



Climate focus
... Muyiwa Oki,
who asked to
be pictured by
the incinerator
he worked on

'It feels like our time has come'

The Royal Institute of British Architects has tended to be run by elderly white men in bow ties. Muyiwa Oki, its youthful first black president, tells **Oliver Wainwright** how he plans to shake things up

With its imposing bronze doors, inlaid marble corridors and committee rooms lined with kid leather, the Royal Institute of British Architects is the apogee of professional pomp. Built in the 1930s as the modern profession of architecture was being forged, it bears all the hallmarks of an organisation desperate to shore up its authority and proclaim a sense of certified

superiority. Its every detail seems to scream: "We are more than mere builders. This is an exclusive, royally chartered profession."

Entering the imperial headquarters on Portland Place, a street of embassies and mansion blocks in central London, you find the names of every RIBA president since 1835 carved into the stone walls. It is a regal roll call of old, bow-tied white men. Unsurprisingly, there are only three women among the 79 names, and only one non-white president, Sunand Prasad.

The 80th name, set to be carved into the wall next year, will stand out from the likes of Thomas Philip Earl de Grey and Sir Alexander

James Beresford Hope. Muyiwa Oki, who was born in Nigeria, is making history, not just as the first black president of the RIBA but also, at 31, as the youngest. Most unusually of all, he is not the founder of an eponymous practice, nor a long-serving RIBA committee member. Instead he is an "architectural worker", selected by a grassroots campaign of early-career architects determined to elect one of their own to the eminent post. It feels as though they've cracked the system, against the odds - and now all hopes are pinned on Oki to shake things up.

"For too long the RIBA president position has been seen as something that operatives 'are in line for' and 'deserve' after years of committee meetings and empty chatter," declared on open letter in March signed by a broad coalition of campaign groups, from the Future Architects Front to the Architects Climate Action Network. "The next president needs to be representative of its members! Time for the first worker at the helm."

Fuelled by an energetic social media campaign and an independent hustings organised by the website Architecture Social, at which Oki was selected, the radical network of pressure groups succeeded in mobilising a younger generation of architects - overworked, underpaid and thirsty for change - to make themselves known at the ballot box.

"I feel overwhelmed by the support I received from all around

the world," says Oki, sitting in the art deco surrounds of 66 Portland Place where he will have his office from next September. "But I was always quietly confident. His election arrives as clamours for fundamental change in the industry have never been louder. Discontent in the workplace is widespread. In a recent Architects' Journal survey, 48% of respondents said that working in a practice had made them less likely to want to qualify as an architect.

Earlier this month, we saw the first ever industrial dispute in a private practice in the UK, when employees at a RIBA-chartered firm, Atomik Architecture, began the process of balloting for strike action following a long-running dispute over pay and working

hours. Momentum is growing. The union the employees belong to, United Voices of the World: Section of Architectural Workers, was founded in 2019, and now counts 500 paid members in its ranks.

Education is also under the spotlight. A report in June into misconduct at University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture found a "toxic culture" of bullying, sexual misconduct and racism spanning decades. It finally lifted the lid on what had long been an open secret, an ingrained masochism endemic to architectural education, leading to stronger calls than ever for a fundamental rethink of how the subject is taught, and the need for alternative routes to qualification.

"It finally exposed something that everyone knew happened," says Oki, who studied at the University of Sheffield, and says he never experienced such abuse himself. "There had always been a stiff upper lip attitude to it. We need to reimagine a way to encourage students to be curious, creative and innovative, without exploiting them. It's time to look at different pathways into the profession, and focus more on outcomes-based education."

In its role as the official validating body, sending visiting boards to inspect architecture schools every five years, shouldn't the RIBA have called out this toxic culture long ago? "I was student rep at Sheffield, so I showed the RIBA panel around," says Oki. "I saw first hand how it's almost

a staged process - so you can't blame them for not seeing what was hidden. But we need to have a conversation about updating that validation process."

Oki supports the consultation being led by the Architects Registration Board, the professional regulator, into the idea of scrapping the onerous Parts 1, 2 and 3 of the qualification process, which usually take a minimum of seven years to complete. "The key is inclusion, and making it possible for people from all backgrounds to get into architecture," he says. "That's my main goal as president."

He sees architecture as a broad church, and he's keen to expand the membership of the RIBA beyond people working in conventional practice - a view



"Thirsty for change" ... a placard created by the new architects' union

PHOTOGRAPHS: GRAEME ROBERTSON / THE GUARDIAN; ALAMY; UUV-SAW

"I know all of BS 6464, he says (that's the British Standard for reinforced plastic pipes, fittings and joints)"



He hasn't founded his own practice and isn't a long-serving RIBA committee member. Instead he is a worker

informed by his own diverse career. After graduating from Sheffield, Oki worked in Birmingham on residential projects at Glenn Howells Architects before moving to London to work at Grimshaw, first on HS2 Euston ("a political football"), then on the North London Heat and Power project, a controversial incinerator in Edmonton where he "worked to balance local tensions" - diplomatic experience that will come in handy as president. Last year, he moved to the large construction consultancy Mace, where he is now working on off-site manufacturing for a public sector client, with the job title technical assessor. "I find myself reciting building regulations and British Standards," he says with a laugh. "I know all of BS 6464."

He may well be the first RIBA president who can recite the specification for reinforced plastics pipes, fittings and joints for process plants off by heart - as well as the first who has worked "on the other side", for a contractor. At a time when the relationship between architects and builders can be fraught, Oki may be just the kind of bridge the industry needs.

"I want the RIBA to welcome all people who design the built environment," he says, "whether it's in a traditional architecture practice, or a construction consultancy, or working in a local authority body, or even working in a tech startup on new forms of manufacturing. We need to build on the work that organisations like Public Practice have done [placing

architects in public sector roles], repositioning architecture at the centre of the real estate world, and diversifying the way we operate."



Professional pomp ... the RIBA building

Does that include endorsing private island resorts? Eyebrows were raised last month when the RIBA launched a competition to design a new luxury resort on an island in the Bahamas. "Why is @RIBAComps promoting exploitative guff like this?" tweeted procurement expert Russell Curtis. "No project at the end of it, and total cost to practices entering will be orders of magnitude greater than £50k prize pot. Who is benefiting from this exercise?" The Future Architects Front was more blunt: "@RIBA just straight up acting as a middleman for island-buying oligarchs now is it?" Oki is diplomatic as ever: "The RIBA should be involved in a wide range of competitions," he says. "But the kind of projects we take on need to be thought through more deeply."

He has an ambitious three-point agenda, including mandating paid overtime for RIBA chartered practices; introducing quarterly "town halls" to engage members in key decisions; and putting the climate emergency at the forefront of everything the RIBA does. "It's about giving our members the right tools, so they can make the economic and social arguments for environmental sustainability," he says. "So when they get pushback, they've got the metrics to argue back."

Such bold pledges have been made before, by countless optimistic incoming presidents yet to encounter the byzantine workings of the RIBA. Will Oki finally overcome the sense of institutional inertia? "Growing up in Nigeria," he says, "I'm all too familiar with this attitude to political leaders, that 'someone will fix it' - and of course they never do. That's why I put myself forward. Can I be that 'someone', with a vision for the future, fresh ideas, and the energy to make meaningful change?"

He may not have all the answers yet. But backed by an energetic network of campaign groups, with real hunger for visible results, there's good reason to believe that, in this time of multiple crises, Oki is the advocate that architecture needs.

I was drawn to the light. One of my early mentors was the US photographer Arnold Newman. When I look at this, I think of his words about using available light and the environment to show people's lives. I also like the way the children are bracketed by their great-grandparents because family is the foundation on which we craft our identities. This is a domestic portrait: the portraits help underscore that theme.

I try to keep photographing my children to a minimum. If I took the camera out all the time, they'd get annoyed. These pictures aren't meant to be photojournalistic: my kids know I'm there but I try to work quickly, so they don't feel like they're "on".

I do advertising work sometimes and those scenes are perfectly arranged. This isn't that. I like the masking tape you can see on the back of the eggs glued to the door's window, the piece of streamer that's hanging off the floral arrangement, how blue my son's

My best shot

Jessica Todd Harper

'I like to photograph the everyday. The moments we don't pay attention to are the ones that actually matter'



Most of our lives are not as dramatic as the lives in novels or movies. A few instances have that kind of excitement but most of our days are passed in everyday moments. I seek to elevate these to something grander, something that connects us to a greater sense of meaning in our lives.

The kids in this photo are three of my four children. It was taken in 2017 in the hall of our home in Merion Station, outside Philadelphia. It was the day after Easter. The children had just come home from school and were reading in the hall. What I like is that these three individuals are occupied in their own worlds. As parents, when we're photographing children, we have a tendency to get them to line up, look at the camera and smile. Here, it's not about them being cute or part of a family, though. It's about them in their own private spaces, their own minds.

The child who's reading a book seems oblivious to me taking a picture. The one studying a map is very engaged in that. The way my daughter is cocking her head to the side and looking curiously - it's almost like she's studying the viewer, rather than the viewer studying her. There's a sense of individuality that I find interesting.

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socks are. All those things are "wrong", but preserve the veracity of the moment, making you feel this is a real domestic space.

I grew up looking at paintings. My mom loved taking my sister and me to galleries and museums.

I've always been drawn to northern European artists: Van Eyck, Vermeer, Holbein. When you look at northern European pictures you realise everything's happening beneath the surface, that the environment is important in describing the narrative. I wanted to be an artist. But they didn't have room for me in the painting class at school so I got accidentally put into the photography class. I quickly fell in love with the medium.

I received a letter from a woman who had spent time looking at my photographs. She said they provided a sense of hope and beauty about our relationships with the people closest to us. Maybe there's a sense of truth to my work that resonates with people. That's what art does: it makes sense of our lives. With my work, I hope to make

sense of the quotidian, the parts of our lives we don't necessarily pay attention to that are actually the parts that matter. At the end of our lives, we will look back at those.

Interview by Graeme Green. Here by Jessica Todd Harper is published by Damiani.

PHOTOGRAPHS: JESSICA TODD HARPER

The CV
Born: Albany, New York, 1975
Trained: Bryn Mawr College; Rochester Institute of Technology.
Influences: Arnold Newman, Johannes Vermeer, Hans Holbein, Carl Larsson.
High point: 'An exhibition at Le Centre Claude Cahun, Nantes.'
Low point: 'As a student, I fell down the stairs of the Paris Métro and tore the ligaments in my ankle.'
Top tip: 'Work with what you're most curious about as that will translate.'

