

# For capability read sustainability in 21st century design

**B**EAUTY, in case you weren't aware, is in the eye of the builder. David Strong, chief executive of Inbuilt, a new consultancy specialising in sustainable buildings, communities and construction, has a radical vision that he believes will fundamentally change the way his clients (who will "be a broad-based mix of the public and private") perceive the built environment.

"I'm firmly convinced that delivering genuine sustainability requires a new architectural language and form of expression," says Strong, adding that "soon a building won't be acclaimed as beautiful unless it is also sustainable".

Inbuilt will provide consulting services in the research, design and delivery of sustainable built environments to private sector clients including major housing developers. In the public sector, the consultancy, part of renewable energy company the RES Group, will work for housing associations, hospital trusts and bodies such as regional development agencies.

Strong says of his new company: "Genuine sustainability isn't just about ticking some of the boxes - it's about delivering crime-free, walkable neighbourhoods, and buildings that are fit for people in terms of health and productivity."

Strong's academic training, which extends to post-doctoral research, can lend him an initially diffident air.

## PROFILE

Professor David Strong believes today's buildings must be made differently to be truly beautiful, he tells  
**Martin Baker**

But when he warms to his topic, the legendary enthusiasm of the landscape architect Capability Brown seems to have morphed into the 21st century's very own Sustainability Strong.

"Our aim is to work more effectively with natural systems to heat, cool, ventilate and light our buildings," he says.

"The advent of plate-glass, concrete and building services has made us very lazy. Designers can do anything they want, and traditionally we've thrown energy-intensive mechanical systems at what they've created, to try to fix the problem. That's very wasteful.

"We feel it's important to learn the lessons of what works from vernacular architecture and to fully exploit the natural systems

available for free.

"For example, there is much to learn from how termites use natural cooling, ventilation and humidity control systems, often in very hostile climatic conditions. This is the new science of 'biomimicry' and many of the lessons can apply directly to building design."

Inbuilt is starting with 20 engineers, designers and consultants, but Strong is aiming to grow staff numbers to around 350 by 2011. If Strong achieves this, and the business works the way he hopes, it will exert a huge influence on the built environment.

"Ideally, we get involved with clients at an incredibly early stage," says Strong. "It's a cliché but a truism, that all the important and expensive mistakes in a building project are made on the first day of the design process."

Few sectors of the British economy require more co-operation between public and private sectors than property. Strong has to forge alliances with developers, architects and planners.

"I've never actually worked in the public sector, but when I went to the Building Research Establishment [a government agency that had just been privatised], I had to learn the language, since the majority of our clients were civil servants in the major government departments," says Strong.

"I needed what Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy* would call the Babel Fish: I got people who knew the public



sector well to interpret what was going on, what was being said. It's difficult at first to understand the heavily coded language and the convoluted decision-making process in the civil service."

Both BRE and EA Technology were recently privatised energy agencies, and as such "the majority of employees were ex-civil servants", says Strong.

"Also, at BRE, at first, the vast majority of our income came from the public sector. A key priority for me was to diversify our sources of revenue, since I was very nervous of having to rely on only one or two government departments as major clients. The public sector percentage of our turnover fell from 95pc

## Professor David Strong

**1953** Born

**1967-72** Felsted School, Essex

**1972-76** University of Bath; architecture and building engineering, BSc; articulated student at John Laing

**1976-80** Oriel College, Oxford; engineering science, D Phil.

Industry-based postgraduate  
**1976-82** Glynwed Central Research Unit, Solihull; engineer rising to manager

**1982-83** Institut Cerac, Lausanne; post-doctoral research

**1983-88** WS Atkins; director, energy division

**1988-91** Emstar (part of Shell), sales and marketing director

**1991-98** EA Technology, Capenhurst, Chester; executive director

**1998-2007** BRE Environment, managing director; visiting professor of architecture and the built environment, Nottingham University

**2007-** Inbuilt, chief executive

to 30pc. At the same time, I grew the total turnover of our environment-related activities by a factor of four over the

nine years I was there."

Strong is also chairman of the EU Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD)

implementation advisory group, which is "belatedly implementing the EPBD in the UK. Provided it's fully implemented, the EPBD has enormous potential to substantially reduce carbon emissions from our existing buildings. The directive has to be fully in place by January 4, 2009, or the EC has indicated that it will instigate infraction proceedings.

"I think there's a real possibility that those proceedings will be issued, as it's likely the directive won't be fully implemented in the UK by then - this will be a huge missed opportunity."

So what would Strong like to see to help him to push his sustainability agenda?

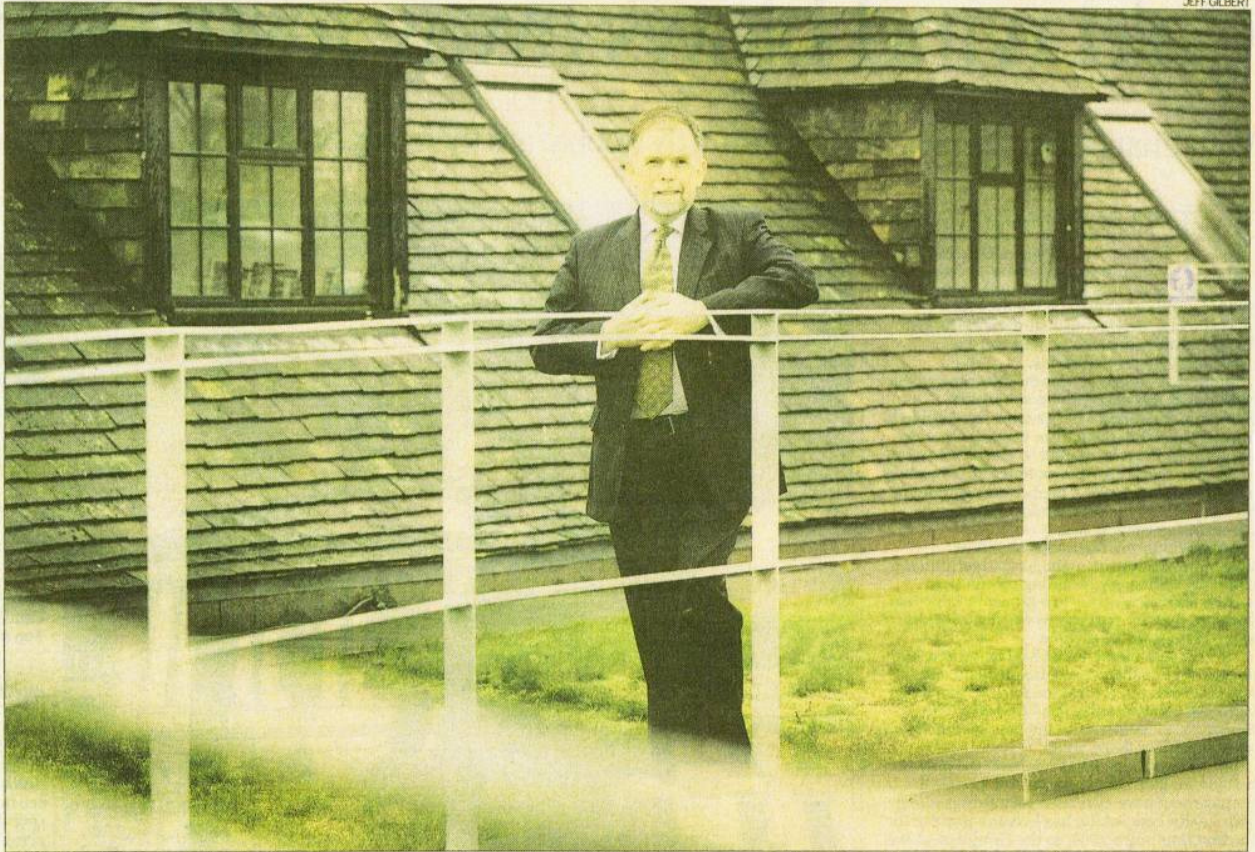
"When I chaired the

'quality of life challenge, built environment group' we proposed simple tax breaks. They were all fiscally neutral and would encourage householders and business to do sensible things that would substantially reduce their carbon footprint - these were in *A blueprint for a green economy*. But it remains to be seen how many of them will find their way into future Conservative policy.

"Also, we need to shift the focus of policy from trying to achieve unrealistic goals of carbon neutrality for new homes, towards large-scale renewable technologies installed where they are most cost-effective."

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**At the top of his game: Professor David Strong heads a consultancy, Inbult, which promises a greener architectural vision for private and public sector clients alike**