

**DENTON WILDE SAPTE "PFI AND DESIGN" SEMINAR
SPEECH BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE ALAN HOWARTH CBE MP
14 NOVEMBER 2000**

Better Public Buildings

Last month we had a very clear call from the Prime Minister to make a step change in the design quality of our public buildings. I quote from his Foreword to '*Better Public Buildings*', the statement of purpose which the Government has published:

"100 years ago public buildings were often the pride of Britain's towns and cities. Schools, railway stations, post offices and libraries set high standards of building design that the private sector tried to emulate. The best embodied a strong sense of civic pride."

Today, by contrast, there is a widespread feeling that the design quality of what we build has been pushed to one side by a concentration on more easily measurable factors. What proportion of public buildings in recent decades could really be thought to embody a sense of civic pride ?

In Victorian times a public building was a landmark which, even if humble, displayed its purpose. It was a recognisable symbol of some government or community activity which most people would value. Several things have changed that element of recognition. Public services and the public sector have been undervalued. Other more technical factors have not helped. An increasing Government use of leased accommodation has encouraged buildings which could serve any purpose so that, from the outside, a court building or a health centre or the council offices might all look very similar. The emphasis has been on cost per square foot rather than on reputation. An age of industrialised building has encouraged dull repetitive frontages.

Cost, value and process

The call used to be for lowest cost, and it shows ! There is now, thank goodness, an increasing recognition that lowest cost does not necessarily deliver best value. But it still needs courage to invest in quality. I have great sympathy, for example, for the local authority officer who has to justify accepting a tender other than the lowest one. And I have a nasty feeling that some clients and some constructors still revert to lowest cost when money is short.

Once we had got over the obsession with lowest cost, the need was to develop a process which would provide public buildings not necessarily cheaply, but economically over their full life. PFI is one of those processes and a PFI supplier, with a 30-year maintenance responsibility, must surely recognise that investment in quality can bring a handsome return over the years.

We have also tried to eliminate the huge costs and inefficiencies which arise from