

**INTERVIEW WITH IAN RITCHIE**  
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**Interview with Ian Ritchie at the 1st International conference on Structures and Architecture, July 21-23, 2010 in Guimarães, Portugal**

1. When and why did you develop an interest in architecture? Did it have anything to do with your surroundings? Were you influenced by your family, friends or even by your hometown in Sussex?

As a teenager I would regularly walk the South Downs and its valleys behind Brighton, to observe, and to sketch the Norman churches. In 1963, I was selected to join others from around the world at Marathon, Greece, for the World Scout Jamboree. I was 16 years old. I visited Athens and the spectacle of the Acropolis and other buildings left a deep impression, as did the tight white buildings on Mykonos with their splashes of bright blue. This period when I was 13-16 years old was instrumental in engaging my mind in architecture and the city. I was destined for a medical career when a close friend suggested that I might find architecture more satisfying. I changed course when I was 18.

2. You spent some time in the launch of your career working in France. How were those years important for the future of your architectural practice?

I first went to France in 1976 to build the Fluy House which I had designed as a retirement house for my girlfriend's parents. Designing and physically building this part-passive energy house with my girlfriend was a seminal experience. I realized that what often appear as simple things could be quite complicated, and I managed to simplify details and the assembly even more. Later, in 1981 I founded a design engineering practice with Peter Rice and Martin Francis - Rice Francis Ritchie, now known as RFR. This was also a seminal experience. Not only did design become seamless between aesthetics, engineering, manufacture and construction, but I recognized the true value of collaborating with others from different design disciplines. I also discovered the incredible knowledge of techniques and processes available within industry - even some of those industries not normally associated with construction.

3. Were you in search of different influences or new perspectives, since France and the United Kingdom have some quite different architectural and landscaping traditions?

I also learned French, and for the first time realized the vital role of humour as a communication tool in another language. It allows you to enter a culture. And once in it, the richness discovered through comparing cultures is extraordinary and gives one a perspective on one's own culture. I slowly realized from this experience of designing, building and cultural exchange that no one person owns the credit for a building but that we share so much with so many people. I became a European, even a global citizen, but also mentally someone without boundaries to the imagination.

4. Throughout your career you've worked on all sorts of buildings, like museums, subway stations, and courts. Are there any projects you like to work on more than others?

I do not think in terms of preferring this or that building typology, but of the social impact of the projects. Better designed social housing, the joy of moving vertically to enjoy a different perspective of a city or designing an exceptionally energy efficient task lamp. A preference for true value in what I do is what matters most, and that means finding and enjoying the design process and the wonder of discovering ways to make people's lives less dreary. The richness in the diversity of the projects is something I treasure.

5 One of the aspects of your work has been social housing. What's your motivation to work on those projects? What more can be done in this specific field?

It is THE sign of a civilized society, of a community that cares about the welfare of everyone. To live in a western democracy and to see people and families without shelter, or without a reasonably decent opportunity to make a home, fills me with anger. I cannot understand that with increasing wealth we seem to become less caring of others. We seem to value shares more than share values. I see more community and support in poorer countries. Why is this? For me, housing people and in particular social housing is a barometer of our society's moral position. A big regret is that, until now, it has proved very difficult for my practice to be able to work more in this field in the UK because of preconceptions among the social housing clients.

6 Way before it was hip to be green, you were already giving lectures on environmentally intelligent design. What made you develop an interest for environmentally friendly designs back in the 1970s?

In 1974 there was an oil crisis. People in the west were first shocked, and then worried, and values in our society changed. But soon people forgot. It changed me, and affected how I have designed ever since. I felt that it was simply stupid to waste energy and materials. I asked myself why have an energy bill when you could maybe, with good design, have very little and perhaps none. This is why I went to France to build an energy sensitive house - one that responded to the sun and wind, and the way people behaved and lived. Some of my early ideas were experimental, but I learned a lot. I also learned that western society was not only exploiting the planet's resources without returning anything of value to the Earth, but that 'waste not want not' - a mantra that I was brought up with as a child - had been disregarded by the time I was an adult. In 1987 I was asked by Herbert Girardet to chair the launch of his book, *Blueprint for a Green Planet*, at the London Ecology Centre - the first book that considered the global environmental impact of cities. This gave me added awareness that others were more aware and more active than I was, and I have made it my business since then to challenge clients, no matter what the project or who they were, on committing to environmentally intelligent approaches to their projects.

7. What kind of impact do you think architecture can have in the struggle against global warming and the destruction of the environment?

We all know now that the production and use of the built environment consumes a major proportion of the world's energy as well as contributing a major percentage of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. I believe quite sincerely that man is a key ingredient in global warming which will affect the lives of millions, change the way we produce and distribute food, and dramatically change the political landscape as we have known it for the past fifty years. Architects and other designers always 'feel' that they are doing 'good', or at least they should do! Therefore, it follows that if they are aware, it is not the consumer of western society that designers should be serving, but helping society to change its wasteful ways of behaving. If we can achieve this, along with politicians and key decision makers recognizing its attributes, then, yes, architects, engineers and all designers can be at forefront of changing our behaviour to benefit the Earth's biosphere - our shared home. I always bear in mind that the Earth is not here for us, does not belong to us, and will still be here when mankind as we now know it has vanished.

8. At the conference you'll be speaking about how a blend of architecture, altruism and innovation can change the world. How is this possible? How can altruistic and innovative architecture change the world?

An economic model based upon an altruistic relationship with our shared planet does not mean that there is no competitive economy. It can be based upon competition between altruistic endeavours to maintain the quality of our biosphere; a better and sustainable economic model can emerge in a global age of green collar workers and green industries. What is the real issue? Will we, in the west, ever be able to accept that we have a standard of living that is quite acceptable? Why do we have to keep plundering to grow? Are we not able to develop new ways of looking at the economy of the world which registers a positive rather than negative impact upon our biosphere? When will we realise that we are comfortable, very comfortable. We need to begin to recognise with some urgency that being generous to others as well as all living things will be repaid with a safer and more secure global society and planet.

9. Do you think architecture should be concerned and pay attention to matters that concern society? Should architecture be socially aware?

Of course, it is a primary responsibility of all architects to recognize that they are part of society, and that their skills have been developed to serve society, not their own egos. I also believe that is incumbent upon editors of design journals to help ensure that this aspect of social interdependence is at the fore.

10. Portugal has a style and an architectural tradition quite different from the United Kingdom, for instance. What's your view on the past, present and future of Portuguese architecture?

The difference is striking. They are two very different worlds. In part due to education and training of architects but also because the economic scale and level of finance available to the industry in each country. The question of the relationship and respect within the industry between clients, architects and the construction companies is a crucial factor that can manifest differences. There has been a steady erosion of the respect for the architect in the UK during my professional career and this has happened through government policy as well as through other professional and the industry itself. There is now a schism between the architect who conceives and the contractor who builds. Much of this change is down to the abdication by many architects of construction and cost knowledge. As an architect, I am very aware that main contractors affect the ability to realise the quality of the intended architecture and consequently the nature and quality of the architectural practice. This makes a practice like mine almost old fashioned in England. To have good economic awareness, knowledge of construction techniques, structural engineering and environmental physics is now unusual. And to develop and maintain good industrial relations with specialised industries in Europe is also declining among architects.

The image of architecture has caught the imagination of architectural education and the public and has led to the rise of the 'celebrity' architect. We live in a thin world.

There are points of contact, specially on the smaller scale projects. Without enough facts, I can be optimistic about Portuguese architecture. In recent years Távora, Siza and Souto de Moura stand comparison to the very best architects in the world, and a new generation has emerged. The RIBA exhibition in 2009, in part to celebrate Siza's RIBA Gold Medal highlighted some of them - Aires Mateus, Bak Gordon, Inês Lobo, João Favila, Paulo David Ricardo Carvalho, Joana Vilhena.

Portugal, as a former empire like Greece, Italy, France, Spain or Great Britain, has influenced and been influenced in return by its colonies. Portuguese architecture has left its mark in many places, and in exotic places like Macao where Carlos Marreiros practices the art of architecture as the clash of nouveau-internationalism and Chinese economic growth converge and conflict. Today's danger for Portugal, as for other countries including the UK, is maintaining links with its architectural heritage and traditions without recourse to pastiche while developing the architecture of its own age and resisting selfish stunt-making buildings to seduce the media with their 'newness' of image.

**11. What are your expectations for the forthcoming conference in Guimarães?**

I am expecting more recognition of the role engineers play, can play, in realizing architecture. For more than thirty years I have promoted the idea of shared ownership of projects by all those involved - and not simply the architect as author and hero. Perhaps because I am an architect, I am in a better position than an engineer to communicate this. An engineer bemoaning the fact that the architect takes all the credit risks being accused of wanting also to share in being a hero.

The authorship of any building is shared if not the concept. Without a client there is no job, thus no architecture and hence no authorship. Second, apart from domestic scaled buildings, the architect has to work with structural as well other engineers and building environmental physicists (unless they are all of these engineers as well). And then with the engineers and designers in industry to get it built. Whoever is the team leader should be generous in acknowledging the role of others.

**12, Your curriculum vitae is immense and the number of awards and distinctions you've been given is amazing. However, is there anything that pops out when you think about your greatest professional achievements?**

In terms of professional recognition by one's peers, I was unbelievably happy to have been recognized in 2000 by the French Académie d'Architecture for my contribution to evolving and advancing the art and technique of architecture through my innovative work. I felt humbled when I looked at the short list of previous recipients, and then noticed that I was the first foreign non-engineer. The fact that Peter Rice, my erstwhile partner, a brilliant engineer had received it in 1989, along with others since 1970, such as Jean Prouvé, Félix Candela, Frei Otto, Richard Buckminster Fuller and Michel Virlogeux, placed my efforts beyond the world of professional architecture. I was also delighted to hear that the firm I had set up with Peter Rice, RFR, was also awarded this honour a few years later.

Professionally, I was very pleased to have been invited by Peter Rice to work at Arup's Lightweight Structures Group back in 1978 and to experience the ethos of recognizing 'the job', 'not your job', the thrill of research and applying it. This was repeated a few years later when Peter asked me to become his partner in Paris. These experiences gave me an insight into the intelligence and skills of some engineers that I have never forgotten. As a result, I have quietly helped a large number of architects, some very celebrated by the media, while remaining quietly influential in helping to promote the next generation of designers, engineers, clients and politicians who will shape our planet's-built environment, hopefully more intelligently, more sensitively and more elegantly than that of my own generation.

Ian Ritchie

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