

Brady: 'The RIBA is in a better place ... I gave the institute great publicity on a world stage'

Outgoing RIBA president Angela Brady talks to *Richard Waite* about Olympic marketing madness, tweeting, and the highs and lows of her two-year tenure

What were the highlights of your presidency?

Making a difference with our campaigns. Showing that the RIBA has teeth and is prepared to use them. I really loved showing off the work of our brilliant UK architects on a world stage and London 2012 was great for this. **What were the most important things you achieved?**

I campaigned on three major themes. 1) Procurement reform: the campaign was headed by Walter Menteth, who deserves a medal for his tireless work. We've made huge progress on improving procurement procedures and the legislation about to be released is down to our group championing better systems for a fairer process. 2) Internationalising the RIBA: The institute has not previously given enough thought to international opportunities and in a time of recession I saw it as essential to find work overseas for our skilled architects. The highlights were launching the Hong Kong Chapter and the Chongqing Forum and there are three others in China in the pipeline. To hear Marco Goldschmied say: 'The recent China mission was the best thing the RIBA ever did' made me smile – even if it was a bit tongue in cheek. 3) Bringing architecture to the public. I've have been up and down this country and round the world promoting this theme. It is so important that architects don't just talk in code among themselves but showcase



SIMON DEWURST PHOTOGRAPHY

their skills and achievements to the wider world and show what value they can bring to the public. On top of this I supported our students and women in architecture, making sure all my panels were 50-50; promoted diversity in our profession and helped to save historic buildings at risk, for example Ancoats Dispensary has now a great chance of a new life and the Save Preston Bus Station campaign awaits an imminent, hopefully positive, outcome. **What was the low point?**

When the International Olympic Committee lawyer told me – in a loud forceful and litigious manner – that I couldn't show my film *Designing for Champions* about the great buildings made for London 2012 until I took out all references to the Olympics. Luckily the Paralympics people are the opposite and we are working on ideas for a great celebration film. Our #Droptheban campaign [against the ban on design and construction firms from advertising their association with the Games]

rattled a few cages, and rightly so. **Do you think you were as revolutionary as you'd hoped?**

I knew the role would have limitations before I started. Fomenting a revolution at the RIBA would be like getting Tunbridge Wells to vote Labour. Revolution was never on the cards.

Were your aims too ambitious for a two-year stint?

I'd have liked to have made more progress in getting the RIBA to be more focused on small and medium-sized practices. There is a general perception among members that policy and RIBA activities favour the large practices, as was illustrated by the last Benchmarking survey and the RIBA responses to it.

If you had the term again, would you do anything differently?

No. I gave it my best shot and I have had fabulous support from many people who have given huge amounts of time and effort and really got behind our campaigns.

What advice would you give to incoming president Stephen Hodder?

Be outward-looking; champion the profession to the world at large and the value we can bring to people's lives; get onto Twitter as soon as possible.

What will you miss?

Absolutely nothing. I knew it was a two-year stint and I gave it my all as a full-time job. I do hope the next president after Stephen gets paid. I will miss having a brilliant PA, though.



In what kind of health do you think you've left the RIBA and what needs to be tackled next?

I think RIBA is in a better place. A lot of people who did not know the institute have engaged with it. I gave the RIBA great publicity on a world stage. There will always be a list of urgent issues to tackle but the issue of governance and who exactly is making policy decisions – the board, the council or the officers – needs to be resolved.

Do you still foresee the future of UK architecture overseas?

One thing I picked up loud and clear during my travels is that British architects are very highly regarded and in demand overseas, which is a great opportunity for us all. So, yes, I see a very bright future for UK architecture overseas.

Is it true you'd like a role as the RIBA's ambassador to China, and have you found any work out there yourself?

Yes. I stated this in my goodbye

'The issue of governance and who exactly is making policy decisions needs to be resolved'

video to the council. It is a part of the president's role I have particularly enjoyed and I have been very well received there. I generally get on well with people. Not having a stiff upper lip helps. In Vietnam, the British Council made me one of their ambassadors for innovation and design and in Qingdao I am a special advisor in urban design. I first went to China 10 years ago with the DiverseCity exhibition with Architects for Change, which I brought to 14 other cities worldwide – and which is the most travelled RIBA exhibition ever, eventually showing in 34 cities.

Will you miss the media attention?

I have many irons in the fire, which will keep me in the public eye. I am currently working on a three-part, one-hour documentary TV series on Irish architecture. I have 10 years' TV experience already and I enjoy bringing architecture to the public on TV. I can also now go back to being myself and not having to worry about RIBA 'reputational damage' every time I speak.

How do you want people to remember you?

As a campaigner who had the vision to see beyond the ordinary and mundane. ■

AROUND THE PROFESSION: ARCHITECTS ON BRADY

Yasmin Shariff, national councillor

'Brady worked really hard to give the RIBA a high profile nationally at the Olympics and internationally in China. Her frustrations with Portland Place did not come out in public and she gave the RIBA a positive profile with the general media.'

Piers Taylor, Invisible Studio

'I haven't got the faintest idea what she did as RIBA president. More, it throws into relief the increasing irrelevance of the RIBA – a bunch of conservative practitioners twiddling at the edges of an inconsequential, enervated, devitalised and antediluvian institution more concerned with its own vacuous actuality than providing a useful framework for architecture or contributing usefully to any debate on practice or education.'

Alistair Barr, Barr Gazetas

'We're a practice with 50 per cent female architects and we all voted for Brady, who brilliantly fulfilled her promise to champion architects. Her presidency reinforced her mantra that "women and men together make the best architecture". Now we should acknowledge that being president is a full-time job and pay all future incumbents a proper salary.'

Simon Gill, Simon Gill Architects

'There have been good initiatives under her presidency – for example the Homewise campaign – but it will always be a problem that the two-year tenure is too short to really see many things through, particularly given the kind of rottweiler-like tenacity

it takes to make any kind of impression on government policy.'

Maggie Mullan, Austin-Smith-Lord

'Our feeling from the provinces is: "Who is Angela Brady?" She may have performed well in her own manor, but we didn't feel the warmth and direction of leadership from Portland Place during her term. That's why as a practice we have backed and personally endorsed Stephen Hodder for president. It is about time Portland Place had a reality check about the situation its members outside the M25 find themselves in.'

Steven Harding, former RIBA head of public affairs

'When Brady took over the institute was quite introspective. Her strength as a communicator has been to make it much more outward-facing and make it more of a campaigning body. She has done what she said she would do.'

Markus Jatsch, Markus Jatsch Partners

'Brady did a good job in promoting the RIBA internationally and creating connections in other countries. This is a good basis for UK practices to get more work abroad and make new client connections.'

Alex Mowat, Urban Salon

'The best achievement in this presidency might turn out to be the campaign against exploiting architecture students as unpaid interns. In a world where further education is increasingly expensive, we should strive for fair treatment for people training as architects or simply studying the discipline. It is a campaign RIBA needs to keep promoting.'