



# by royal appointment

Now you could hardly accuse us of being Royalists, writes Roger Croft, but this balmy summer's day (with the summer we've had you can probably pinpoint the exact day) sees us catching up with a slightly bashful Diana Monkhouse, Associate at Swanke Hayden Connell Architects.

**b**ashful because she's relating to us the fact that she's just returned from the official opening of The Willis Building, Norman Foster's acclaimed development in Lime Street. SHCA were the interior designers for The Willis Lime Street project, and the building was opened by Prince Andrew.

This completed a 30-year cycle for both Foster and (the then) Willis Faber and Dumas. Way back, Foster completed an extraordinary facility for Willis in Ipswich which in 1991 became the youngest ever building to be given protection by English Heritage when it was listed.

After 25 years in the business (yes, I know I don't look old enough!) I've worked with a vast number of specifiers and have some cracking relationships (you know who you are), and a few who leave a lot to be desired (I will guarantee you don't know who you are!). Di very definitely falls into the former category. I'd like to go on record and advise that I've known Di for a number of years and really like her no-nonsense approach. Di certainly knows her stuff and calls a spade a spade – hob-nobbing with the royals over canapés is not a regular day out for our Di.

As with all our profiles, we're more than interested in how our 'victim' came into the industry. 'After college I was looking to go ▶▶▶▶▶





▶▶▶▶into graphic design – although my careers adviser seemed extremely keen in getting me into banking – so I applied to The Kent Institute of Art and Design, only to be told they didn't think I could draw! How ironic is that? My immediate reaction was 'where's the bank?' However I stuck to my guns and discussed with the college my enthusiasm for design, they asked if I'd considered Spatial Design, we discussed it further and I enrolled in a BTEC Diploma course and the rest, as they say, is history!

'On leaving KIAD I joined Percy Thomas Partnership and stayed there for over 13 years. It was here that I discovered a mantra I've taken with me through my career in that it's not the place you work that's important, but it's the people you meet and the projects you work on. I was really thrown in at the deep end and my first project

was the International Convention Centre in Birmingham, which was opened by The Queen (is there a trend developing here?) and, although it was described by Prince Charles as a 'carbuncle', it won numerous awards.

'PTP then amalgamated with Seward Glyn Marsh and we found ourselves doing a lot of retail design, especially for Virgin Megastores. Their project in Barcelona is one that springs to mind and the Dorchester Hospital, which not only won awards but was actually acclaimed by Prince Charles!

'However, the project we're most remembered for is for the Ministry of Defence project at Abbey Wood in Bristol. This project was memorable, not only for its size (1.2m sq ft over 11 buildings, including crèche, library and conference facilities), but in the way it▶▶▶▶▶▶





▶▶▶▶ was conceived and brought to fruition. We were responsible for the master planning, landscaping, architecture and interior design of the whole site and worked extremely closely with all other disciplines – so much so, we were living with them during the week! But seriously, we had such a remarkable team and I learnt so much at such an early stage of my career. A lot of that team I'm still in contact with now, such as Tony Brown who worked for Bucknell Austin at the time – a QS with more than just a passing understanding of the cost/design synergy – how fortunate was I?



After PTP Di joined SHCA and is now ensconced there as an Associate, Senior Designer, Project Leader and internal furniture specialist. 'My role is responsibility for project design, delivery and successful client relationships. My philosophy is to foster leadership and co-operation of all team members, consultants and contractors. It's a philosophy very much prevalent at SHCA, which is more than justified by our successful, long term and continuing relationships with many of our clients.

'I'm privileged enough to supervise interiors projects of all sizes and complexities in a myriad of sectors and managing the process from strategic briefing, design, through to completion – and there's rarely a dull moment.'

The same could be said about her personal life. Along with Dave, her partner for over 22 years, her two young children (Matthew, coming on five and Jessica, nearly two), Di still finds time to enjoy her local church and community. She's a member of the Mother's Union and is heavily involved in organising fun days for the children along with supporting activities and groups in the community. One recent arts and crafts activity took on a pirates and princesses theme whereby she worked with kids on making crowns and cutlasses out of cardboard. Knife making? For children? In South London? I think we'll move on!

When time permits, Di is a great fan of the sky blue half of Manchester – that'll please the *Mix* Publisher who thought he was unique down here. 'I've been a City fan for as long as I can remember, my father was born at the back of Maine Road and my Great Uncle, who's 95, was at the first ever game at Maine Road and also went to the first at Eastlands.'



▶▶▶▶ She and Dave are also eight years in to their own house refurbishment – ‘very much a work in progress as there’s still a few years left in it!’

Di takes an immense interest in the contract furniture market and is certainly more knowledgeable than the majority of her peers in this area. Manufacturers with ‘work in development’ are forever using her as a sounding board and they’ll certainly hear it from Di. ‘I’m very interested in developments in the office furniture market and like to keep up to date and offer my views when asked. It really helps our cause when we’re discussing solutions with our clients, not just on workplace trends but also how products are adapting to these changes. I use the word ‘adapting’ because one of the problems that I have with office furniture companies is that the majority seem hell bent on developing a new product for every conceivable trend. I feel they would be much better suited to adapting existing products rather than trying to reinvent the wheel. I’ve lost count of the amount of times I’ve been approached by manufacturers introducing their new product, which replaces the one they introduced a couple of years before and is now ‘obsolete’. If they were able to adapt their existing products, they are building in non-obsolence. It’s better for the market, end users and the environment. With this in mind, I really appreciate what Herman Miller has tried to do with Abak. It’s now in its third or fourth generation yet the latest developments can be fully integrated with the original and it still works well alongside Ethospace. We’re often advised not to treat furniture as a commodity. If that’s truly the case, don’t treat it as one yourselves! Evolve your product and don’t look to continually reinvent.’

So on that note, we take our leave of Diana Monkhouse, bowing and scraping as we go. Believe you me, knowing the real Diana Monkhouse, if we went down that route we’d get a right Royal kick up the...●