

- VIRTUS EDITORIAL -

PURSUING EXCELLENCE IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

My love affair with Edinburgh's architecture began in 2000. At the time I was in my early twenties and working with my father's contracting business in Verona, in the northern powerhouse Veneto region home to some of the most beautiful architecture Italy has produced, from Roman amphitheatres to Medieval towns and Palladian villas.

Since moving to Scotland, no conversation with developers, architects or industry colleagues goes by without a reference by them to, and admiration for, the beauty of the natural and built environment of my country of origin. Sometimes a question, asked with genuine interest and some perplexity, follows: why Edinburgh? The reason is to be found in the feeling that embraces you when you start noticing its impressive and elegant architecture, the proportions of the buildings, the type of materials used and the balance of its urban realm, culminating in that sensation of being in a city 'a misura d'uomo,' on a human scale.

Almost twenty years later, Edinburgh has proven to be the perfect habitat for a young man aspiring to a career in project management, for the valuable opportunities to work with many talented industry colleagues on modern and traditional buildings. There is immense value, not to be underestimated, in the ongoing exchange of ideas, best practice and lessons learnt, project after project, in the common pursuit of excellence in our professional fields. The sometimes arduous but rewarding journey we have to embark on as we encounter, debate and resolve differing point of views, is the stimulus that keeps most of us eager to learn, hopefully a bit wiser as time goes by and sometimes even proud of what we have achieved collectively.

The idea to create this publication, Virtus, was the natural continuation and the next node in the network of our linked and expanding knowledge and experiences. A review dedicated to the built environment, its contemporary issues, urgencies, best practice and its people; able to go beyond the vertical knowledge, egocentricity and focus of the



individual experience of a single profession; aiming instead for the interdisciplinary knowledge, cooperative nature and multifaceted experiences of all the professions and parties involved in the creation, development and delivery of projects. A review that pursues excellence, in the form of contributions and expertise from industry colleagues, developers and consultants, as well as enabling organisations, contractors and ultimately us as the wider society. A review for those diligent observers of today's urgent issues in our built environment, with the need to understand it in its present state and to identify the early signs of what it needs to become; it is that moment capturing the awareness of where we are and the perception of where we need to be, that attracts the interest of Virtus and the imagination of its contributors.

Born as a collective project with contributions from a number of industry colleagues and organisations, Virtus owes its name to the Latin word for virtue; an homage to Palladio, who embraced and promoted its meaning of excellence and good deeds, to be pursued for the accomplishment of the well-rounded individual. Whether part of a client organisation, a professional practice or a project team, we all have a moral and professional obligation to strive for excellence. It is expected of us. Excellence can take many shapes and forms, but to achieve it we must be dedicated and prepared to commit to a desire for learning, to exchanging knowledge with others, to working within ethical boundaries and to identifying opportunities for improvements no matter how marginal.

Collectively we need a critical analysis of our time, to understand if what is produced in our built environment fulfils society's needs and reflects how we live today.

In countries like the UK with increasing demand for new housing stock, are we dedicating enough time and efforts to the masterplanning of available land, in addition to the redevelopment of existing buildings and the sporadic addition

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of new developments in tight city centre locations? There are lessons we can learn by sharing best practice, the latest ideas, innovations and construction methods with other countries. In the context of a fast-evolving society and a construction industry notoriously slow at introducing and adapting to new technology, as well as the use of new materials, is the type of home being offered today by house builders and developers acceptable in terms of utility, durability and beauty? When one or more of these three elements is sacrificed for profit, does a fourth, dignity, still stand? Conversely, why aren't home buyers knowledgeable enough to understand what they are buying, letting builders get away with shoddy refurbishments of a standard that would not be acceptable in other countries? We should pay attention to foreign investors' dismay at the embarrassing state of disrepair and poor quality of some of the building stock being offered to them.

These are issues increasingly more relevant, at a time when the size and volume of the average new home is getting smaller and in an unregulated construction industry where anyone can call themselves a builder and make serial profits with cheap, tasteless and unfinished makeovers at the expense of inexperienced buyers relying on questionable home reports.

Some of my industry colleagues argue that excellence starts with the end users: if their expectations are low, there will always be opportunities for substandard ways of working; others that excellence is driven by the individual's innate desire to improve themselves, regardless of what others may expect. Both are valid arguments. In any case, our education system should do more to prepare those young minds who, one day, will be the end users as well as the professionals working in the industry. A culture that teaches the appreciation of quality and, importantly, the appreciation of the efforts required to achieve it, should be part of the curriculum from primary school to university. It may also help to reduce the requests and expectations



of some individuals and organisations that consultants, particularly architects, should work speculatively in the early stages of a project; an issue that is brought up constantly by industry colleagues and that should be tackled by the various chartered institutes and associations.

If we are to pursue excellence as a core value, the efforts required to achieve it should be understood and valued by all concerned, from clients commissioning the work, through to the designers, consultants, contractors and end users. A culture aiming for excellence is a culture that values knowledge, experience and professionalism, that is mindful of our built environment, sympathetic towards its heritage and inspired by the opportunity to provide solutions to new challenges.

Improving our knowledge, experience and professionalism takes time though. In a multi-tasking and networked society characterised by communication enhancing technologies, increasing interruptions and ever reducing attention spans, information and data require to be understood and processed quickly; a skill that is becoming increasingly more valuable. Some professions might find themselves competing against the growth of Artificial Intelligence applications in the not too distant future. Until then, the importance of cohesive and highly performing project teams will have the upper hand, providing creativity and the ability to generate optimal solutions remain human priorities; from the design ability of an architect to the craftsmanship and ancient skills of a stonemason repairing the capital of a Corinthian column. These are some of the issues Virtus will address in its pages, starting with this first volume.

In my debut as an editor, a role which I have discovered has many similarities to my day to day project management profession, I would like to thank all the contributors and organisations who have taken part in this first volume with such enthusiasm and commitment. The hope is that the result will do them justice.

Alex Crovetti
Editor

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