

**BUILDING CENTRE, LONDON
OPENING ADDRESS
THE ART OF STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
FEBRUARY 1992**

IAN RITCHIE

THE ART OF STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING: EXHIBITION 1990 LONDON

The reason I have been asked to say a few words on the opening of this exhibition on The Art of Structural Engineering, is, I suggest, to announce my own personal indebtedness to engineers and at the same time to help proclaim to a wider audience that Art is an essential ingredient of all good engineering, although that art has, and is still, so often buried beneath an avalanche of the architectural taste of the day.

It was Buckminster Fuller who once said that most architects are simply good (or bad) taste purchasing agents (i.e. they're experienced at selecting from catalogues).

To enjoy the company of engineers is a privilege, but for me they must be more than just engineers, they must be sensitive human beings, who have a personal philosophy about life in general. This is often too rare, or rarely apparent, but I have been fortunate to have met and worked with a few, and there is no doubt in my mind that they deserve public recognition (even if they don't seek it) on an equal to those architects they have worked with.

This is also occasionally true of enlightened civil and services engineers.

What these engineers have in common is confidence, and an intuitive sense of sharing an experience, where the job is the goal, not their job. This is probably the most important message of this exhibition.

Numbers, (says John McLeish in his recent publication) "are not a sadistic conspiracy devised by one half of society for torturing the other half. Instead they are evidence of our inventive genius, and understanding them is one of the most important characteristics that distinguish us (as animals) from other animals".

If we add culture to this number source, then we really do create the medium of invention. Today this culture, at a personal level, between individuals, begins often with estranged collaborators, both of whom have to be able first to shed their protective skins to enable a barrier free exchange to take place - this is the primary move to allow cultural fertilisation to take place.

This approach in a larger context is no different. History is full of nations and peoples developing philosophies and techniques which have, through mixing, produced the context for extraordinary creativity.

This exhibition is essentially about cultural exchange - a hope that the Art of the Structural Engineer is received by a wider public.

The exhibition themes are concept, form, materials, connection and construction - these are no different from the essential components of architecture, sculpture, even music, which is why there should and must be common ground between those of us who are fortunate to be entrusted with a major role in creating our built environment.

The true artist searches for the essence in things and then seeks to express it. It may be in the properties of a material, or how one part interacts with another.

Engineering is a domain which should seek essence and I hope that this exhibition will demonstrate it to those so far reluctant or ignorant to accept structural engineering as much more than a quiet service industry to architectural egos.