

# DEFINING QUALITIES

Interview with  
**JONATHAN HILL**  
**CHAIRMAN**  
**SCOTT BROWNRIGG**

**PMW** | Partridge Muir & Warren

CHARTERED FINANCIAL PLANNERS

In a series of interviews with Simon Lewis, chief executive of Partridge Muir & Warren, owner-managers consider their approach to business and the specific qualities which deliver sustainable success.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

SOMETHING THAT makes Scott Brownrigg different from other architectural practices is that it is not run as a traditional partnership or like companies where only the 'top table' own the business. As a limited company, the practice has shareholders instead of partners – currently sixty-seven employees from associate level and above have purchased shares in the business.

"This provides a real sense of ownership because they have a real stake in the company, explains chairman Jonathan Hill. "They can actively participate in the development, growth, and future of the practice. This is a shareholder model which gives a real sense that we're all in it together."

The limited model has also led to a principle that 50% of profit goes back into the business. "We don't take all the surplus home with us, which is what can happen with the partnership model," says Hill. "We are re-investing for future stability and success."

Another difference is the firm's longevity; its roots date back to 1910 in a profession where most practices are of an age where the founding partners are still working.

And there's a focus on designing buildings and places which Hill describes as "inspiring yet practical" – important for a firm that has worked on everything from the world's largest single building airport terminal in Istanbul to the

University of Reading campus in Malaysia.

"Some architects have a reputation for pushing boundaries so far that the buildings are unrealistic or don't work well," comments Hill. "Always we are thinking that a building needs to serve its purpose and be flexible for use by generations to come. We do want buildings to be fresh and stimulating but we stay ahead through continual evolution rather than revolution."

Scott Brownrigg also differ from some practices of their size in that most of the directors are still hands-on architects. Their strategic board mainly focuses on direction while a separate operational group manages the day-to-day business, including its performance, resources, and training. Its a structure which allows architects to continue to practice as well as develop as business leaders. "All of our board members are busy with projects for part of the week," says Hill. "I'm still an architect and I enjoy working with clients. Otherwise I feel I would lose my relevance and that would become a problem for me."

He sees his role as that of "master designer," deploying the team's skills. "It's fascinating to see how people at all levels generate new ideas if they are given the opportunity to do so," he observes.

His aim is to create a collaborative team through training, coaching, mentoring and continuing professional

development delivered through video conferencing, courses and internal training resources. "Training is not just about how to manage clients or deliver drawings," says Hill. "It's about securing new work, how to do effective presentations, how to manage teams, resolving conflict, effective team building - all techniques that we try to instil in the team."

The focus on training, along with a reputation for providing it, helps to attract new talent, says Hill. Links with universities, such as having a chair in design research at Cardiff University's Welsh School of Architecture, contribute not just to the Scott Brownrigg brand but to the number of people who want to work for the practice.

And social media is used to communicate with potential staff, among other audiences; for example, a photo competition run by Scott Brownrigg for students on Instagram generated a "positive dialogue," with shortlisted students invited in for a day of mentoring. Other events have included a design workshop for all of the employees - not just the architects. "That created interaction between our employees at all of our offices, and some really good ideas coming from non-technical staff who engaged with the event with real enthusiasm," says Hill.

Developing talent and succession planning is key, he asserts. "When

someone first qualifies, they think they know best because they don't realise what they don't know. The result is that they feel very powerful in their own ideas. Then they get into their thirties, they're running projects well but realise they still have so much to learn because they've not run a business before. They have to absorb information like a sponge. Then it becomes time to contribute, utilising everything they have learned."

He goes on: "When I became chairman after being managing director, it took me a year or two to adapt to letting go of operational issues. It's about allowing yourself to let go at the right time. There are better people behind you to take on those tasks, and they're just waiting for the opportunity. Letting go was more liberating than I thought it could be. A lot of businesses don't bring young talent in at the right time so they don't have people internally they can turn to for leadership positions when they are needed. I can see talent all the way through this organisation and that makes me feel very proud."

The ambitions of Scott Brownrigg have shifted over the past couple of decades as it has moved from being a regional, south-east of England practice to becoming international. "We had the dilemma that if we were to be a long-term sustainable business we had to be more diverse," says Hill. "We opened in Cardiff and Edinburgh, then Singapore

and now New York. We have also been doing a lot of work in Russia, and are opening an office in Amsterdam. A number of the sectors we work in, including aviation and education, are taking us to key overseas markets."

In June 2017 the practice was ranked seventy-two in The Sunday Times HSBC International Track 200 index.

Having offices across the globe is a massive advantage in that it helps Scott Brownrigg squeeze sixteen productive hours out of the day, says Hill. And it gives staff the chance to work overseas as part of the talent mobility programme. "We need different skills for every project. We might find that New York are leading the way in one sector and we can bring that to other areas of our work."

It's not about trying to become as big as possible, he adds. "It's about staying relevant, becoming a global practice, competing on the world stage and getting involved in the best design opportunities globally. To do that we have to be a size that is appropriate and you have to apply a huge amount of energy into getting prepared to perform at a higher level.

"If you're not careful you get close to a big threshold but you just can't break through. I remember twenty years ago we struggled to get over the £10million turnover mark. We are coming to another one now - £25million to £30million but

we are prepped and ready because we are investing now in infrastructure, processes, technology and the team to improve on what we do."

And Scott Brownrigg have been recognised for the second year running in the London Stock Exchange Group's 1000 Companies To Inspire Britain initiative.

One thing Hill believes an ambitious business cannot risk is falling behind with technology. "We can never wait for the future to arrive, and that means continually looking to embrace opportunities brought about by technology," he says. As an example, Scott Brownrigg have set up a design strategy unit to analyse the functional and emotional demands of a working environment, which involves the use of an app-style tool the practice has developed to engage with an organisation's employees. "This enables the client to make informed decisions to align their physical workplace with their business objectives," Hill explains.

Most design work is done in 3D, which of course allows clients to be taken on a walk-through of their prospective building at every stage of the design process. Elements of the building can be amended and refined before the design is finalised. "It's a bit like the way we can configure cars on the web, changing the colour of the seats, for example," Hill explains.

Advances in virtual reality are also gathering pace. "With virtual reality we can even show how much sunlight and shade there will be at different times of the day. Everyone is getting super-excited about it. Clients, other consultants, town planners, and the contractors are really engaged with it, and there's a different, highly constructive form of dialogue generated as we work together to fine-tune the design. Virtual reality means you can visualise the initial concept through to the most detailed design which includes the materials, textures, and furniture."

Technology is already changing the very nature of construction, through the use of building parts prefabricated off site. "Architecture is a science as well as an art and technology enables us to explore so many more aspects of design and construction very quickly," Hill explains.

Then there is the prospect that technology in other areas will influence and change the nature of building design. Hill cites changes in motor car technology. "If everyone is car-sharing or using intelligent vehicles that drop you at the office and then go off somewhere else, maybe existing car parks could be converted for other uses. That's just one example of how technology will move the world forward in terms of design."

Another big development is artificial intelligence. "It's said that 60% of jobs

that we have now won't exist in 2030 because of robotics and big data and the internet of things," says Hill. "The world is changing enormously in how we do our work."

Artificial intelligence has the potential to deliver building design, he predicts. "It could learn a set of rules and listen to instructions and be programmed to design in the same way that I was at university, and it could become very good at it. At its most simplistic, I could say 'design me a house with five bedrooms', within certain parameters. And if you don't like that one, it could provide another design. You could have thousands of designs."

Not that architects should look to the future with fear. "The mechanics are one thing," suggests Hill, "but the question is how do you programme artificial intelligence to negotiate with the local planners for example?"

"Of course 3D virtual reality is just fantastic but architecture is still all about people. It's a very interactive process, it's not mathematics, where one plus one is two and there is no other answer.

"Design is a re-iterative process where there are thousands of solutions. If you are working with an architect, they will talk to you about how you work or live your life, whether you have a dog, what sort of things you like doing; they will look at the excitement and surprise in your face.

"All those things get fed into the design. How can a machine do that?"

What about the future for Hill? "It would be difficult to ever stop continuing to be an architect and designer," he replies. "Architecture is a fascinating role where every day is slightly different and I can't wait to get out of bed and come to work. But no-one can, or should, go on for ever, and I have a thousand things I still want to do which aren't work related. It's finding a way to fit it all in."

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