

## Quality Matters

There can hardly be a more appropriate time than now, in the wake of the Biche School Affair, to advocate quality over expediency for the design and procurement of public buildings. Surely the message is there to be heard by all – that mediocrity in our public buildings will no longer do, that all buildings should pass a quality threshold and that lowest cost is no longer the default option for those procuring public buildings. Value is the key concept – which does not equate with the lowest costs per square foot for hastily conceived projects, but for inspirational solutions and efficient use of time and human resources.

Design represents less than 1% of the lifetime cost of a building – but done well it has a disproportionate impact on how well the building, its users and its surroundings perform. High quality architecture helps deliver high performance in a cost effective manner – resulting in a good looking and better-functioning buildings that will deliver cash savings over the medium to long term. Surely the evidence is there when the ex Minister of Finance admits that, in his opinion, good judgement gave way to expediency for the hasty erection of Biche School on a geological fault line. This is not an isolated phenomenon – it is a symptom of the short-termism which is destroying the fabric of our towns and countryside.

In all the recent print about the schools programme and the best way to achieve their construction there is very little debate about a vision for schools in Trinidad and Tobago. We all agree that education is key to overcoming ignorance, poverty and inequality, but what do the designs for these schools express about self fulfillment, learning and equality of opportunity? Isn't the building of these schools an opportunity to reassess what functions these schools are supposed to accommodate and how they relate to each other from first principles? For the teachers, the students, the parents and the architects these issues are fundamental.

In terms of the tendering process – both for the selection of the design team and the selection of the contractor – we should remind ourselves that the primary aim of these processes is to achieve value for taxpayers money and not just the cheapest solution. If the fees for the entire design team are set at the lowest level, then the time and resources spent on the design concept are minimized. This practically eliminates the opportunity for developing innovative solutions for design, structure and services which enhance the enjoyment and efficient functioning of a building as well as minimizing the running and maintenance costs.

If no value is attributed to design by our society then how can our buildings improve?

Good design is about making buildings attractive to look at, to live in and to work in. It adds value economically, socially and environmentally to our communities, it enhances performance for the occupants, it reduces health and safety risks to those involved in building and using the facilities, it helps to nurture regeneration and it offers a better return for investors i.e. the public.

It is in the built environment that we make manifest what we stand for as a society. Now is the time to create a forum for discussion to raise consciousness about the impact of design and to demonstrate how high quality architecture can contribute positively to this country's future development.

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