



# The knight behind the portcullis

Portcullis House has generated countless headlines, but its architect, Sir Michael Hopkins, has featured in very few of them. So who is this powerful yet elusive figure?  
by Hannah Baldock. Illustration by Thomas Barwick

THE MOMENT LAST WEEK WHEN THE QUEEN officially opened Portcullis House, the £233m office for MPs, must have been a poignant one for architect, Sir Michael Hopkins. The ceremony marked the completion of a magnum opus that has dominated the past 12 years of his career.

But whereas previous projects have won the 65-year-old plaudits and a knighthood, this one has attracted unprecedented criticism. The press and public have pilloried its appearance, with architecture critics calling it "as leaden as it is diaphanous" and "black and forbidding ... a Transylvanian fortress".

MPs have complained of teething troubles since moving in last summer, including fire alarms and sprinklers going off without warning, a lack of storage space and few places to plug in kettles. "I could not have justified its expenditure,"

chancellor Gordon Brown said last month, adding his voice to the chorus that has attacked its exorbitant cost.

Hopkins has kept his head beneath the parapet of late and has declined to be interviewed by *Building*. Whether this was because of the storm surrounding Portcullis House is hard to tell: he has always kept a relatively low profile. Arguably the third most esteemed living architect after James Foster and Rogers, he has nothing like their public profile and is regarded as something of an enigma. "He wants the architecture to speak for itself," explains a colleague. "He is very much a doer rather than a talker," says another. The signs are that he is wise to let the dust

settle on Portcullis House. Already a growing body of opinion predicts that once the furore over the cost has died down, people will start to appreciate the building as an exemplar of environment-conscious design, and an object lesson in structural integrity.

"I think Portcullis House will be a slow burner. It does not meet with immediate universal approval, but it stands up to closer examination. It has a structural logic, consistency, clarity of detailing," says a colleague of Hopkins.

"You may not like how it looks, but it is a very tight piece of design. Every part of the external envelope has functional criteria derived from environmental logic," says a project source.

Although MPs continue to wring their hands over accusations that they have been profligate with public money, Hopkins has been largely exonerated from blame for the cost overruns, which have been attributed to bungled procurement, unforeseen construction contingencies and inflation. It seems he will walk away from the project with his reputation intact, as well as fees calculated as a percentage of the inflated construction cost.

Hopkins has a reputation for designs that are expensive and hard to build, and that often result in contractual wrangling. He will not be on the Christmas card list of many trade contractors, one of whom says he is "notoriously difficult to work with on a day-to-day basis, to get approvals to build and get things done".

Hopkins' clients have also been on the receiving

end of the same stern treatment. "He achieves buildings of great integrity by being tough with clients. He will not let a commercial client water down or weaken his ideas," says a long-standing collaborator.

And former staff of his 100-strong Marylebone office say he "does not suffer fools gladly" and is extremely exacting. "He is a master at being difficult and asking the awkward question," says one former colleague.

Yet his supporters argue that it is only by being so tough that he is able to execute his designs, and that Portcullis House is a tribute to his determination and conviction. "He is good strategically; he can hold his nerve and see his way through the morass of relationships, publicity and different agendas on projects," says a colleague.

Lord St John of Fawsley, who commissioned Hopkins to design the Queen's Building when he was master of Emmanuel College Cambridge, seconds this. "We had some terrible times with the fellows at Emmanuel, but Michael always won them over with a combination of firmness, tact and sheer knowledge." Hopkins' wife and partner Lady Patty Hopkins, who jointly won the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture with him in 1994, is reported to be a powerful asset in this regard. "They are working from Michael's philosophy, but she is a strong support. When they make presentations together, she is delightful, very articulate and very knowledgeable," says urban design consultant ▶