



Careers

Just the job Alex Ely has left CABE to spend more time with his architecture practice. He tells **George Hay** why



Age 33

Job Joint founding partner of Mæ, a five-strong architecture firm based in Hackney, east London

Employment history After graduating in 1998, he worked with architect Pierre d'Avoine for three years until he set up Mæ with Michael Howe. He joined CABE in 2002, where he was in charge of housing policy and sustainable communities

Qualifications RIBA chartered architect, MA from Royal College of Art

Lives Islington, north London

What is Mæ?

We create highly crafted, high-quality public spaces and urban design. We work on everything from housing developments to cemeteries. With the practice we don't want to get embedded too deeply in projects without recognising the wider context. We want to grow in a way that will deliver good buildings but that challenges the way things have been done.

So why did you join CABE?

When we started off as a young practice, we asked ourselves how we were going to get a view of the wider world. CABE seemed ideal. Working with people such as Sir Stuart Lipton, Jon Rouse and Dickon Robinson was inspiring. I planned to stay for two years but ended up staying for three. They got quite a lot out of me and I learned a huge amount from them.

And why did you leave?

I didn't want to be a civil servant for life: I want to build stuff. My experience from CABE will inform how the practice shapes up – I want to use the lessons practically.

What's the best thing you did at CABE?

I think the *Housing Audit* [on standards of housing design quality] is a really important piece of research. Everyone thinks there's a lot of rubbish housing out there but it was vital to get a proper information base. It showed design isn't

entirely subjective: there are underlying principles of quality. I was also proud of the *Homebuyers' Guide*, which was all about raising consumer awareness of good design.

Who's the best architect you've ever worked with?

Pierre d'Avoine. He's someone I admire and respect hugely. He shaped how I think about architecture.

What are you doing next?

We're working on a chapel in Letchworth, Hertfordshire, and a big housing development in Faversham, Kent, looking at how to create a modern vernacular style to fit in with the area. We're also in the early stages of a project to look at how to remodel terraced housing in the housing market renewal pathfinder areas. I'm also a CABE enabler and want to continue contributing to the debate on housing.

What should CABE do next?

I think it's got to focus on getting stuck into specific projects, especially in the regions. There's a bit of a danger that CABE could be used as a scapegoat if anything goes wrong. At the moment, the ODPM often has the attitude that everything to do with design is all right because we've got CABE. In reality, CABE has limited resources and can't do everything. What CABE is about is creating aspirations and exemplars.