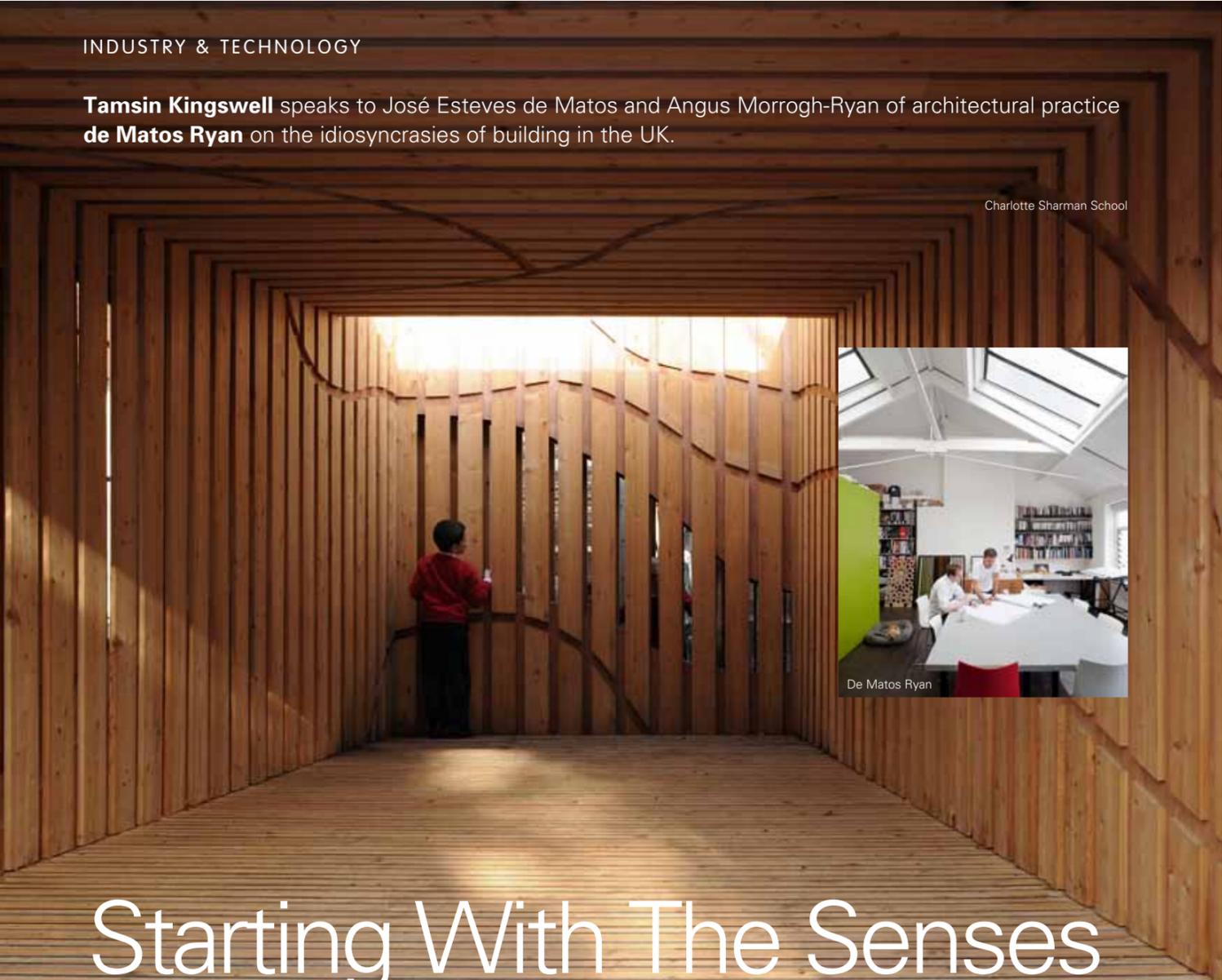


Tamsin Kingswell speaks to José Esteves de Matos and Angus Morrogh-Ryan of architectural practice **de Matos Ryan** on the idiosyncrasies of building in the UK.



Charlotte Sharman School



De Matos Ryan

Starting With The Senses

Great Britain, with its diminutive proportions and wealth of historical buildings, poses a unique challenge to architects. Responding enthusiastically to these issues has carved London-based De Matos Ryan a strong niche. "It's good to have a context to respond to. We like complex conditions and restrictive planning, we thrive on that," laughs José Esteves de Matos. "And it's meant that we managed to get our hands dirty quickly," adds Angus Morrogh-Ryan.

The practice was established in 1999. The pair started to attract attention as soon as 2002 with work on the multi-award winning Cowley Manor luxury hotel. The project's challenge was how to create a hotel environment from a labyrinthine former nursing home, with a grade two star listing from English Heritage. "Our clients were happy to take a modern approach but we didn't want to remove anything with historic value, neither did we want to roll out a by the metre pastiche. Instead we wanted to make a clear distinction between old and new yet

with a reference the original," says Morrogh-Ryan. He adds: "There's no real formula, and of course it's subjective, but it's about borrowing clues from what's there."

Old buildings need architects who are willing to work with and appreciate past glories, but this requires an openness in approach. Part of De Matos Ryan's success lies in their studious avoidance of a prescriptive approach. Instead they prefer to start with the client and the project. "A good client becomes a part of the project and while they don't necessarily inform the style, they do direct the approach," says Esteves de Matos.

Both agree that the most successful projects are those where the client becomes enfranchised, the worst outcome when the client doesn't want to get involved. "We tend to be guided by the needs of the project. Some spaces, like our work with Strada (a chain of UK restaurants) needs to be lively during the day and softened at night. It's about judging the purpose of the space, starting with your senses, then working



Strada



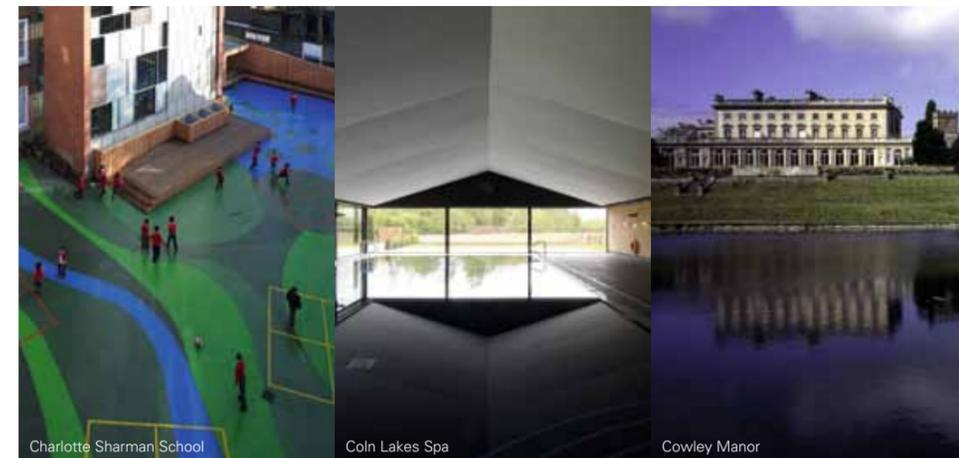
Bentley Manor

backwards," says Esteves de Matos.

Both architects are also interested and believe in the social and public role that architecture plays in motivating community. "Although not every project appears to have a social agenda there are fundamental issues to every project that contribute beyond the immediate agenda. It's really important to consider the quality of the built environment," says Morrogh-Ryan. Both agree that sustainability is not negotiable; clients have to decide to opt out.

However they are careful that the sustainability flag isn't waved to the detriment of business; "A well detailed, well insulated building can achieve as much as 90 per cent of the sustainability of an eco-designed build," says Esteves de Matos. He adds: "I think we are actually quite relaxed about it. I think its really grating when people harp on about sustainability, it should be a given. And sometimes sustainability is too narrow, with no consideration about any aesthetic or the importance of an emotional response to environment." They are against what they describe as 'eco technological paraphernalia' preferring instead to avoid gimmicks and add-ons: "If something isn't simple, human beings will get tired of it. Programme switches are a good example, it's possible to preset maybe five scenes but in a way that's quite lazy and limited as every day is different," says Esteves de Matos.

Another reason for the practice's success is the sheer breadth of projects they are happy to take on, from luxury spas in Gloucestershire, to a children's playground. Its clear that the solutions needed on a tight



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Coln Lakes Spa

Cowley Manor

budget add an extra frisson, rather than a sigh. "Of course what can be achieved nearly always comes down to money, but it's surprising how much is achievable with a little thought. What we like to do is maximise what can be achieved, there's a real challenge to that," says Esteves de Matos.

He cites the project to regenerate an oppressive grey school playground in Elephant & Castle, London with a budget of only £20000. An aquatic pattern of greens was applied to the ground, while an outdoor stage and a clubhouse made from 'undeniably cheap' materials have transformed the space beyond recognition, and within budget.

Along with the tiny budget, it's the bold use of colour that really impresses. Unlike many architects with an 'any colour as long as its grey' attitude, De Matos Ryan has

shown that a confident and sometimes unexpected palette can lift and add an extra dimension to a project. "We certainly don't shy away from colour, I think it should be used like a material. However I think we are shifting a bit. Twelve years down the line and looking at old projects, there are problems with colour, or paint in most cases, not being maintained. And colour is vulnerable to fashion," says Morrogh-Ryan.

In line with their interest in the social effects of architecture, the pair has been looking into the possibilities of improving learning environments through architecture for some time. "Of course we would like to work on public spaces as that's where you can have the biggest impact. Schools have been clobbered by cuts but we do envisage working on them in the future," says Morrogh-Ryan. ▶



Cowley Spa, Cowley Manor

◀ De Matos Ryan was initially involved in the Sorrell Foundation's 'joinedupdesignforschools' project programme. "In the government's BSF programme no-one had asked the students what they wanted, so when we were invited by John Sorrell to look at refectory spaces we talked to students who directed us to thinking about how to open the whole space up, where people could socialise, study, much like the public spaces of a hotel," says Morrogh-Ryan.

Although in no hurry to join other architects experimenting with product design, both architects like the idea of furniture designed specifically for a certain place. At Coln Lakes Spa all the furniture in the clubroom was specially commissioned to De Matos Ryan's design, while at Cowley Manor there was a striking chandelier and fibre-glass tree stump stools. "Many 20th century architects made furniture for their architectural projects and we like that idea. It adds real value to a project, these are one offs that sit perfectly with their environment," says Esteves de Matos. "We like making and the process of design. One of the big problems with architecture is that projects take place over a very long time whereas product design on a small, bespoke scale is far more immediate," adds Morrogh-Ryan.

For the future Esteves de Matos in particular would like to design an individual free standing building. "So often buildings are attached or have historical considerations, it would be good to start from scratch." He cites Bentley Manor, a project that didn't make it due to planning issues, despite the design winning a Roses Design Awards in 2010. This desire to start from scratch is also probably why Seacliff, a private house perched on the cliffs, currently under construction in Devon, is close to his heart. "I do like working with listed buildings but you are always part of a process of evolution. With Seacliff there was an opportunity to work on a project completely in the round."

Both architects remain very involved in the day to day processes of design, something they are loathe to give up. "What our clients pay for is us, not getting passed down the food chain. While there is always the temptation to really expand a practice, we are resisting it as we both like to be very hands on. We like to know everything from the mundane details to the prototyping of products," says Esteves de Matos.

It is this bespoke, personal approach that both architects believe is the reason for the success of De Matos Ryan: "We need more individuality, there's a real

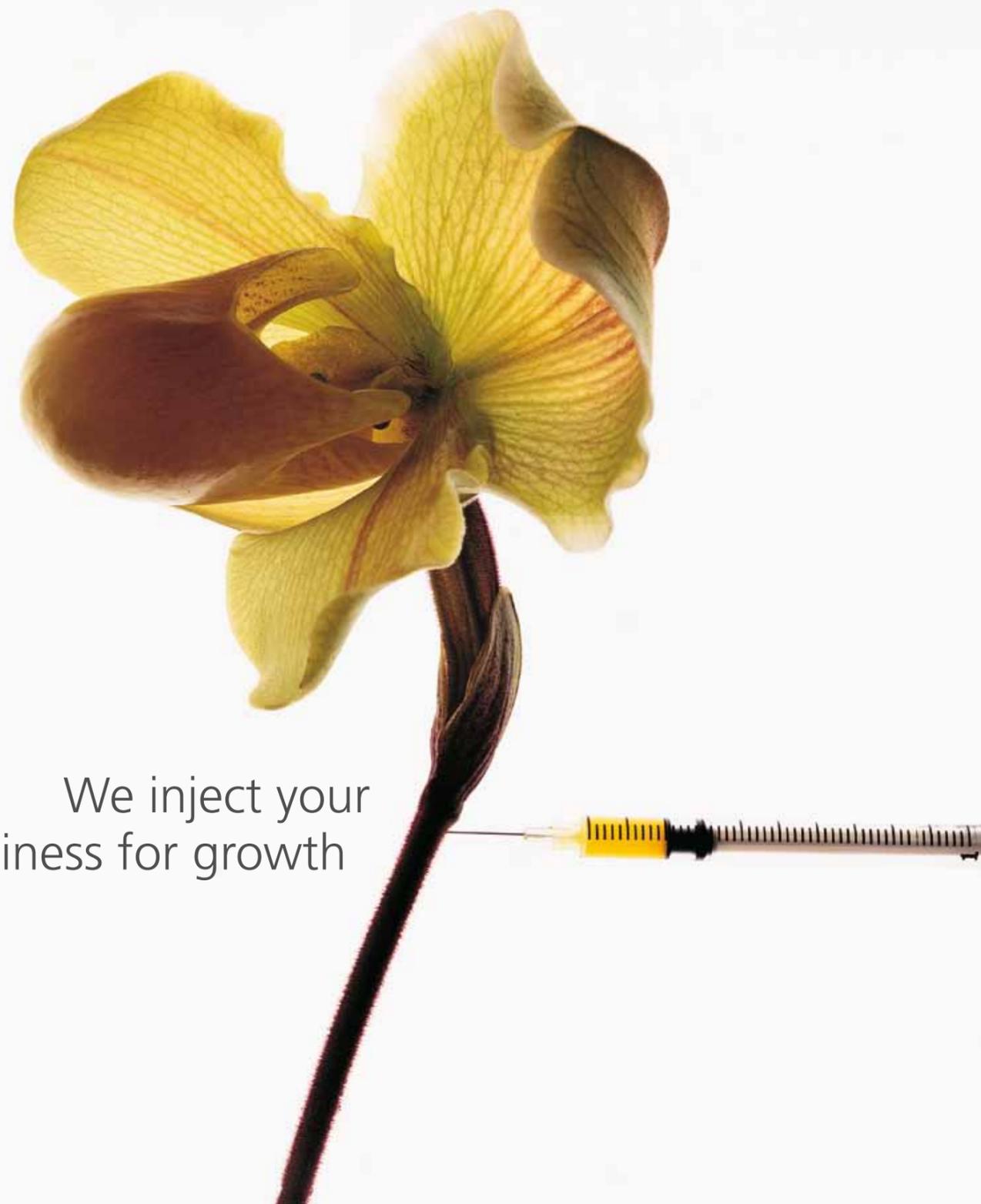
hunger for it and bespoke designs add value and in some cases can be more economic than a commercial mass-made product, it's the best of both worlds," explains Morrogh-Ryan. ■

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