bennetts Associates, Sheppard Robson, Patel Taylor and Penoyre and Prasad. She also has the support of more commercial practices including TP Bennett and Rolfe Judd, both of which once employed her.

Fisher speaks fondly of both practices, despite the fact that she left TP Bennett because 'there were seven partners – all male, of course – and I just couldn't see the potential for being more than a project architect'.

After a stint at Whinney Mackay-Lewis, she heard of Rolfe Judd as 'a practice which really encouraged women – which it did'. Within three months, she was running a £3 million refurbishment job, and when she became pregnant, it proved to be an exemplary employer, allowing Fisher to work flexible hours at home. She has also worked in the US and has run her own practices both in Nigeria and the UK. Her current practice, Fisher Associates, a five-year-old, seven-strong practice based in London's Chelsea, specialises in restaurants, offices and sports buildings.

Its first new-build project – a sports building on a green belt site in Hertfordshire – completes in June. Fisher is proud of her range of experience, saying: 'I want my practice to appeal to anybody. I don't want to just do black projects because I am a black person. That's not my background. My background has been in the commercial world.'

Which could explain her no-nonsense attitude towards funding the role of