

## Quality matters

This double-issue of **arq** marks a minor landmark in the journal's short history: after publishing twelve issues in the last two years we are finally able to return to the quarterly schedule embodied in our title. It is also the last to appear before the UK government's quinquennial national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) grinds towards its final phase. Five years ago, it was good enough for the best work, like the 'best' universities, to be merely excellent. This time around, nothing short of world-class work, we are advised, will secure for the lucky few the top four-star rating.

In academe, as almost everywhere else in contemporary life, the rhetoric of quality is inescapable. When we planned a conference at Cardiff University on the theme of 'quality', from which several papers in this issue are drawn, your editor – being old enough to have read Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* when it was still moderately warm from the press – hoped for meditations on the quality of quality. Happily, the deliberately open-ended, cross-disciplinary approach did produce some unexpected and telling juxtapositions.

We anticipated submissions on 'quality management' in the construction industry (and weren't disappointed), but it came as a complete surprise to discover, from Matthew Cohen's paper (pp 276–289), how Renaissance architects and patrons faced similar problems of 'time management'. We also hoped for analyses of the dilemmas of making judgements of quality in a field as complex, and public, as architecture – and happily Igea Troiani (pp 291–299) rose to the challenge. Few buildings illustrate this issue better than James Stirling's Florey Building, directions to which were at one time most readily elicited by asking for 'the ugliest building in Oxford': the problematic nature of such judgements of quality will doubtless be exercising the minds of the RAE panels.

Variouly assured, measured and managed, 'quality' has been absorbed into the corporate-speak that dominates public discourse and, in the process, the word is in danger of being emptied of useful content. But from making regulation-compliant 'traditional' stone walls on Orkney (pp 198–208) to the digital 'crafting' of reinforced concrete (pp 210–222), achieving 'quality' remains a central challenge of practice. And could it be, as Pirsig seemed to be hinting back in the dim and distant era of apparently unlimited oil and growth, that societies and economies grounded in a concern with the quality of things, rather than with ever-accelerating consumption, might offer a sounder foundation for living the good life? In British universities, of course, the academic good life rests in no small measure on the funding that flows from the RAE. But the results of that are still several issues of **arq** away, which we will endeavour to deliver on time and with assured quality.

THE EDITORS

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