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Determinedly modernist

By Edwin Heathcote
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Furzey Hall farm, by Waugh Thistleton architects

"In the 18th century," writes Michael Manser, whose practice celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year, "Britain created the best housing and planning the world has ever seen. It was design-led by educated and sophisticated clients. What depresses me is that since then it has been downhill all the way and 300 years on, Georgian is still estate agents' prime selling tool. For the last 90 years speculative housing has been generally lamentable."

But what can be done? "It's getting better," he says in his Whitehall mansion flat, overlooking London's Embankment. "Until recently 80 per cent of houses were not designed by architects and that is changing." Part of the reason it is changing is an Royal Institute of British Architects' award, the Manser Medal, which has been recognising innovative, intelligent and elegant houses since 2001.

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Manser is an architect and former president of the Riba who has had a powerful, probably underrated, influence on the development of postwar architecture in Britain. His own designs for houses, dozens of works of great modernist clarity throughout south-east England, showed what was possible – how modernism could be integrated into a seemingly resistant English landscape. There is his exquisite Capel Manor, a crystalline glass box atop the ruined podium of an old Victorian manor house; there is the low-slung Californian chic of Forest Lodge; and the sheer simplicity of Buckland, which seems to float above the landscape. His larger works, most notably the Hilton hotel at Heathrow, leave an indelible image, a relentless modernity that chimes perfectly with the high-tech, Ballardian environs of the airport.

Though retired himself, his office continues, arguably more successful (and more international) than ever, with his son Jonathan in charge, as the Manser Practice – still based in a Hammersmith building designed by Michael. Recent buildings include embassies in Dar es Salaam and Harare as well as the swanky Sketch restaurant in London's Mayfair. His daughter Victoria, meanwhile, has her own eponymous practice. Over tea, Manser brings out an old copy of a 1962 magazine called Home. On the cover is his minimal self-designed house in Leatherhead, the children playing as toddlers in the garden. "Good photo," he says, "though it's a bit of a shame about the plastic daffodils."

"It was easier to build houses then," he recalls. "There were more sites. Since then, the speculative developers have been sending scouts out and have bought up all the good land. But the trouble is most architects' careers begin with the building of a house, the situation was stifling them."

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The Manser Medal (which comes with a £10,000 prize and is sponsored by HSBC Private Bank) was a reincarnation of an existing house building prize, which was taken over by the Riba. "I wasn't comfortable with the idea of a Manser Medal at first," he says, with a slight wince. "It always sounded a bit pretentious. But I suppose there's a certain alliteration to it. And it has done some good – I suppose it's ultimately worth the embarrassment."

In its brief history the medal has launched the careers of a number of architects, often with their first buildings. The first winner was Cezary Bednarski, with his house in Barnes ingeniously shaped to inhabit an awkward leftover site. Subsequent winners included Burd Haward Marston, Jamie Fobert, Mole Architects, Robert Dye, Knox Bhavan and Alison Brooks. The past two years' winners exemplify the diversity encompassed by the medal and its potential as exemplar. In 2008 it



Michael Manser with his son Jonathan and daughter Victoria

went, unusually, to a large, established practice, RSHP, the former Richard Rogers Partnership, for its affordable eco-houses at Oxley Woods in Milton Keynes. These showed what could be done, using much prefabrication and off-site assembly, generous space standards and a friendly yet determinedly modernist design. It also highlighted the dearth of big international practices getting involved in mass housing – still a sector generating low profits.

Last year's winner was Pitman Tozer, for its ingenious sliver of west London urban infill for architect Luke Tozer's young family, the Gap House. It was up against schemes as diverse as dRMM's brilliantly quirky Sliding House (a conservatory which opens out on railways tracks) and S333's very fine social housing on east London's Tarling Estate. It was a list which acknowledged a burgeoning diversity of design across all sectors of the market.

This year's shortlist is similarly encouraging – albeit markedly more luxurious. It includes an eco-house, a historic conversion and the inevitable architect's dwelling. The combined house and gallery in London's Bateman's Row by Theis and Khan – a house for themselves and an office for their practice – was shortlisted for the Riba Stirling Prize, the UK's premier architectural award, and it is a skilful intervention into the chaotic fabric of Shoreditch. James Gorst has a more established practice and, unusually for the UK, one recognised for its houses. His central London Leaf House is billed as a contemporary interpretation of the Georgian house, restrained and relatively austere, but a dwelling that revels in space and light.

Three of the schemes reuse existing architectural fabric, weaving the contemporary into the texture of the old. Most striking is the Martello Tower. A collaboration between architects Piercy Conner and product designers Billings Jackson, the interior of this Suffolk building revolves around a brick-built central space of Piranesian solidity and the rooms revel in the thickness of brick. Acme Architects' Hunsett Mill house extends a historic Norfolk dwelling beside an exquisite windmill to create a domestic ensemble that builds on the hybrid industrial/domestic language of architecture. Furzey Hall Farm by Waugh Thistleton similarly builds on a vernacular Cotswolds architecture of a particular place using modernist vocabulary to link and illuminate a pair of existing historic buildings. There is an almost west coast US feel to the new pool and glazed dining area, open to the landscape and minimally detailed. Finally John Christophers' Zero Carbon house is self-explanatory, a piece of clever urban infill in an ordinary Birmingham residential street which shows the potential of the contemporary house to radically reduce energy consumption.

Manser himself is adamant that the issue of energy will come to dominate future architectural discourse and practice. "Oil and gas is going to run out in 30 years," he says. "No one's done anything about it. It's extraordinary. That's why it's important that the winner of the medal each year is a prototype, an example of how it could be done."

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Details

The Manser Medal awards ceremony takes place on November 11, www.architecture.com

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