

**RIBA election** » A female moderniser ruffles the establishment with radical ideas for a 'sponsored' president of the institute

# Power struggle rocks architecture



By James Morrison

She is a moderniser, a single mother with a taste for designer tailoring and a penchant for snappy soundbites. He is the perfect establishment figure, a sober-suited 50-something with a 30-year background in urban design.

Together they have plunged the Royal Institute of British Architects into a dispute that bears the hallmarks of the rows over "cash-for-favours" and "cronyism" that engulfed New Labour.

In a move that many of her colleagues have condemned as a threat to the integrity of their profession, Annette Fisher is asking architectural and construction firms to "sponsor" her campaign to become RIBA president. This has

angered opponents in her profession, including her main rival for the presidency, George Ferguson, who describes her ideas as "dangerous".

Ms Fisher, 42, confirms she has approached "all kinds of companies" with a view to securing funding or "support in kind" in the run-up to the election for the presidency later this month. And far from repenting in the face of her critics, Ms Fisher has pledged to go even further if she is voted in. In an attempt to "democratise" the 168-year-old institute, challenging the "old boys' network" she claims has traditionally held sway, she is calling for the introduction of "sponsored presidents".

Her opponents, including the veteran Bristol-based architect George Ferguson, have branded her ideas



Annette Fisher has the support of Marco Goldschmied, left, and is up against George Ferguson, right



"dangerous". They argue that, by seeking donations from companies with a vested interest in influencing RIBA policy, candidates risk sacrificing their independence.

Ms Fisher, who has 17 years' experience as an architect, maintains her motives are

honourable. The presidency, she says, is the province of "the rich and the retired", as the post is unpaid and requires such commitment it is open only to those who no longer have to work for a living.

If elected, Ms Fisher would become both the first woman

and the first black person to hold the two-year presidency.

Ms Fisher, who has vowed to publish full details of any help she receives from corporate sponsors once her campaign is over, last night insisted no money had yet changed hands. But she added: "There are costs involved and I expect to receive help in due course."

She said: "RIBA has always been dominated by an old boy network. "We want to make the office more dynamic, but to do that we have been open about saying we require support. Officially, sponsorship is a new idea, but in reality it has been there for a long time, because those who run the biggest firms are effectively sponsoring themselves." She added that she would be happy for "presidential sponsorship" to take the form of support for

the office itself, rather than the individuals who hold it.

Ms Fisher counts among her backers former president Marco Goldschmied. But her plans have encountered stiff opposition. In a letter to *Building Design*, Mr Ferguson said "what Ms Fisher was trying to do was dangerous, adding: "I would prefer to lose fighting clean than win fighting dirty."

Former president David Rock said sponsorship was "a dreadful idea". "Even if you are strong-minded, you are almost bound to be swayed by the fact that a company has given you, say, £10,000," he said.

An RIBA spokeswoman said candidate sponsorship was not against the existing code of conduct, but confirmed that presidents were precluded from deriving any "financial gain" from their positions.