

STARTING AN ARCHITECTURE GROUP



By Martin Funnell

National Architecture Coordinator

ARCHITECTURE

This leaflet is written and illustrated by Martin Funnell from Merton (South London).

*It includes some social matters as well as practical and architectural details, and my advice is:
"Pick and choose what you need out of it - have a go - and do it your way!"*

INTRODUCTION

You can have fun with ARCHITECTURE in a variety of ways because there are so many aspects that can be studied, and they can be enjoyed by both experts and novices alike. The subject enlarges horizons and increases awareness of the environment we all live in –or occasionally travel abroad to see.

EXISTING STUDY GROUPS ARE VERY DIFFERENT.

Leaders in U3A are more often amateurs bitten with enthusiasm or members of related professions, and rarely architects (who seem to want to retire quietly!) Groups often run courses covering the "History" (usually from ancient Greece up to Modern times), but there are lots of alternatives depending on what is easy to visit locally or the enthusiasms of the leader or the local situation. There is a mass of books available in most public libraries – and I can recommend certain books to buy.

Usually it's best to have one person in charge and this paper is written for that person. You will probably already have



some idea in your mind what aspects you want to study. This idea should be kept in mind as it is probably the best one to motivate you over the coming months. You may of course gather students who want to do something else – so compromise may be inevitable – but it's useless trying to do what some other person has suggested if it isn't easy for you. Students in sympathy with your approach will stay with you.

Building professionals have a slight advantage in that they can speak from experience (particularly about the process of designing and building), and they are used to thinking about the future, but they may still be a bit rusty on the history they learnt as students and didn't develop.

GETTING STARTED

The usual procedure is to work out what you propose to do, prepare a handout, advertise an initial meeting and cajole members to come. Talking directly to people is by far the most effective way. If you are not used to developing ideas of this sort into complex reality just "keep going" and deal with problems as they arise.

The first meeting can be more or less democratic, and can settle the way you will carry on, where and when you meet and



so on. Some initial meetings have produced large numbers of people, but most groups start modestly and manage in someone's room. A few members usually drop out after a first meeting - but don't be put out by this. Your finally agreed programme needs to be publicised accurately, especially if you require fitness for walking tours or climbing into church roofs!

Confidence trick

Running a group needs to be done with confidence so that everyone anticipates having a good time, and one has to conceal the natural anxiety that something may go wrong - but disasters are very rare. I keep a spare video on the shelf just in case...

Be friendly.

Research shows that many U3A members attend groups for social reasons as much as for learning, and it is important to welcome members and sustain a friendly atmosphere. You can describe many U3A groups as "Parties with a Purpose".

Participation is a good way to bind a group together, and people can feel valued if offered small jobs (or big ones such as keeping tabs on everyone's telephone number, address and attendance).

Meeting in members' premises

If you meet in a hall there are probably rules to obey. Meeting in members' homes poses other problems. We curse having to tidy the room in advance and remove minor hazards, but have never had a bad accident whilst accommodating groups of U3A - but we do take precautions. We confine coffee to a separate room where there is a big table to put things down on so that there is no spillage. The host member is



normally free to invite non-U3A friends to visit, but U3A insurance only covers members and potential members.

We are ready for coat hanging, WC, parking and public transport problems.

Timing and Refreshment

Instant coffee seems to be a regular feature of U3A meetings, and we usually get it over at the start (10 am) so that the meeting has a clear run (from 10.30 to noon), but some long sessions seem better with a break in the middle. Tea-making volunteers deserve more status than they normally receive. I like decent biscuits – and speakers like a glass of water!

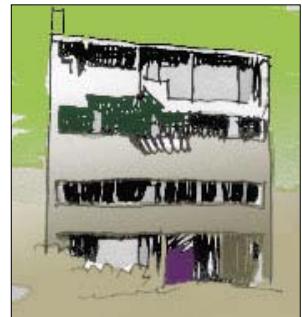
Waiting list?

If a group gets too big for comfort it's a pity to turn people away, and there are other options which may be possible: - a bigger room, running the course twice or making a "waiting list" for a later re-run. You may be tempted to take people off your list if they have not attended regularly and you want to let in "new blood".

STUDYING - TALKS AND VISITS

Hard work

It can be quite hard work preparing a year's programme, and I now prefer to find a way of either spreading the load by using other speakers or using a semi-ready-made course – such as following a book or a set of videos. But it can be fun working up a new idea, and the hard work can be very rewarding. I found a monthly meeting worked well, and for a while we had a visit as well between each meeting – and a packed programme like this keeps everyone interested.



Variations in programmes

Speaking broadly, most groups run by non-architects seem to progress steadily

through a single subject such as past history (the basic "Foundation Course" from Greek to Victorian), whilst the professionals also tackle present and future, including "modern" and "designing". And many groups go for buildings which are close at hand which they can visit – and sometimes research local history. Some leaders like to have a theme for the year and others take subjects more at random. Some courses only run for a few sessions and others run for years. A few U3A's have several architecture groups; leaders run them in different ways. Big groups using invited speakers have to select subjects from what speakers can offer.

Members contributing.

Most sessions are likely to be given by one person, but can be shared. The "workshop" technique usually requires the subject to be split so that each person contributes a part, and is rarely used for architecture, where one person is usually the expert of the day. Discussion is usually best after a presentation, and time should always be allowed for questions. Getting the members to contribute is good for morale – but not always rewarding. U3A is famous for trying out new ways – and quizzes and other party games can be adapted to add variety.

Speaking

I like to appear spontaneous, work to notes and never read a script, but my wife types her paper and then hands out copies in the traditional University manner. A bit of both works well.

Outside speakers.

Big groups need good speakers, and although many can offer a choice of subject there is inevitably an interesting diversity in a year's programme, and such a group tends to finish up similar to a local amenity group outside U3A. We do not invite speakers without a personal recommendation, and beware lists without

a named recommender. I find speakers by joining specialist groups and asking around.

Many architects specialise and become eminent in their fields, and work with allied professions, but most of them are not fluent speakers. I am lucky to have many contacts and was able to get them to take on a talk each. We enjoy a meal together afterwards. One retired architect persuaded his old firm to give three talks using different specialists from within it.

You won't want speakers from too far away unless you are prepared to pay their air fares. You can also try bodies like the RIBA (020 7580 5533) and ask for a regional contact.

Regular speakers usually have a list of subjects already prepared, and some want a fee and travel expenses. If they do then they probably expect an audience of 50 or more, which may not be your scene – though my branch (Merton) has occasional big meetings open to the whole membership.

Building Professionals

Architects, Architectural Draughtsmen or Technicians, Builders, Building Owners, Building Standards Specialists, Clerks of Works, Computer Aided Design Specialists, Conservation Specialists, Developers, Ecologists, Engineers (civil, structural, mechanical services, heating, electrical, lift, drainage, acoustical, geophysical),



Historians, Interior Designers, Journalists, Land Surveyors, Perspective Artists, Photographers, Quantity Surveyors, Site Managers, Sociologists, Specialist Contractors, Suppliers....

VISITS

I think that experiencing "real buildings" is an essential part of any architecture course. And this includes moving about in the spaces and just "looking" silently – free from guides.

Most groups visit buildings and some do a lot of it. It's easier to organise with a theme in mind. Many "historic" places are open to the public and well advertised (National Trust / English Heritage / private). You might manage to get into buildings that do not normally see visitors.

Brand new "modern" buildings are often visited by architects and builders who just ask, and U3A can do the same. Larger corporations are usually helpful. I select newly built buildings by perusing the trade magazines. As a professional I have got into the more evocative parts of historic buildings (roof spaces, turrets, tunnels, basements and between-floor voids), but such delights are usually denied to U3A groups unless they ask. Security and insurance ("Health and Safety") are often quoted as problems these days.

SUBJECTS FOR COURSES OF STUDY

As a rule the subject comes with the leader, who has his own specialist knowledge and enthusiasms.

Subjects can be suggested by local buildings or come with speakers or follow a set of slides or a video that you have got, but if you are on the hunt the best source I have found is the public library. You can find books which give you a "theme" to work through in a season, or books to reinforce just a particular talk. Libraries can also guide you to local history, which often includes architecture. U3A's own Resource Centre has quite a lot of material – and you only have to pay to post it back, but it is not indexed in a very informative way.

The commonest theme tackled is the Foundation Course "History of Architecture", usually from classical Greek

through mediaeval to 18th Century and the present day, and this is usually done using one of the excellent books available, all of which contain profuse illustrations. There is always a need for plenty of pictorial material.

Some groups study particular architects, building types (eg churches or theatres) or perhaps "modern design", for which there are many books.

Some groups study buildings in their own area, so that they can visit the real thing and even meet the designer as well as see slides, and others study the development of their area over centuries using maps and local records – they liaise with historians and archaeologists.

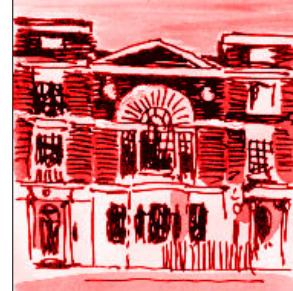
About half of groups tackle subjects in no particular order (even history backwards), getting members and invited guests to give talks on whatever architectural subject interests them. This gives variety to the course and expresses the wide range of ingredients in the architectural cake.

However I think you need some coherence in your programme.

LIST OF TYPICAL SUBJECTS CHOSEN

I have omitted the "Foundation Course" historical items and "named architects", and removed repetitions to show how wide ranging or specialised the U3A world of architecture can be.

Regional variations, Traditional house design and decoration, places of work and assembly, buildings for worship, Renaissance and Gothic, Modern times (Alton), Oxford Buildings, Pre-war modern, Kent Historic, Hong Kong airport and other buildings, Beijing, Energy Conservation, Georgian London, American Skyscrapers, English Castles, French Romanesque, Italian Architecture, Russian and Baltic, European townscape, Gaudi, Florence, Venice, Seville, E. Anglia, (Bromley) Houses of Parliament, (Oxford) Discuss TV programmes, members' slides, Industrial archaeology, 20C architecture,



High Rise, Fortified sites, (Peterborough), Dorset cast iron, Local landmarks, Langton Matravers, (Purbeck) Regional influences, Townscape, Durham, Montepulciano, Window tracery, Chios, Salisbury Cathedral, Garden Architecture, Bridges, Rood loft parapets, Reigate - your town, Egypt, (Reigate) Sustainable buildings, New housing and modern landscape, (Stour Valley) Sydney Opera House, Sound of Architecture, Ladakh, Local architect's problems, Reading plans, Roof trusses, Japanese landscape, Housing elderly people, (Merton)

This next list is of subject areas covered so far by courses:

History of Architecture, Materials and constraints, Specific local buildings and their context, Building types (religion, education, health, transport etc) Named architects, mediaeval cathedrals, Church history, local building, interesting planning applications, building materials, engineering, acoustics, architectural theory etc..

PRESENTATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Architecture is widely regarded as a "visual art" but it does include the practical aspects of "commodity" and "firmness" as well as "delighte"! However students usually regard the "poetry of building" as the interesting bit – so there is a demand for plenty of pictures.

Nevertheless words play an important part in introducing architecture.

GOOD DISPLAY WORTH WHILE

A scrappy presentation wastes time and can be irritating. If you are inviting speakers you ought to take a professional attitude to any technical equipment you use, as there is nothing more embarrassing than a distinguished speaker stalled in full spate by faulty equipment.



COMPLICATED EQUIPMENT

Equipment is getting unbelievably complicated, and with hired gear in a hired hall there are countless possibilities for going wrong, and you need someone who is acquainted with equipment to organise it for you. For gear owned by a U3A there is usually one person who understood it originally. Treat this person with deference and don't forget to thank them even if things go wrong.

As there does not seem to be any comprehensive guide to this subject I have written "PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF PRESENTATION" in the hope that it might help.

The commonest thing to go wrong with a talk is for a plug to come out of a socket – usually in the wall.

CHOOSE YOUR ROOM

Proper black-out lining is expensive but worthwhile if you want to show pictures at

their best. Some halls with clerestory windows cannot be blacked out, and are useless for daytime projection.

For any projection we use proper "blackout" lining to the curtains, and we turn off all the lights and dim the lectern light - which all makes for a really gutsy picture. Real projection rooms have a black ceiling – but we are not willing to go this far!

Rooms with ceilings below 10 feet are problematic with large audiences as heads get in the way of seeing and the reflected whiteness of the ceiling spoils the image. I set the screen bottom edge above seated head level (5 feet) if I can.

GETTING PICTURES FOR YOUR TALKS

Getting the right pictures is a big problem. Most of architecture is visual, and words are a poor way of putting things across. For architecture talks *you need a lot of pictures*, and having a set of pictures may well determine what you choose to study.

Many leaders start with a stock of slides and have access to a 35MM SLIDE projector, usually borrowed but sometimes owned by U3A's. A few draw or display prints, or book or magazine illustrations in some way - usually by making slides from them.

Increasingly, groups are using a DIGITAL projector and allied lap-top computer, which means that digital photos can easily be included. Some members have masses



of digital slides and may be able to send you copies on line or on disc. Book illustrations can either be included in a "Powerpoint" display or via the "slide-

“show” facility included in many computer programs for capturing digital camera files – or even “Live” from a camera rostrum. These machines can show DVD’s or VHS tapes if suitably connected.

A TV set can perform some of the functions of the digital projector – if you know how.

HEARING WHAT YOUR SPEAKER SAYS

Speech is a major problem with U3A. A lot of U3A members are quite deaf.

Some learn lip-reading and need to see your mouth, but it helps everyone if you can avoid important words at the beginning of sentences, speak slowly with clear enunciation of consonants and sum up occasionally.



For gatherings of more than 20 the speaker needs miking. Speakers find holding a mike a bit tedious and if they turn their heads they "fade" with a fixed one, so they need a head-set mike. Everyone uses radio mikes these days to avoid the long trip wire, and these are no longer expensive. The amplifier and loud-speaker equipment is often provided conveniently in one box that is easy to store.

BOOK LIST

These four books were recommended by RIBA Education for students new to architecture and hoping to become practitioners:

Experiencing Architecture by Steen Rasmussen. A slightly dated book, to borrow and read rather than buy. It's about most aspects of the impact of architecture, particularly how we see and feel it.

The Story of Architecture by Patrick Nuttgens. 1997. An attractively presented picture book with very good balanced text covering architecture of all periods throughout the world. To be given to keep and refer to. £15.95

Modern Architecture Since 1900 by William Curtiss. 1996. This has lots of examples

and a decent text but is a bit ponderous. To buy and refer to if you are into modern. Has a different bias to the next book. £19.95

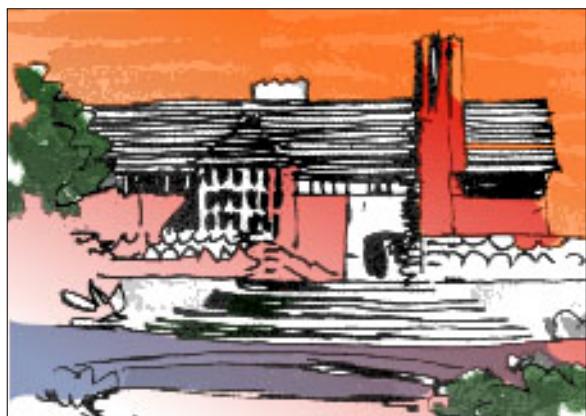
History of Western Architecture by D Watkins. 1996. This has splendid pictures and very authoritative text but loses its way a bit when it gets to "modern". To buy and refer to. £19.95

My selection:

Understanding Architecture, its elements, history and meaning by Leland M Roth. A well illustrated and well written account of mainly European architectural history. This is based on a course given in America and is the book I bought and use. £17.99

A History of Architecture on the comparative method by Sir Banister Fletcher. The standard text book on architecture with masses of meticulous drawings, but despised by architects as it treats architecture as a sequence of "styles" rather than setting buildings in context and saying "Why" they are what they are. £80. Best inherited.

The Honeywood File by H B Cresswell. A classic disaster story about a small building extension that went wrong. Reveals what private practice used to be like in the 20's. To borrow and read for relaxation after your first meeting.



A Place of My Own by Michael Pollan. The story of a writer making a garden shed to work in. A good read and painless introduction to modernist aesthetics.

£7.99

If you are in to serious modern ring me for more. Note that other startup books are listed by later contributors. I use the RIBA bookshop as it seems to have everything that is going.

REVIEWS OF SOME OF ARCHITECTURAL MATERIAL IN RESOURCE CENTRE

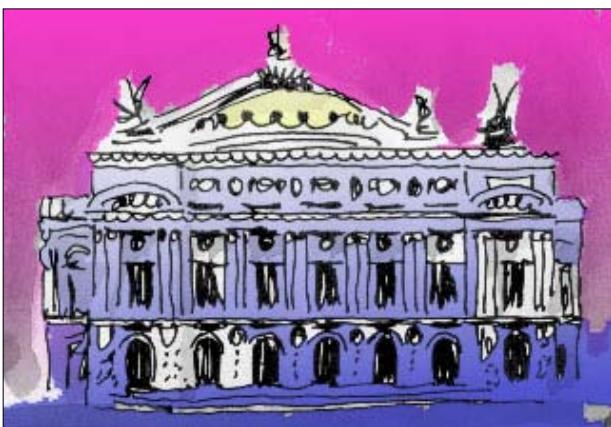
Material is added occasionally to the Resource Centre, so refer to an up-to-date list of items.

Videos

Videos of named architects are in my experience all OK, but if they are still alive they are probably a bit out of date.

The *Mackintosh* one is particularly good - perhaps it's the music that moved me to tears, but it's a superb BBC Scotland production showing the art and architecture at its best, and also telling a poignant story.

Developing Structures - Modern Architecture would have been better titled "Michael Hopkins". It is an excellent (but out of date) exposition of objectives and schemes.



New Buildings in Old Settings would have been better titled "Ted Cullinan". This reveals Ted Cullinan waffling and scribbling in his typical manner a scheme for underground offices in Feltham, which you can visit. He is famous for his jolly

University buildings - which came later. One of a set of videos by journalist Monica Pidgeon. They are slightly amateurish productions but very revealing.

Metropolis 1 shows Tony Fitzpatrick (the wobbly bridge man) explaining how to build a mile high tower. A little unnecessary after Sept 11th, but good for structural engineering. This is the first of 6 BBC videos, and good. Each covers a different aspect of engineering and is a part of the world of architecture. (1 structure, 2 surveillance, 3 sewers, 4 cars, 5 underground, 6 lighting).

Slides

The *slide sets with numbers* (eg Palladian No 977) are part of a vast series that seems to cover British Architecture from Saxon to Victorian. Each set has a printed introduction with a paragraph for each slide, though just reading these unaltered could send some members I know off to sleep.

The series is designed for school use but is easily adapted, though I think you would need to read up a few standard history books beforehand. The numbers give the order of sets, but 677 jumps next to 971.

TECHNICAL COMPLICATIONS

The complications of buying and operating all sorts of modern equipment are gone into in boring practical detail in "PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF PRESENTATION".

There may be further leaflets you can ask for too, which deal with other aspects.

FINAL THOUGHT

The basis of all learning and creativity is of course "*love*" - and this also applies to running a group. Love your subject and get enthusiastic about it. This will communicate to others and you will get mutual support from your group. Hope for positive keen members and have fun with architecture!

It also helps if you get to know (and

hopefully like) your members and are careful never to make them appear small. Your U3A will rely on you as a leader to check on the welfare of your members.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

When you have been running for a while you may wish to contact other architecture groups to share experiences and to join in events. There are certain enterprises that work better with larger numbers than one group can muster, although they may not form the bread-and-butter of your activity. Weekend visits using hotels and a hired coach, or even foreign travel are examples.

In order to make contact *Register your group* with me (the National Architecture Subject Coordinator) by filling in the Registration form attached. You will then receive my occasional Newsletters and the list of other Architecture groups. You will be able to ring up your neighbour to exchange ideas etc.. I also welcome phone chats – but avoid calling in the evening or during an architecture programme on the TV!

Currently there are only about 40 groups on the Register, but I think there are many more operating independently – and they are none the worse for it!

You do not need permission to set up an Architecture Group – though you will doubtless cooperate with your local U3A! Registering with me is optional and costs nothing.

FEEDBACK

I will be delighted to receive programmes of events and news of your group from time to time, and will occasionally feature “what’s going on” in the newsletter. I am interested to know what you deal with at meetings, how you structure your meetings, whether you tackle modern or historical buildings, where you meet, visits to buildings, where you get new members from, who you get help from (eg Council

or local architects), your expertise, books you recommend, equipment problems, financial matters, gripes and successes and any other organisational features. In particular tell me where I can help.

U3A BUREAUCRACY AND ME

Unless you are very new to U3A you will know that each U3A is an independent charitable organisation enabling the “education” of both mind and body of retired people. Groups develop a fund of ideas as they work out their own ways of doing it, and rely on the laws of supply and demand for their members. Unlike school, the leaders are mostly amateur enthusiasts (but there are relaxed experts too) and there are no standards or exams or diplomas. It pays to dabble in new subjects and it’s fun - and the idea has spread across Britain.

Each U3A has a Committee to do the necessary organising and encouraging, and there is a National focus with the Third Age Trust. This is a hive of bureaucracy but it does produce publications and run bigger events.

I am listed as one of about 40 unpaid “Volunteers” attached to the U3A Standing Committee for Education, Education Support Group (a).

My working life was spent as an architect building schools in Middlesex and an experimental housing scheme in Leicester, and surveying historic palaces. My other life was spent in making films, music and books and running small social events. For U3A I have run groups on architecture, film and early music and have been a chairman (Merton – South London).



National Architecture Coordinator:

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London, SW19 7JL :: 020 8946 7739 ::

Third Age Trust: Third Age Trust, 19 East Street, Bromley, BR1 2RN :: 020 8466 6139 :: national.office@u3a.org.uk :: u3a.org.uk

The **Resource Centre** is in the Trust buildings and operates on Tuesday to Thursday.

This leaflet is designed for A4 printing but is also destined for the web. If you would like a paper copy please ask.

(Original file: STARTUP short & lengthenadd allcolor2008.doc issued via .tif version as separate .pdf pages). Cover is :STARTING ARCHGROUP. Jpg. Paper version needs blank reverse to cover)

Little drawings are © Martin Funnell 2008

REGISTERING YOUR GROUP WITH THE NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE COORDINATOR

A feature of my Register is that I publish and distribute to the participating groups a list of all groups registered, and include the telephone numbers and E-mail addresses (but no postal addresses) of a member willing to be contacted. This list is CONFIDENTIAL to those on the register. U3A has a rule not to disseminate personal details such as telephone numbers or addresses without your express agreement – so this form (or a photo-copy) needs to be filled in and returned to me.

The list is revised and republished every year or so. Nearly everything comes to you by post, but for emergencies I prefer to use telephone or E-mail – and a few groups do not have E-mail.

Martin Funnell

REGISTRATION FORM and QUESTIONNAIRE

INFORMATION TO GO ON THE REGISTER WHICH IS SENT TO GROUP ORGANISERS

Branch of U3A:

Title of your group:

Contact person's name (usually the Organiser, Leader or Coordinator):

Telephone number (if you agree):

Fax number (if you have one and agree):

E-mail address (if you have one and agree – and be careful about the upper or lower case):

DESCRIPTIVE MATTER ABOUT YOUR GROUP – WHICH MAY BE SUMMARISED ON THE REGISTER

Average attendance:

Frequency of meeting:

All year or winter only:

Where you meet (eg "member's house" but do not give address):

Summary of what you do, in a few words:

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR MY FILES ONLY - AND NOT FOR THE REGISTER

Your name and address for postings:

If you wish, you may add details of your working life and interests: