

ARCHITECTS IN EXILE

Architectural Design (Academy Editions)

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IAN RITCHIE

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A sense of a prolonged absence from home has been neither imposed or self-imposed. It has been perhaps a combination of both. As an 'Early European Architect', first working in Germany in 1970 and receiving my first commission from France in 1976, my interest in seeking a boundary-free approach to architectural thought and practice made the emerging European Community a natural setting. The UK was and still is prevaricating over Europe, while for more than two decades its reality has been central to my life.

While my contemporaries were still working within architectural practices, I was off on my own account at the age of 28. By the time we received our first large UK commission, to design the Roy Square housing scheme, I had already taken responsibility for several constructed projects abroad running into many millions of pounds.

My ideas and creativity have certainly been more readily accepted abroad, and this has, fortunately, led to our practice receiving more commissions from mainland Europe than from the UK.

Abroad, one has an opportunity to approach work with a directness, freshness and openness which can bring lots of pleasure. As cultural strangers there is an inevitable curiosity on both sides and no-one anticipates a conventional exchange. Because of this framework, preconceptions, although clearly existing, are given a low priority, and new ways of exploring ideas and the process to achieve them come much more easily. Simply being in a milieu of different cultures is an action which brings forward innovation and development. The more we collectively or individually remain marooned within our own culture, the more our ideas will fossilise. For me, my cultural identity has not been lost working abroad, but rather it has become much more focussed, clearer and contextual.

I have never chosen to work specifically in any particular country as against another, although both my French wife and I have always preferred to live in London. I suppose that, having learnt to speak French fluently, language would not prove to be an obstacle if a French commission came along. What did surprise me was that they have come along so regularly, while they have been very rare in England. Now, more invitations come from Germany than from either France or England, yet I do not speak German fluently. Participating in different European cultures has been hugely rewarding, not only in the development of ideas, but also in helping one's confidence to mature.

The British have always had a propensity for both innovation and amateurism. Exploiting innovation has often seemed amateurish, as if this position is more morally correct.

I recall one of our English clients saying "I'll consider innovation, but not pioneering; pioneers get arrows in their backs!" Most British clients will not even consider innovation. A favourite saying abroad is - "the British invent, let others exploit, but then come round the back to insure."

Living with modernity, when that modernity is being led by other countries, is, given its illustrious past, difficult for the British to accept. Britain's own ability to modernise has been tentative, and for those who have had the will to invest their energy in the present for the future have often been frustrated by a British reluctance to back innovation properly - and subsequently emigrated.

To make suggestions that we might learn from studying how things are done elsewhere (with the possible exception of the USA) is so often taken as a sign of disloyalty. For the British to invite a foreign architect (not including the big commercial practices from America) to come and design a significant building here is almost unheard of. Only very recently has Edinburgh commissioned Meier, and The Tate selected Herzog & de Meuron.

Why is it, that for so long, the British seem so reluctant to invest in young professional talent? Is it that we are preoccupied with safeguarding the status quo, of a misplaced sense of self-preservation? Is the UK's pop and rock music industry so successful because it doesn't rely upon or invade the nation's establishment arenas? The reactionary element which is always present in the young always demands or implies the need for change - exactly what British culture seems to deny, or to have abdicated during the last forty or so years. I have felt that while a marginally quicker rate of change can be tolerated, indeed sometimes welcomed, abroad, we in Britain seem so reluctant to accept the premise that another way of doing things could not only be better for all concerned, but would actually be more enjoyable. I am not referring to the imposition of a centralised political dogma, but of cultural development in professional activity. I find it astonishing that we still maintain separate professional institutions for architects and engineers. Switzerland does not, and I doubt that this is because there are not so many of them to justify separate institutions? It is probably because they simply recognise the obvious interdependence of the professions.

While we in Britain have been basking in the sunset of Empire, and Victorian enterprise and invention, others countries have sought to invest in new futures. Has my involvement with some of these European countries, and their government projects, somehow conveyed a sense of disloyalty to Britain? I hope not, but the lack of commissioned work for young architects here has given me the feeling that this country has shown a disloyalty to its own.

These are some of the opening lines which potential clients in the UK have opened with in their letters of rejection to us.

"We were extremely impressed with your approach and presentation.....but unfortunately..."

"Your ideas were very innovative, indeed brilliant...however for this project....."

"We very much appreciated your unique approach, but we feel that it is too advanced....."

"We have reluctantly concluded that your design proposals are too modern....."

And these opening lines in letters from various people in mainland Europe.
"We were delighted with your creative proposals and although they appear extremely advanced we are very pleased to inform you that we wish to appoint you to develop them, despite some element of risk to us."
"We have become aware of your innovative approach to architectural design and development and application of new materials and their assembly, and we would like to..."
"I have followed the progress of your architectural work with much interest, and I believe that your work is now of such high quality that I am recommending you to the University of Paris..."
We are familiar with your exceptional work in France, and we wish to fly to London to discuss the design of a very significant cultural project with you...."
We are delighted to ask your office to join us on a major project in Germany where your creative and innovative approach and skills will be of significant value to us and our client...."

There is an irony in our sense of exile. We have been permanently based in London since 1978. Over nearly two decades we have completed only three permanent buildings - all of them have received awards - a few temporary structures, and one temporary museum exhibition interior. Meanwhile, during the same period, we have built sixteen projects in mainland Europe.

In the first few years of practice I thought that the lack of British commissions stemmed from the fact that my independent career was launched in France. In 1976, at the relatively young age of 28, I received my first commission, the design of a house in France and I went to France to personally build it. The next commission, in 1981, came from England for a house - Eagle Rock, and enabled us to establish our Wapping Studio, where we still remain. However, this house was considered avant garde. Peter Cook describing it as architecture that he might expect to come across in California, but not in the conservative Weald of southern England. However, this house did receive a lot of press and TV coverage.

In England, it is said that you have to be over 40 to be taken seriously. It is not uncommon at the age of 30 to be married, and to have children. This is considered in mainland Europe as a reasonable sign of maturity and that one is capable of responsible behaviour and presents little problem to potential clients. As an example, I recall at La Villette that both Directors of the enormous Science Cité Exhibition Programme were appointed while in their mid-thirties.

On the contrary, here in England we somehow have difficulty accepting this. After seven or more years of study an architect is still rarely trusted with a commission. Similarly, in many walks of life, friends or acquaintances, who might become future clients, also seem obliged to reach their fourth decade before they have either the trust or independent means to commission

architecture.

Another possible reason for our "exile", and perhaps more significant, was establishing the design engineering office of Rice Francis Ritchie in Paris in 1981. Although none of us was permanently based in Paris, the impression I sensed in England, apart from our local area in Tower Hamlets, was that we were now mainly involved in France. In fact, the next built commission in 1986, Roy Square Housing in Limehouse came from within Tower Hamlets during the UK building boom of the 1980's.

During the same period, between 1981 and 1989 we were involved in major French and Spanish projects, which were undertaken from our Wapping studio. All of these projects, once built, received European wide media coverage. Only at the end of this period did we increase the number of our UK projects to four.

In 1989 we received two UK commissions, one for a building at Stockley Park from Stuart Lipton of Stanhope Properties, and the other for an enclosure for the proposed Ecology Gallery from Dr Roger Miles at The Natural History Museum. The latter came about as a result of Dr Miles's awareness of our French work in museology and glass structures.

We also received our first major public building commission in December 1989, from the Jubilee Line Extension Team of London Underground.

For us, we felt that these important and visionary clients heralded a sea change in attitude towards our practice. Yet since 1989 we have only received one further British commission, in 1995, for the architectural master plan to refurbish the Geological Museum.

The following table reveals our "sixteen year exile at home" from September 1978 to 1994.

Equally, we are still being invited to competitions in France, winning in February 1995 the EDF international pylon competition, and Germany, and receiving commissions from mainland Europe.

We have to remain hopeful about our chances in Britain.

With its lottery windfall, Britain is capable of realising new social projects for the Millennium. So far the signs are not brilliant. In London it appears that it will be a case of polishing the brassware already on the mantelpiece - The South Bank, the British Museum, South Kensington (including the idea of a Museum for the 21st Century before we've even reached it!), The Albert Hall, The Neptune Hall; or resurrecting ideas from the past - a giant ferris wheel, and perhaps even a millennium exhibition to celebrate 150 years since the Great Exhibition of 1851, inside a reconstruction of the Crystal Palace.

I do hope Britain can do better than this, although it is difficult to see what we should be exhibiting at the new millennium since most of will soon have virtually unlimited access to the state of the present and glimpses of the future through the world wide web.

One project which we have nurtured along, a revolutionary spherical planetarium at Greenwich, on the Thames riverbank, has received outline planning permission, and now awaits the support of the Millennium Commission. It is unique, scientific, educational and presents a forward-looking, long term project for London and one in harmony with Greenwich and the Millennium, and the client body are representatives of the Greenwich community. Too much to hope for?

I know that from either home or office in London, it is quicker for me to reach a meeting in Paris or Frankfurt than it is to reach one in Birmingham. I can never disguise my pleasure to be homeward bound. I have learnt to accept the vagaries of air travel on outward journeys, but if there is a delay coming back, I still get upset.

I have been frustrated, sometimes incredulous at the manner in which things are done here, but I have never once felt like leaving London. The arts, music coupled with youthful energy, compassion and tolerance, makes London uniquely attractive and a wonderful city in which to live and work; and with its international transport interchanges, a very convenient base for Europe. However, life would be yet more enjoyable if we could have a few more commissions in Britain.

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