

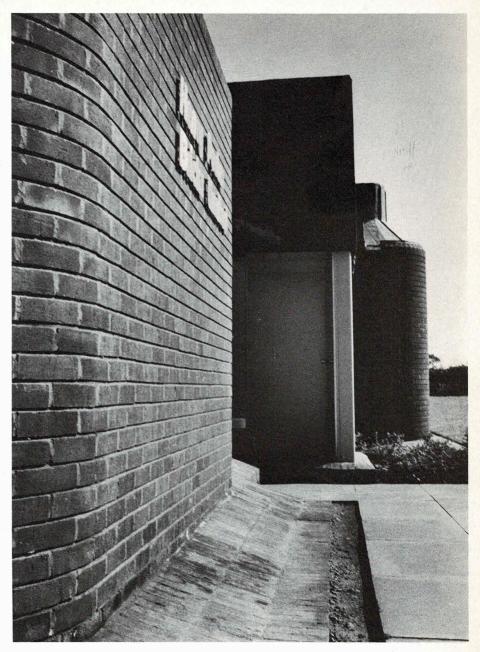
Chapter 4 The practice at work

The day-to-day workings of a practice such as OLP fall into two separate yet overlapping sectors: administration and job organization. Unless these two are properly related and maintained, no amount of design talent, no amount of entrepreneurial vigour or personal charm will keep the practice alive and flourishing. For, despite the thousands of words written about the art of architecture, the hard truth is that little of that art would see the light of day without the solid businesslike foundation common to all successful commercial undertakings. Of course there are and always will be some architects who regard this characteristic as being incompatible with 'Architecture'. Sadly, this is a view still encouraged in too many schools of architecture where such eccentricity is seen not as a solipsistic fault but as an indication of genuine talent. Extend this view to cover a practice of about fifty people needing annual fees of, say, £,500,000 in order to keep afloat and it becomes obvious, as the OLP partners agree, that the right way of running a practice is of cardinal importance. The right way - stability and profitability, the wrong way financial disaster. For this reason, they argue, it is imperative that all the partners in a practice must have, as well as design skills, a broad appreciation of the general business rules for operating a practice. It is all very well to suggest employing experts to deal with notoriously difficult subjects such as taxation but it is no use doing so unless the recipients of the advice given have enough general knowledge themselves to understand whether the advice makes sense or not and how it should be interpreted. In the end the partners have to make the decisions - not the experts who may advise them.

The practice of architecture has much in common with the creation of music. It can be a solo effort, a trio, or a full-blown orchestra. The music of architecture can be very individual or highly orchestrated. The music in the mind, or written down,



Two views of offices for Foster, Bishop Auckland, County Durham. A neat building for a brick manufacturer.

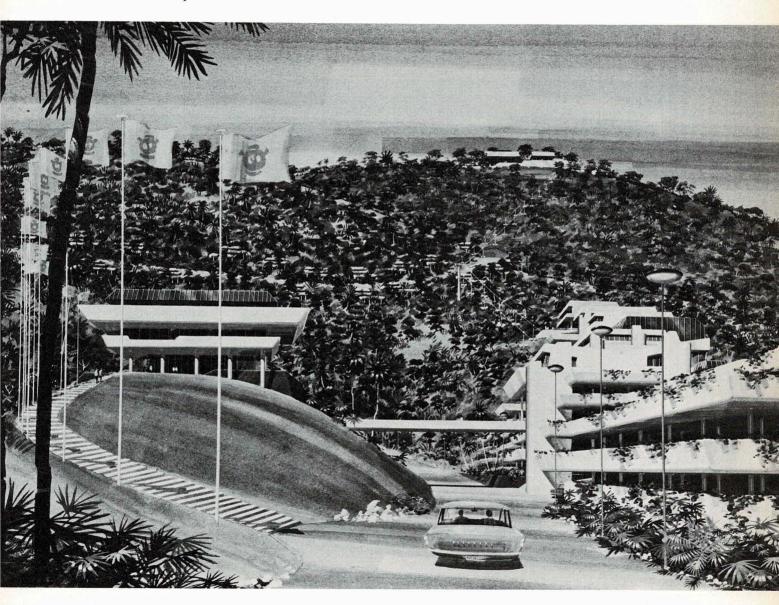


may be potentially beautiful – but a proper and sensitive organization of artistes and instruments is needed to translate it satisfactorily to the listeners' senses.

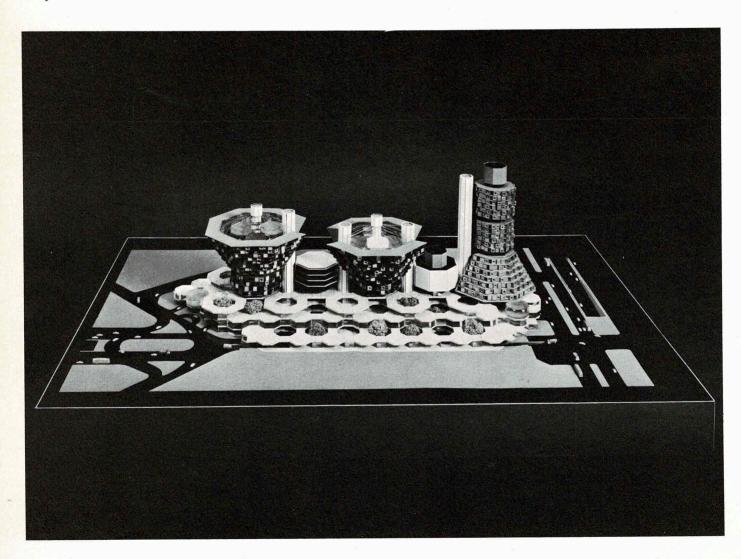
The larger architectural practice has often been compared with a symphony orchestra. On this analogy, OLP has three or four sections each with their own leader – the partner in charge: Ray Silcock in London, Brian Jones in Newcastle and Arthur Beer in Newport. To these is now added a fourth, Femi Akande in Nigeria. The overall conductor is Owen Luder, who has the special responsibility of ensuring that the various geographically separate sections, while largely autonomous and individual in work and clients, are kept in tune with each other. Within this general format, it is the responsibility of the partners to control and direct the work and organization of their offices. Their functions include workgetting and processing of work flow, ensuring that the various talents of their staffs are properly utilized. There must be the maximum of job motivation and satisfaction to produce good architecture as well as just buildings. Last, but not least, they are responsible for monitoring the cash flow and profitability of the practice.

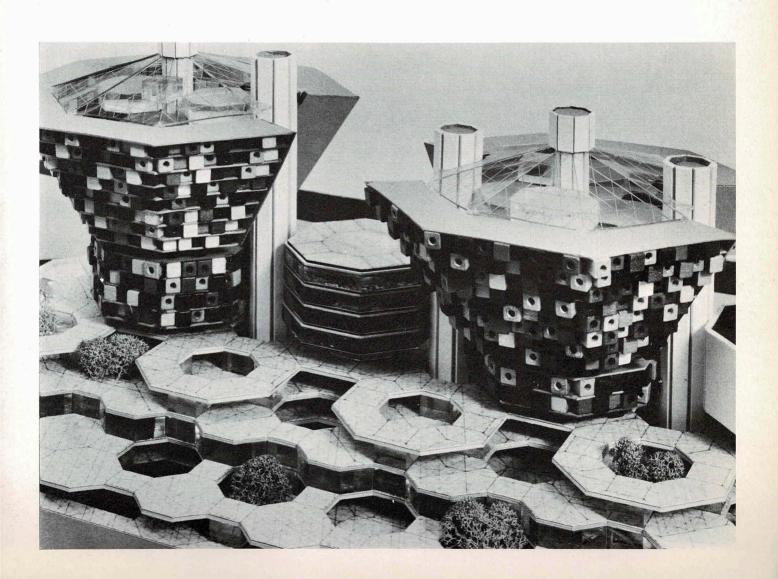
As well as Owen Luder, OLP now has three senior partners backed up by a junior partner in each of the three UK offices. In addition, there is now a separate partnership in Nigeria and associated architectural offices in Belgium, Saudi Arabia and Greece. Although, as with all private practices, figures tend to fluctuate with the ebb and flow of work, London understandably remains the largest office. It has a conscious ceiling size of about forty staff. This, in the experience of OLP, is near to the ideal size for a well-balanced office. It is big enough to become involved in the largest projects, yet small enough for control to remain with the partners. Moreover it is large enough to permit significant delegation of decision-making and responsibility to staff. In boom years, to avoid expanding beyond this figure, OLP have used other smaller offices and individual architects to help them over a 'hump'. In Luder's view, if the long-term necessity arises for a permanently larger office in London, then this will be achieved by setting up a separate office within the OLP framework, perhaps to deal with one of the specialized design fields in which the practice is now becoming increasingly involved, such as hospitals, prisons, military establishments, and most surprising of all, perhaps, the environmental design of coal mines!

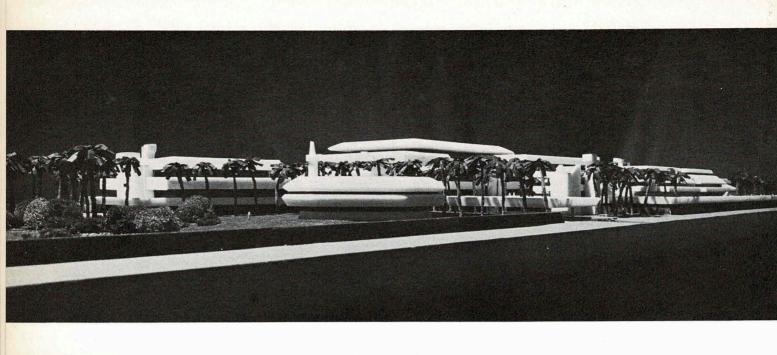
Tourist and conference centre for Ondo State Government, Nigeria. This is one of the projects currently being undertaken by the Akende Owen Luder Partnership.

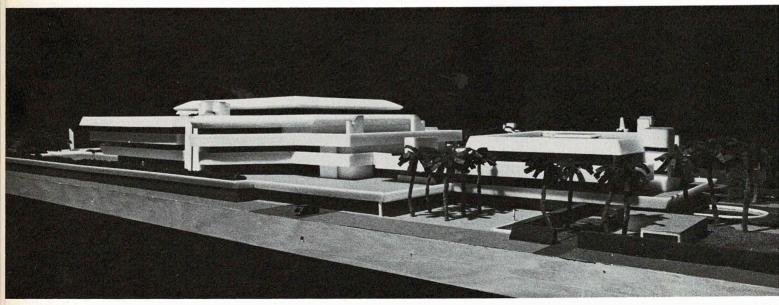


Model for a mixed development at Port Louise, Brussels. A large-scale urban renewal project on one of the main boulevards which collapsed when the American hotel tenant withdrew. The illustration on the right shows a close up of the treatment for shopping areas and apartment towers.









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Eros House, Catford, the first low-cost
speculative office building to receive a RIBA
Bronze Medal and a Civic Trust Award.