



Visible man

Piers Taylor's very public rebirth seems to be paying off – Invisible Studio has been busy from day one, says *Rory Olcayto*

Twenty-first of December last year. One email among hundreds stands out. The subject line reads: 'Yet more fucking corporate christmas greetings...' It's from Piers Taylor of the Mitchell Taylor Workshop. It reads: '...From the land of plenty where the sun never stops shining, where we are surrounded by water, where the pub is a table under a gum tree a boat ride up the river, where architects are gainfully employed, planning restrictions are lax, and from where the miserable world of pre-qualification questionnaires seems a million miles away... Have youse all a fantastic Christmas...'

His entire address book gets the message. Woah. Risky! I check previous emails. One from November says he's off to Australia to hang out with Glen Murcutt for six weeks. What's going on out there?

Three weeks later we find out. Another email – subject line: invisible studio – and sent to everyone again, announces: 'This is to let you know that after an incredibly productive six years I am splitting from Mitchell Taylor Workshop, the practice I co-founded.' The email speaks of a new kind of practice 'based everywhere and nowhere, which is a provocative and polemical vehicle for collaboration, experimentation, research and education [that] doesn't try to squeeze itself into the tiny and narrow confines of a pre-qualification questionnaire... A studio that is an invisible studio'. It seemed to mirror a wider debate taking place over the nature of architectural practice itself.

But it was an unusual way to court new business in what is a conservative deal-making environment. Saying you're planning to collaborate with bicycle framers and magicians, for example, as Taylor did in his email, doesn't sound like the best way to win work during a recession. Six months later, during a visit to Stillpoint in Bath, the final Mitchell Taylor Workshop project but in spirit the first Invisible Studio completion, Taylor

reflected on his very public rebirth. 'At first I thought I'd committed career suicide,' he says. 'I thought, "I'm never going to work again!" But then people began to get in touch and I realised something was going on.' Taylor says one industry figure rang him to say: 'What you're doing with Invisible Studio, that was us years ago.' He explains that he was ashamed of how those ambitions had faded and that his firm had failed to reinvent itself. 'Thank God you're doing it,' he confessed to Taylor, who in his studio manifesto railed against the 'flatscreen monitors and associates and directors and buzzy rhetoric about itself' that characterises contemporary practice.

Then Jill Smith, a partner at FCB Studios, called to say: 'When we read your email in the office, we all let out an enormous cheer.' Sarah

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Wigglesworth lent her support. But architects at Conran's and Foster's did too. Taylor explains: 'They said to me, "You have touched a nerve here. You're exposing the banality of a lot of contemporary architectural culture no one is questioning".' Taylor questions that culture everyday on Twitter, where he promotes his work and world view. 'I'm an avid user,' he says. One tweet (12 September) reads: 'World is 2 full of anally retentive architects living out their neuroses producing arch that is sanitised, slick, celibate and over-controlled.'

So was it really those six weeks with Murcutt, who Piers calls 'a solitary Johnny Cash-style soothsayer', that brought about the sudden change? In truth, there were other factors, and firms, such as AOC, leading Taylor to question his approach. 'Instead of just buildings, they also designed games, scenarios and ideas,' he says

of the FAT-inspired Shoreditch-based 'cultural interpreters'. 'Instead of an office, they had a pop-up space with sofas and Russian books lying around.'

But it was the Architectural Association's (AA) Design and Make programme at Hooke Park, for which he is studio master, that swung it. 'It was there that I realised I could work with a group of extraordinary people as colleagues,' says Taylor. 'People like Martin Self, an aerospace engineer with great digital skills who worked for Zaha Hadid and ran the AA pavilion programme. He's the engineer to my architect. And the carpenter Charlie Brentnall. He set up his timber framing business 30 years ago. He built the space frame for Fielden Clegg's Earth Centre. He built the Big Shed in Hooke Park. He has an amazing brain for timber and connections.' Both Brentnall and Self are set to be regular Invisible Studio collaborators. 'I feel we can reinvent what architectural practice can be,' says Taylor, who will form partnerships on a project by project basis.

And despite gossip at the time that suggested Taylor had been foolish to be so bold, Invisible Studio is busy. It completed the Big Shed earlier this year. There's the Caretaker's House at Hooke Park, an Invisible Studio collaboration with students at the AA, and a gridshell structure in the Midlands being developed with Nozomi Nakabayashi, ex-SANAA and a former AA student. He's busy enough to turn down work, including a £2 million house for a senior figure at Buro Happold. 'It was too ostentatious,' Taylor says. 'I felt increasingly out of my depth and uncomfortable doing a project like that.' Taylor knows this is the kind of thing that will wind up other architects. But he's adamant.

'My last practice wanted to say yes to everything. Clients and developers expect it. But we need freedom to make careful decisions.' And take risks, of course. Remember those? *Follow Piers on Twitter: @Piers_Taylor*