

"CONTEMPORARY CRAFT; HISTORIC CONTENT"

Pam Alexander, Chief Executive, English Heritage

The following is an abridged version of the speech delivered at Glaziers' Hall on the occasion of the Annual Prize Giving on 20th May this year. As it was considered by many of those present to be an important statement by English Heritage, we have obtained permission to reprint it in this form, for the benefit of our members, in the hope that it will promote informed debate.

Our work at English Heritage is all about the management of change in such a way as to preserve and enhance quality and "sense of place". We are keen to emphasise the positive value of Conservation-led Regeneration to urban renaissance and rural renewal. The revitalisation of our historic towns, cities and buildings is complex and challenging, but also extremely rewarding. We are an organisation that looks both ways - back to the past and forward to the future, and it is our policy wherever we can to synergise the meeting point of the two. We support the importance of innovative new design - representing a continuity with the enormous creativity of our predecessors.

The character and confidence of previous generations is expressed eloquently in the historic buildings they created, re-constructed and added to, to meet the exigencies of their time, much as us changing our historic environment to meet present day requirements. Glass has always been part of this changing world and has responded to development in technology, as well as changes in taste and patronage. We are here tonight to share and enjoy the dynamic creativity of a new generation of artists and craftsmen working in this remarkably flexible medium. It is a particular pleasure for me, and for English Heritage, that the outcome will be a new addition to an historic building.

At the beginning of the century, the great Arts and Crafts architect W R Lethaby prefaced Christopher Whall's *Stained Glass Work* with the opinion that:

"Glass painting has been and is capable of again becoming one of the most noble forms of art

"It holds a supreme position in its association with architecture.....

"It is probable that more consideration will be given this century than the last to Design and Workmanship".

It is interesting to speculate which architect today would be in a similar position to introduce - say- Patrick Reyntiens's book, and what he or she would write about our expectations of "Creative architectural glass" in the next century! From the designs we have seen here tonight we can only have Great Expectations of the 21st century. Glass is an extraordinary medium to use creatively. The way it is worked has an enormous impact on the character of its surroundings. It is a complex contradiction:

fragile yet forged by fire;

physically a super-cooled liquid but stable and static;

with two sides of quite different character - internally it can transform the quality of light inside a building - externally it can affect the whole of an elevation:

it transmits messages about cost, culture, status and charm:

it has a life apart from its original context and can be relocated in an unexpected variety of spaces and places;

it can survive fire, burial, indifference, changes of taste and patronage;

it can be one way and concealing; reflective and flamboyant; or bullet proof to save lives;

its technological advances have completely transformed the design of and possibilities for buildings both inside and out.

The development of windows was made possible by the invention of glass and their impact on architecture has been enormous. You can change the very character of a building by changing its windows - windows are the eyes of a building:

buildings look dead and forlorn bereft of glass in their windows; broken and neglected windows signal a building in distress and often cause the vandalism of it;

blinded windows provoke the natural desire to open them again; their absence can bleaken and depress;

their inappropriate replacement can devalue and destroy - how many Victorian terraces have lost their character and charm to PVC and metal frames, despite the preservation of all other historic fabric;

windows can direct and enhance interactions between buildings and landscape - windows can focus on the world or exclude it.

Quality

English Heritage shares with the Glaziers Company and with the Birmingham Assay Office a passionate concern to identify, maintain and promote quality and standards of excellence in our respective worlds.

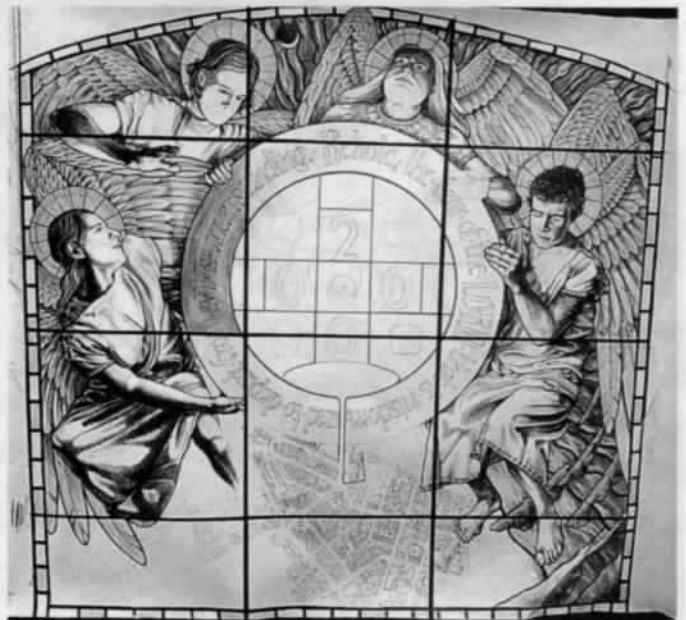
We all know what quality means and we like to think that we can recognise it when we see it, taste it, feel it or hear it.

What does it mean for glass? How does it involve English Heritage? We have a particular interest in the quality of materials, workmanship and design used in historic buildings:

Materials, workmanship and design

We use our grants, expertise and influence to ensure the right traditional materials of good quality are used rather than cheaper short-term lower-quality expedients.

We have joined forces with enterprising entrepreneurs to bring back the lost art of spinning crown glass so it can again scintillate in the grand and humble 18c houses. Alas, the blowers cannot achieve the consistency of quality essential to supply the hungry market, and Crown glass is therefore still just as irreplaceable as earlier hand-made historic window glass. We seek to make sure that custodians and owners of this precious resource are aware of its special and irreplaceable qualities.



Stevens Competition 1999: Rachel Thomas's design selected by Sponsor - cartoon in progress.

We have responded to concerns expressed by glazier-conservators as well as contemporary craftsmen about the variable quality of lead available today and are engaged in a research programme with the collaboration of conservation workshops and suppliers to improve standards. We also investigate new products which are on the market and which claim to perform as well as traditional quality materials. We develop and use new methods and materials in our own conservation laboratory. If there are materials that perform as well as traditional materials, that have the same qualities - and are less expensive and easier to use - then we want to know about them!

But it doesn't matter how good the materials are if the quality of the workmanship is bad. Like the Assay Office, our role is to safeguard standards of workmanship. We and your own Glaziers Trust need to have quality assurance that the workshops put forward by the applicants for grant will provide the right level of craftsmanship. We also have a mission to use our grants in the pursuit and promotion of excellence and exemplary good practice.

Like the Company, we have fostered, welcomed and supported the British Society of Master Glass Painters Conservation Accreditation Scheme which, for the first time, assures transparency of information about the quality of workmanship and level of competences offered by the workshop and the craftsmen they employ. It is scrutiny of the profession by professionals.

So we care deeply about the quality of materials and workmanship. We are passionate too about good contemporary design and its ability to work alongside and enhance the best of historic design. We promote it over pastiche wherever the opportunity presents itself.

Historically, as taste and techniques change and develop, stained glass designs have been inserted and removed from historic buildings, and we have always recognised this as part of their continuing history and development. Our role and aim is to ensure that the quality of workmanship and design is appropriate to the context.

The key to inserting new contemporary design into historic buildings, to enhance rather than detract from their existing character and significance, is to develop a full understanding of that character. We have methodologies for character appraisal which ensure that in managing change to historic buildings, whether change which takes away or change which adds to what we value already, we start with a very full and detailed appreciation of what it is that makes what is there valuable in the first place. If such an understanding informs the development of contemporary design as we have seen in the competition winners this evening, then the new is likely to be a true enhancement of the old, bringing together the best of the two. Understanding never requires replication, but it can certainly inform and inspire creation.

Sense of place: the New and the Old

There is emerging a separation between artist and designer, craftsman, conservator and executioner which presents interesting challenges and boundary breaking opportunities for new ways of working with this ancient medium. There is an hierarchy of questions to ask of



Stevens Competition 1999: Rachel Thomas's design - sample panel

both the context and the design before confidently bringing the two together and this must always be a broadly consultative, inclusive dialogue, not an exclusive monologue.

We participate continually in these dialogues to find synergies between old and new. Our work is all about the management of change. That is what we do. Recognition of the value of innovative new design is a continuation of, and certainly as important for the heritage that we will pass on to future generations as recognition of, the creativity of our predecessors. Time and again, the controversial creativity of today becomes the admired and venerated historic and cultural asset of the future and bringing the new into the old is the continuing dynamic that created the riches of our historic inheritance. There is no doubt that pride in place - that a sense of interest and excitement in one's surroundings, a feeling of living and working somewhere with character and with a sense of history - is an important element in what makes us who we are and what gives us our self respect. At a time when social inclusion is coming to mean more than simply the expansion of opportunities to those with disadvantage; when it is coming to mean the involvement of people in the decisions that affect their lives; that affect the places where they live and work; at a time when regional government means real devolution of decision-making, not only from national to regional level but from regional and local government to communities and neighbourhoods, I believe that those of us at English Heritage are identifying character and discussing significance in the manmade environment around us, and those of you creating new character and interest through your work, are playing a real part in social regeneration as well as in the conservation and enhancement of the fabric of our built environment. I have my own personal aim which is that English Heritage should become something of a Blue Peter for the built environment. We have a generation of young people who do not need to be taught concern and care for the natural environment. They take it for granted, and wonder why our generation has been so careless. No such task has been achieved for the built environment, yet it's so important to our sense of wellbeing. With understanding comes the opportunity for rights - to enjoy it - and responsibilities - to look after it. If we could help communities and individuals better to appreciate the built environment around them, then they would preserve and enhance what is significant, what adds character to their lives and our task will become simpler. And they would be the patrons of new public art on a much greater scale than we have seen so far.

Patronage

For the gap left by the loss of patrons of civic life in this country is not easily filled by the National Lottery alone. The commissioning of new glass for historic buildings is an essential part of our cultural life. We may be suffering from a failure of confidence as we reach the end of the century and the millennium, which is affecting decisions about all kinds of art and architecture. We need the courage of our convictions to commission contemporary work which speaks in the language of today, and not the borrowed "Heritage speak" of the past. A commemorative or celebratory window is very often the only work of art that someone will commission in their lifetime. It is a valuable opportunity for ordinary people to patronise - in the best sense - an artist, designer or craftsman.

Where, we might ask, are the patrons of glass designers today? Why do Germany, France and Belgium appear to offer many so much more exciting opportunities than Britain to place "architectural glass" of all kinds in a huge diversity of contexts - buildings of all categories and periods, sacred and secular?

We at English Heritage are keen to engage in a positive dialogue to promote patronage of good contemporary design and craftsmanship. Indeed we have offered suitable sites and monuments in our own guardianship for this purpose. Recently, Belsay House and Mulchelney Abbey have provided successful contexts for stunning displays of contemporary crafts which have transformed both the appreciation of the creativity of the makers and the extraordinary beauty of the architectural spaces which their presence has enhanced - as well as leading to some very successful sales and commissions.

Pam Alexander concluded by commending and congratulating the Glaziers Company for their creative use of competitions to continue the collaboration between the Company and the craft.