Earlier this week, Gordon Brown confirmed that the economic growth that Britain has enjoyed over the past 16 years is at an end. Our output shrunk by half a percent in the last quarter and according to most analysts, this downward trend will continue for at least another couple of years. With the building industry particularly badly hit, it seems a chapter in the history of British architecture may also be drawing to a close. It has been a period marked by an extraordinary level of production and also by a new found enthusiasm - both among practitioners and the general public - for the values of modernism. After a prolonged battle with forces of conservatism throughout the seventies and eighties, the generation of Rogers and Foster have enjoyed a highly profitable Indian summer. By the turn of the millennium, their work - and that of their many followers - had been widely embraced as a lingua franca that could answer the representational needs of building types ranging from schools to concert halls, government buildings to corporate headquarters. A raft of glassy,
monumental forms has duly transformed the skyline of every major city in the country, a process in which central issues of architectural decorum - the difference, say between interior and exterior, the individual and the group, the corporate and the civic, one building type and another, one place and another - have played little part. The cause is perhaps something more than carelessness. Unburdened of all cultural association, these buildings boldly present themselves as the landscape of a new egalitarianism.

This boom period forms the context within which the four directors of AOC studied, worked for a range of established London practices and, in September 2003, formed their own partnership. The position that they have adopted from the outset has been one radically at odds with the prevalent sensibility. In contrast to the determinedly generalising character of much that has recently been built, the practice has sought to make work that accommodates, indeed celebrates, the quality of difference.

Each of the projects in this exhibition employs imagery that is at once highly associative

A New Centre for Architecture
New free-standing cultural building, London
Competition 2005, THIRD PRIZE, for the Architecture Foundation

1. build your own exhibit, build your own exhibition centre
2. a formally inclusive, public house
3. 2005 & 2055: encouraging participation in the building’s future
and highly diverse. Consider, for example, The Lift, the mobile performance space that the practice completed earlier this year. It is a fabric structure and memories of circus tents and wedding marquees inevitably bear on our impression of it. However, in certain key respects The Lift demands to be read more as a conventional building than as a tent. Its front face is tall and vertical. It is also fitted with a gigantic “window” - a full-width panel that can be retracted, admitting light and air to the interior. These gestures lend the building a monumentality but the pattern that has been applied to the exterior carries more domestic connotations. It is based on a traditional quilting design which the architects asked everyone involved in the project to colour in. Their final layout samples these contributions but superimposes a geometrical structure which adjusts the scale of the imagery up the height of the wall.

The building’s interior is conceived as a stage for multiple activities including concerts, lectures, theatrical performances, group workshops and debates. Accordingly, it has been designed to be configurable in many different ways. A blackout curtain can be drawn round

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*No.1 Lower Carbon Drive*

New touring exhibition, improving energy use in existing London homes
Realisation 2007 for the London Development Agency

1. a green billboard
2. a domestic moment in a public place
3. a communicative architecture
the full extent of the space and a series of inflatable deployables can be lowered into it. Each of these elements incorporates lighting and can be fitted with a curtain that forms a smaller, room-like enclosure within the larger territory. Again, the imagery of these elements suggests many sources, including Andy Warhol’s inflatable pillows, Lilly Reich’s exhibition designs and the mutable structures of Archigram.

This melange is rich in contradiction and resists coalescing into anything as easily labelled as a “style”. Indeed the building presents an open invitation to its users to extend the range of associations. On one level, this offer takes a very physical form - the robust structure lends itself to addition and change - but the purposefully unsettled character of the building’s imagery can also be taken as a license to interpret it in different ways. For example, members of the large Moslem audience that the building serves on its travels around the eastern reaches of London have detected a relationship to the culture of Islamic tile design in the building’s tessellated skin.
The sensibility at play is rooted in AOC’s commitment to both an architectural and social pluralism. In this respect, it clearly owes much to the intellectual territory staked out by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and indeed various recurring formal strategies - the juxtaposition of the domestic and the monumental, the use of “sampling”, the elevation of the role of signage within any architectural expression - find a clear precedent within the Venturis’ oeuvre. (That said, the extent to which the history of British architecture played a role in formulating the Venturis’ own mindset is worth noting. Is it too much of a stretch to locate AOC’s work within a British mannerist lineage that can be traced back through the work of Stirling, Lutyens, Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh?)

And yet looking at the projects gathered here it is clear that the practice has found a voice that is very much its own. What I find most provocative in the work is the practice’s integration of the semiological lessons that it has gleaned from the Venturis with another ambition - that of making the act of inhabitation intrinsic to the image of each project. Strategies of adaptability and transformation recur throughout the work, from the scale of

**Birnbeck Island**

New all-star hotel and serviced holiday homes, Weston-Super-Mare, UK

Competition 2008, SECOND PRIZE, for Urban Splash

1. natural artifice - rustic homes support a slice of hillside
2. inclusive exclusivity - a publicly accessible destination
3. a mountain of co-habitation
the blackboard wall in the Janet Summers Early Years Centre to the houses at Birnbeck Island that are constructed in an ad-hoc manner, structurally independent of the public park that sails overhead. There is an unavoidable tension in this impulse to make work that is at once grounded in a set of cultural associations and yet capable of being adjusted by its users. In its housing schemes that conflict is presented with particular force and, ultimately, they are going to have to build some of these projects before we can make a meaningful assessment of the assumptions on which they are based.

Of course, an exhibition of the work of a practice as young as AOC is inevitably as much concerned with future prospects as past achievements. The firm’s four partners are still in their early thirties and while they have established a reputation as strong as that of any British architect of their generation, it rests as much on a series of unbuilt competition entries as it does on their modest body of built work. One would like to think that this discrepancy would soon be resolved. However, given our current economic woes, the coming years look set to be highly challenging ones for UK architects. When we do eventually begin to
build again, new political and cultural circumstances will doubtless frame different kinds of artistic challenge. Adapting to that new context will prove a test of intellectual agility but this exhibition makes clear that AOC lack nothing in that regard. It will, I am sure, find an important role to play in whatever narrative unfolds. The interest lies in what part of its current thinking will prove of future use and what will come to be seen as the product of a soon-to-be historical moment. In this respect, the ideas embodied in the exhibition might be thought of as a message in a bottle, cast into an uncharted sea. I look forward to revisiting its contents when - hopefully, before too long - it is washed up on a foreign shore.

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The Lift - a new parliament
International demountable performance and meeting space
Competition 2006, FIRST PRIZE, Realisation 2008 for London International Festival of Theatre

1. made from generous ingredients
2. a very public welcome
3. an adaptive box of tricks
AOC is committed to exploring and enriching the relationship between you and the complex, messy world that surrounds you.

AOC emerged from a shared obsession with the uniqueness of places. What they are and what they could be.

AOC is about making things. Some of these things are buildings. Not all of them though. We can design you a home, write you a book or build you a city. Or design you a book, build you a home and write you a city.

We produce open, honest and generous proposals. They are beautiful. In their own way.

AOC is about making things happen, working with people, rather than for them. We enjoy discovering how people live. And what they do.

We listen to, interpret and amplify people’s desires.

1. Janet Summers Early Years Centre
2. A New Centre for Architecture
3. No.1 Lower Carbon Drive
4. The Street, Royal Armouries
5. Birnbeck Island
6. Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery
7. The Lift
8. Introductory text - Ellis Woodman
9. The Lift - DIY Wallpaper
10. The Lift - A spatial constitution
11. Media installation