

Creative Industries Federation – Brexit Conference

Speech by Amanda Levette
National Gallery, London
15 March 2018

During my time as an architect, I've seen how membership of the EU has hugely increased the talent pool and how we've thrived as a result.

I've seen how open borders have enriched our discipline – because architecture feeds off diversity.

Attracting and retaining talent from across Europe has helped British practices to become world leaders.

If we're to maintain that pre-eminence, there can be no compromise on free movement or the opportunity to recruit freely.

In my practice, we have people from thirteen different countries and over half are non-British EU citizens.

This is typical of most creative offices who work at an international level.

The diversity brings different perspectives and different cultural references – and our work is all the richer for that.

When we start a new project, we need to be agile.

Language skills are vital, but it's also the local knowledge of context and regulations that are essential when working on projects across Europe.

Different educational backgrounds also give us a broader skillset.

On the continent, architectural training is more technical and encourages different ways of explaining buildings. For example, Spanish universities don't allow students to present their work in person to their tutors—everything has to be in the drawing.

In the UK, it is very different and there is a much greater emphasis on the student's explaining their conceptual thinking.

We need both.

Today, British practices benefit from a virtuous circle – we can recruit the very best people, work with them to realise exceptional projects, and in doing so perpetuate our pre-eminence.

Any weak links in this chain – including barriers to recruitment – will lead to a downward, vicious cycle that will be difficult to escape.

And what will happen to those European citizens already here? In my office, there is a fear that comes from uncertainty.

My team are exceptional people at a formative time in their careers and they're making a huge contribution.

Many of our young architects have made their homes here – they're putting down roots, getting onto the property ladder and starting families.

They're mobile and ambitious, but a sense of community is extremely important to them.

An open community is a big part of London's allure. It is culture and diversity that has attracted young talent to our cities.

But those talented young professionals who want to contribute to the UK are starting to go elsewhere.

Migration of talent happens very quickly.

We've already had people leave to go back to their home towns in Europe and we're seeing a marked decrease in the number of EU applicants.

Economies in Spain and Portugal are picking up. France and Holland are looking like better alternatives. Their cities are welcoming and more affordable.

The culture of the UK's cities will continue to attract people but we've been complacent in expecting it to be enough and to always be there.

We're losing our reputation for tolerance and diversity - the very values on which our cities thrive.

There is a universality to creativity – the most talented people can and will set up anywhere.

So, we need to send a message that young creatives are welcome here and we need to send it fast.

The longer we hear only hopes rather than answers from our leaders, the greater the psychological damage.

I would be derelict in my duty if I were not now exploring the potential for having a base in the EU.

We are being actively encouraged to set up an office in Paris and they're making it financially competitive, because they see the value that a practice like ours would bring to the city.

But this is a distraction for us.

And it sends the wrong message – our studio and our discipline have collaboration at its core. Having separate offices for people with different passports runs completely counter to those values.

In the 20th Century, Britain went from the position of being the “workshop of the world,” when we sent finished goods across the globe, to being the “workshop for the world”, importing talent and exporting ideas.

If we can't import the talent, how can we export the ideas?

Many people today will talk about the impressive contribution that the creative industries make to our GDP.

But to talk about the creative sector only in terms of money is to miss the point.

As an architect, I'm asked to design the very physical manifestations of a nation's identity – its buildings and its cities.

Yes, we're entrepreneurs— hundreds of thousands of people are employed in the sector and it generates billions of pounds in revenue. But this is about values that money cannot buy.

The creative industries are not just an economic success story – we're also ambassadors who help shape our sense of who we are as a nation and communicate Britain's identity across Europe.

The EU is a visionary idea – a union that is social and cultural as well as economic, one that came out of war and intended to create a lasting peace.

But in the decade or so leading up to the EU referendum, almost all our politicians failed to convey the ethos of this union.

That lack of positivity and the negative rhetoric about Europe played out in both the “Leave” and the “Remain” campaigns.

Very rarely was the focus on what we gain from Europe – and even less frequent was the focus on what we have and can achieve together.

In his excellent speech for the Federation a few weeks' ago, John Major said that “Brexit has been the most divisive issue of our lifetime...”

We need to heal those divisions. And culture is better than anything at repairing rifts.

We practice co-operation and collaboration on a daily basis. We find ways of bridging divides, blurring thresholds and building consensus. Our artists, writers and musicians tackle some of the big existential questions of who we are and where we're going.

There has never been a more important time in society to celebrate what unites rather than divides us.

I've worked across Europe and seen how respected British creatives are when it comes to finding common ground.

In Berlin, two of the most important civic projects since the reunification of Germany are by British architects: the Reichstag by Norman Foster and the Neues Museum by David Chipperfield.

Both projects go to the very heart of German identity and the painful reconciliation of the past with today.

My office has been entrusted with the remodelling of Galeries Lafayette in Paris.

The department store is an icon of the city that has 37m visitors each year—more than the 9m who go to the Louvre or the 7m who go to the Eiffel Tower.

So this project is not just about the department store it's about "l'art de vivre à la Française" – in effect we're looking at what it means to be French.

Our client, a French family business, didn't hesitate to give this role to a British practice because they understood we have empathy and sensitivity to the spirit and heritage of both the store and its city.

Here in London, the museums and institutions of South Kensington were the idea of a German-born, adopted Briton, Prince Albert.

Last July, the V&A opened their largest project in over 100 years, the Exhibition Road Quarter.

Looking back on our six years of work there, I question how such a project would be different in post-Brexit Britain.

We depended on talent and expertise from architects and specialists from across Europe.

By way of example, the porcelain tiles for the courtyard required two years of intense research with a manufacturer based in The Netherlands.

Yes, we have great manufacturers in Britain.

But we cannot replace the expertise that we don't have. Tichelaar, is the oldest company in Holland and they've been working with ceramics for over 400 years.

In future, Dutch tiles may prove to be too expensive and we'll have to use cheaper, inferior products for our national museums.

All clients – and especially public institutions – need cost certainty. But unknown tariffs and delays at customs will give cause for alarm.

Rather than a bold new Britain, we will become more cautious and risk-averse. And that runs completely counter to creative thinking.

So, my message to our leaders is: Do not mess with this trans-European collaboration.

It's not just about trade and what we can extract, it's about culture and society. It's about the exchange of talent and knowledge and respect for each other's nations.

It has taken decades to build this spirit of co-operation, but it could be dismantled in months.

The rest of Europe is busy getting on with business as usual and looking on with bemusement at our anxiety. They will be fine without us.

This European indifference should be extremely worrying for our leaders.

I will always try to work in Europe and continue to express a commonality of ideals – of democracy, openness and creativity.

But I fear that it will not be so easy in a post-Brexit Britain.

The creative industries are engaged, enterprising and solve problems every day. It's what we do. We have a voice that is listened to and respected on an international stage.

But loss of talent will hugely dilute our voice and the UK's pre-eminence in the creative sector.

We need to mobilise now and to hold our leaders to account – so that Britain remains a creative nation - of hope, diversity and tolerance.