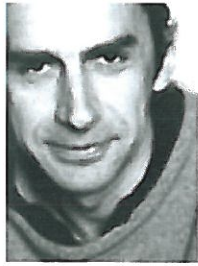


Wednesday 21 December 2011



Chris Wise

Small engineering companies have been pushed to the edge of extinction by the conforming imperatives of big business. But we need their talent and guts for our own survival

We need small engineering companies

09 December 2011 | By Chris Wise

If I were a rhinoceros not an engineer in a little practice, I'd be on the WWF's endangered species list. My contribution to global diversity would be gazed at in wonder on national telly with David Attenborough. But it isn't. Again, as a rhino, princely patrons at the head of worldwide organisations would try everything they could to feed and water me so I didn't become extinct. Why? Because genetic variation is healthy. So why is the construction industry driving out such diversity? Through procurement, through globalisation, we're being BIM'd into conformity, our design DNA is being sanitised, our buildings homogenised.

There are still some little practices, supported by enlightened clients, doing their own thing. "Because it's there" in the words of George Mallory not long before he fell off Everest. And because they have at least some intellectual freedom. In my risk assessment of our industry, I find our diversity is under threat, and while big might mean consistent, we need the counterpoint of the little practices to stay healthy.

Little people do good work, such as arguably the cuddliest concrete building ever made, the National Theatre ... it epitomises the 'small is beautiful' philosophy

Little people do good work, such as arguably the cuddliest concrete building ever made, London's National Theatre. Back in 1977, engineers Mr Flint and Mr Neill said their client commanded them to "devote their personal attention to the project [...] in which earth, air, fire and water are to be so regimented as to verve the architecture." In short they were to be individuals. Their work on the theatre epitomises Fritz Shumacher's Small is Beautiful philosophy. In his book, A Guide for the Perplexed, he wrote how the creativity of individuals like Flint and Neill should keep pushing upwards, because if the higher powers of man atrophy through lack of use, our problems will become insoluble.

In nature, it's not just the rhino under threat ... there's the newt, the Purple Emperor butterfly, anything in the way of "progress". It's the same in buildings nowadays. Take two small examples surviving purely on talent. There's Neil Thomas of Atelier One, the rock-and-rolling engineer for U2 and more recently the amazing swaying Dune Grass sculptures in front of Blackpool Tower. In turns glorious and daft, Atelier One once engineered a 150ft stage modelled on Mick Jagger's tongue. Then there's Doug King of King Shaw, the Royal Academy of Engineering's silver medallist 2011 "for an outstanding personal contribution to British engineering". King is the man behind the RAE's Engineering a low carbon built environment: the discipline of Building Engineering Physics, arguing for a reshaping of building practice. Where would we be without the likes of Thomas and King?

They may have talent and guts, but can they find clients? At the recent Institute of Civil Engineers Structural Awards, I asked a project manager whether small, creative practices make much difference to him. Of course, he nodded, it's always nice to work with the best individuals but, to be honest, most projects don't need them. Or, we like their thinking, but our business case doesn't understand it. So despite their talent, Atelier One and its kin are business-cased out of helping humanity with its "insoluble" problems.

My firm recently raised a flag for little people when we won the ISE Supreme Award for Structural Engineering

Excellence for the second time in three years. Afterwards the partner of a big consultancy said well done, and sweetly asked us not to enter a project next year so a hard-pressed big consultancy could win.

As I'm told Aecom has become indistinguishable from Balfour Beatty and its Design, Build, Operate offering, I realise the rhino analogy is wrong ... because rhinos are endangered by habitat changes outside their control. In building, the changes in our ecosystem are within our control. So, although our Supreme Award scores one for the endangered little people again this year, let's have an environment in which our rich diversity of small practices is not BIM'd out of existence (clients, form an orderly queue).

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- [ERLAND RENDALL](#) | 9 Dec 11 5:09 am

Good piece with logical thinking. Rhino's or cattle - what you rather be?

I don't see BIM though being an impediment to creative, problem solving, innovative solutions formed and delivered by small practices or individuals. As a number of small architectural firms are recognising, the ability to use technology and process can allow the little person to stand on the shoulders of giants.

I vote for the rhino and definitely more Mallory spirit!

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