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ANNETTE FISHER

IS THIS THE NEW FACE OF THE RIBA?



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Annette Fisher

This time next month, the RIBA could have a black woman as president, which would certainly be a change for an institution – and an industry – still dominated by white men. So, asks **Marcus Fairs**, who is Annette Fisher? Portrait by Ophelia Wynne

SOMETIMES SYMBOLS OF CHANGE ARE MORE important than change itself. When Halle Berry became the first black woman to win the best actress Oscar last month, her victory was a decisive sign that Hollywood was ready to march in step with the rest of society.

Winning the RIBA presidential race might not be in the same league as scooping an Oscar, but if Annette Fisher dons the venerable gold chain of office next month, it will be the first time a woman – let alone a black woman – has become president of a professional construction industry institute.

"If I win, it will be a huge symbol," says Annette Fisher. "Even putting the colour thing aside, if a woman were to win after 168 years of male RIBA presidents, it would be a bit like Maggie Thatcher becoming prime minister. And I'm not just a woman but a black woman, which would make it even more radical."

A winner will be announced in late May and early opinion polls have given Fisher, who has secured high-profile backers, including Will Alsop and past president Marco Goldschmied, a narrow lead. Observers predict a nail-bitingly close battle between her and Bristol architect George Ferguson (the third candidate, David Thorp of Birmingham, is trailing).

Yet Fisher, a 42-year-old single mother, is no radical outsider – she runs a small commercial practice and has sat on the RIBA council for three years. She is passionately interested in the minutiae of the institute's Byzantine bureaucracy and a sizeable chunk of her manifesto is devoted to its reform.

Fisher is campaigning on a broad range of issues and, although her manifesto does not mention her race and gender, she concedes they are central to her appeal. She admits that her standing in the polls is not so much because her policies are different: "It's because I'm different. As much as I may not jump on to the gender or race bandwagon, you can't get away from it. Some people have said, actually, the reason I'll vote for you is because you're female and you're black. They say it's about time, the RIBA is ready for change."

With women making up just 14% of

architects and ethnic minorities a risible 2%, Fisher believes the lack of role models is one of the main stumbling blocks to a more representative profession. "I've always said that if you want to attract different people into the profession, you have to have people who look like them at the top."

If successful, she hopes to instigate changes that will make it easier for others like her to follow in her footsteps. She wants presidents to be paid for their tenure; at present, they rely on their own private funds or the

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generosity of their employers to see them through the two-year stint. "This has meant the presidency has only ever come from those who can afford to do it," she says, perpetuating the "old boys network" that has for so long dominated the institute.

Fisher, a committed Christian, is warm and vivacious, breaking frequently into a wickedly joyous laugh. Her clothes express her confidence. Sharply suited by day, her

lace-and-leopard evening-wear turns heads at cosmopolitan engagements. "I like to be a bit risqué at night. There's nothing wrong with being feminine. I think my femininity is one of my most powerful assets."

Her parents are high-achieving West African professionals: her Nigerian father was a civil engineer and her mother, a lawyer from Sierra Leone. Born in Paisley, Scotland, she spent her formative years in Nigeria. She attended an international school in Lagos where, alongside children of 60 nationalities, she was taught to accept and celebrate racial differences.

She fell in love with architecture at the age of 15. "I was just mesmerised by the drawings," she says, "and thought I'd really like to draw like that." Returning to the UK, she studied architecture at Bath and Strathclyde universities and worked in the UK and the US before setting up Fisher Associates in 1997.

The Chelsea-based practice is unashamedly commercial and she claims the demands of setting up in business forced her to become more outgoing. "I used to be quite shy. But in business you'll starve if you're shy. You have to project. I've had to overcome any reticence in speaking to people."

Over the next few weeks, Fisher will be working her charm around the country to garner the votes she needs. She senses she's in with a chance of making history. "It's a very positive response that I'm getting. I don't know if it'll be enough to win, but it just might be."

The other contenders

David Thorp

The 42-year-old from Birmingham is the champion of the small practitioner who believes the cult of star architects is damaging to their less well-known colleagues. He will increase support for small firms and promote their skills to the public.

George Ferguson

The high-profile director of Bristol practice Ferguson Mann is the defender of regional design character, campaigning against centralisation and promising a higher media profile for the profession.

All three candidates' full statements are at: www.architecture.com.

