

We must learn to build a better Britain

Have you been to the new Westfield Shopping Centre in Shepherd's Bush, opened amid much hoopla a few weeks ago? I hadn't until yesterday. From the pictures, it looked ghastly. Then I thought I better go and see it for myself, and I wish I could tell you that the earth moved. It didn't.

Architecturally, it's a kind of decorated aircraft hangar, with acres of marble flooring that make my feet ache just to look at them. I would rather spend an afternoon on the Arctic tundra in my underpants than suffer an hour's consumerism in the architectural vacancy of Westfield.

A while ago, I might not have said as much. In the British way, I was prepared to put up with the mediocrity of so much of our built environment, because that is how we do it these days. We have some of the best architects in the world. Norman Foster bestrides his profession like a titan. But even Foster cannot be everywhere, and the buildings that are not brushed by the hem of such greatness are

almost universally dire. No doubt foreign visitors have been laughing up their sleeves at our built gaucheries for ages, much as the French have always scoffed at our cooking and the Latins have lampooned our John Sergeantish presence on the dance floor. Now one of them – Andres Duany, favoured by the Prince of Wales – has come out and said something. Most modern architecture in Britain stinks.

Well, he didn't quite put it like that. We Brits can still claim the ascendancy in grammar. "Anything that is overly large," drawls Duaney, "impacts the city negatively."

Revile the syntax if you will, but we understand what he means, because negatively impacted cities are our stock in trade. Like some snivelling addict, we know that architecture of this kind is wrong, but we keep on doing it.

Edinburgh, the most beautiful of all our cities, is garrotted by a necklace of hideous retail sheds. Drive towards the City of London from Kent and you might feel you were in the Bronx. Hereford has



The standard of modern architecture, as typified by the Westfield shopping centre, is appalling, says
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been destroyed by a ring road. As for Swindon, Poole or Cumbernauld – it's unkind to mention them. Presumably the planners didn't expect those towns to be inhabited by human beings, because they don't appear to have been designed for them.

"Not only are they prone to failure," observes Duany of Britain's glorious new buildings, "but they're incredibly boring." Oh play that clip again.

Let the words be incised in stone and put above the entrance to every architectural school in the land. May everyone responsible for commissioning new buildings – yes, volume house builders, I'm thinking of you: you've got a bit of time on your hands at the moment – apply for a licence in aesthetics, before being let loose on our towns and countryside.

As for the planners, gather every one of them together, and compel them and their families to live for a year in one of the miserable housing estates which they have allowed to deface this fair land: I can think of some on the outskirts

of Kettering which would do nicely. Then they would realise the evil of constructing 21st-century starter homes to lower standards than those of a 1930s council house.

I'm not against modern architecture. Architects such as John McAslan, Eric Parry and Hugh Petter will inherit the Foster mantle and wear it nobly. But these are – or soon will be – the grandees. The great mass of building in Britain is beneath their notice. They and their like are never asked so much as to look at it. Ultimately, that's down to us: the public. We aren't an instinctively visual nation like the Italians. Traditionally, our top schools have been good at producing classicists and rugger players, not aesthetes. We need to open our eyes. Otherwise, expect inelegantly spoken Americans such as Duaney to come and open them for us.

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