

Playing safe

Britain is in the middle of one of the biggest building booms in recent history. The global financial crisis may take the steam out of the overheated economy, but the government's determination to press ahead with its massive programme of new schools and health buildings appears undimmed. This ought to be good news for architecture, but in a society increasingly averse to risk the prospects appear less rosy.

Commissions such as primary schools or small health care facilities that once allowed young practices to cut their teeth are now farmed out in job lots to corporate practices with the requisite track record and resources, while practices of all shapes and sizes are confronted by a proliferation of warranties, 'value engineering' and new forms of contract that, by devolving design responsibility – and hence risk – to subcontractors, appear almost calculated to discourage innovation.

Reading Barnabas Calder's paper on Denys Lasdun's early 'battle with architecture' (pp. 59–68) one cannot help but wonder how differently his career might have developed in today's climate. The young Lasdun appears surprisingly eclectic, even rash, in his experimentation with different elements of the modernist canon, and this playful process of trying new things was clearly crucial in enabling his style to mature so quickly.

Such 'serious play' is echoed in Radford and Cawthorne's investigation into Lutyens (pp. 69–85) who was, according to one of his biographers, 'part schoolboy, part great artist, part mystic' – a description that might equally well apply to Le Corbusier. Lutyens' love of verbal puns and 'vivreaitions' (cartoons) are perhaps the best known aspects of his personality, and like many with a gift for mathematics, he was attracted to puzzles of all kinds – which Radford and Cawthorne link convincingly to the profound and complex number games characteristic of his work.

In *Homo Ludens* Johan Huizinga famously argued that all 'the great instinctive forces of civilized life' are 'rooted in the primeval soil of play' and the astronomer Johannes Kepler, attempting to explain the intricate form of 'The Six-Cornered Snowflake', went so far as to suggest that Nature herself was in the habit of creatively 'playing with the passing moment'. Nature's apparent playfulness has been a perennial model for artists and designers, and creative risk-taking drives both artistic development and, seen in human terms, natural evolution.

The government's determination to limit financial and other risks may appear an essential part of its duty, but by drastically curtailing the opportunities for small, creative practices to contribute to the school and health building programmes it risks an homogenisation as depressing as that which resulted from its predecessors' commitment to the supposed economies of system-building.

THE EDITORS