

'Giving it a go is important — something may come along'

Sarah Wigglesworth advises Mitchell Taylor Workshop that the secret of winning public buildings is having the courage to bear its architectural soul

Words Elaine Knutt Photographs Ed Tyler

This month, masterclass began with an anecdote that suggested two-year-old newcomer Mitchell Taylor Workshop had already found an inside track on securing public sector commissions — albeit one that skirted around the law. The Room 13 art studio for Hareclive Primary School in Bristol is a chunky statement in breeze blocks and sky-blue cladding. But partner Piers Taylor explained it was almost guerrilla architecture — the school governors appointed the practice directly rather than going through Bristol City Council's consultants' framework.

"We effectively did it illegally," he says. "The client desperately wanted us to do it and the only way was to circumvent all the pre-qualification stuff. As a new practice, he knew we'd never get on the list. So we did what he wanted — we put that school on the map and energised a scuzzy area." The project has won a RIBA award, a sustainability award and was shortlisted for Cabi's Better Public Buildings.

To Sarah Wigglesworth, the story illustrates two fundamentals about pitching for publicly funded work: that pre-qualification processes squeeze out the innovators, but that a determined client can shoehorn them back in.

'I want to do interesting work in the public sector that engages with the community'

"Processes are processes, but if someone wants it strongly enough, they can find a way within it," she says. "The problem is the process creates this levelling effect that means clients can end up with anyone — it doesn't matter who because it's just process driven. It's a tick-box exercise — it's not about what you can do for them."

It's a common frustration for a young, ambitious practice such as Mitchell Taylor Workshop. Rob Mitchell and Piers Taylor have built an eclectic portfolio for clients prepared to venture beyond the architectural comfort zone. Projects include social housing in Bracknell, a private museum on rural life and a live-work eco-village in Hereford.

Inside track on public buildings

Mitchell Taylor Workshop put their questions on the sector to Sarah Wigglesworth of Sarah Wigglesworth Architects

Gaining recognition

Piers Taylor: The question we're always asking is how do we do it? Do we do competitions, do we go through PQQs? What was your experience?

Sarah Wigglesworth: Some projects are won through Ojeu. Once we were invited to pitch for a job we didn't get, but they liked what we'd done and offered us something else. So giving it a go is important, something else may come along later. It's a long journey. Our practice is the same size as yours and I wouldn't say that we're much further ahead than you. We still have the same issues.

Kris Eley: But you are more established in the public sector.

SW: Possibly, but we still have similar issues. Where we've made inroads into the public sector is because an individual has seen something they like and is prepared to take that risk in order to do something a bit special.



Mitchell Taylor's Work Heritage Centre in Northamptonshire.

PT: So when you meet someone, do you deliberately build the relationship?

SW: We do, we just keep talking to them and work does come our way eventually. I don't actually pursue people. I'm not really a winner and diner, but I don't mind going to visit people and showing them our portfolio and trying to knock on the door.

Working in the public sector

PT: There's always the sense with public work that lowest tender wins. Is that the case?

SW: No, we've done a job where the contract was awarded to someone who was not the lowest tenderer. The client was suspicious of the big gap between the lowest and the next one, so they ended up negotiating the tender with the other person, who was very co-operative and really wanted to do the project. Trying to shift that



Mitchell Taylor's carbon-neutral housing scheme.

concept of value is very difficult, the idea that cheapest equals value is surprisingly robust as an idea.

PT: People don't realise that cheap buildings can be more interesting.

SW: Exactly. I never have a problem with a low budget. I think we are quite good at building on a low budget.

PT: And if you're a practice our size, if you do get on [a framework] you only get buildings that are a very small proportion of your turnover.

SW: Exactly, what you get is pegged to turnover. It depends on your local authority, but it might be that 10% of turnover is the biggest contract they can award you. So that acts as a real brake on how you can develop as a practice.

Simon Gould: Any tips on applying for Ojeus?
SW: There is no formula; you can't predict what the local authority is trying to do. Recently we went in for a

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