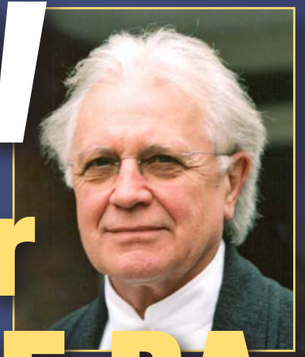
INTERVIEW with Professor Ian Ritchie CBE RA



by Grouse Beater©

Grouse Beater is an essayist, filmmaker and troublemaker

AT THREE score years and ten, Academician Professor Ian Ritchie, CBE RA, master architect, is a veritable whirlwind of creativity and industry. Try to e-mail him at any two points in a week's gap and he'll be in a different European country each time, back in London at the weekend, or perhaps in his beloved Edinburgh. But you'll always get a reply and on the same day or hour.

His firm of architects is based in London, his list of projects enormous, from designing hand friendly door handles to entire inner city areas, from a domestic house in a rural setting to a majestic scientific centre. He is currently involved in planning a large area of Malta - twice the size of Canary Wharf - a new central business district, a project anticipating another 100,000 people will move to the island, a real challenge in any architect's book.

As one would expect he's garlanded with awards, of which he considers the most significant are the international ones recognising his innovative designs and their impact on global architecture. To get a measure of the man and his achievements readers are referred to his *curriculum vitae* on the Internet - and set aside half-an-hour to read it.

Ian's grandfather electrified early WW1 tank turrets so that they could rotate in any direction. His father was born in Edinburgh and won a scholarship to study engineering at Heriot Watt University, but he died when Ian was only eleven. His mother was Welsh, a nurse from Blaina in South Wales. She took on sole responsibility for Ian and his two brothers.

I got to know him when I asked for his help to stop the hillside I'd purchased from sloping off to new ground. Gabion baskets were the answer, an ancient technique Ian had introduced into domestic architecture 25 years ago, the same industrial technique we see holding back high motorway embankments. Later he invited me as a guest speaker to his Edinburgh conference on its future architecture – an honour that took me by surprise.

Ian has the appearance of the preoccupied professor, and though he speaks in the soft whisper of a man used to being listened to, hard, you'd be advised not to assume him an intellectually defenceless senior citizen. As you'd expect, he has strong opinions on architecture and the politics that govern and shape it, and he can articulate his evidence to back up his ideas and theories. In typically generous style, he answered my questions with respect and erudition.

Currently involved in planning a large area of Malta - twice the size of Canary Wharf

To begin with one of your best-known projects, the Spire in Dublin's O'Connell Street, the non-monument monument. When you submitted the design for the competition did you think there would be opposition to it?

The Spire is audacious, and on first viewing people are asked to think and to look, not simply see. So, no, I was not surprised by the opposition, but I was by two competitors who thought we had broken the rules and managed to secure a court hearing, which delayed its construction for nearly three years.

I really like the Irish, their wit and banter. I enjoyed the various names for it; 'The Stiletto in the Ghetto' was the first to gain approbation, followed by 'The Rod to God'. The nicknames showed they were beginning to own it. My personal favourites were 'Celestial Acupuncture'. At the final lift someone in the crowd of more than five thousand watchers cried out "C'mon Ireland!" and everyone burst into applause. It was home.

You describe your firm as 'neural' architects. What does that mean?

This was a term 'invented' by John O'Keefe (Nobel Laureate in 2014). He was the acting and then the first director of the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre, and central in its evolution. It describes the process of learning from each other, architects from scientists and scientists from architects, and of a shared language between architects and neuroscientists as we developed the design.

SWC building at night © Adam Scott

Eagle Rock House © Andy Earl

Architects work with light and shadow to give space and objects form - the interior and the exterior architecture. With all that we learned about how our brains process sensory experience from the scientists and their writings during our research into neuroscience, it was inevitable that we would translate this knowledge into how we would design the space for their research.

The Sainsbury Wellcome Centre was a mammoth undertaking - budget £75 million. Judged a great success by architects and public, how did you manage to balance all conflicting needs of the scientists using the building?

Ah! The mind of the architect who can imagine a picture in its entirety and is open minded enough to be able to fine-tune it as more and more knowledge is brought to bear on the concept!

We were fortunate to have been given a year for research. We travelled to several continents to discuss with some of the world's most important and esteemed neuroscientists, and to document their opinions and their existing labs, and explore where neuroscience research might go in the future.

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It was thrilling, and there was no way my practice was not going to deliver the very, very best that we could for them. It came down to how we could give them a building that would be relevant for the next 60 years. A daunting challenge, but we believed it to be possible. Our answer was to accommodate the twenty plus services (medical, and lots of gasses, and including drainage) in a flexible way within highly adaptable spaces. The scientists would be able to determine and economically modify the interior spaces to their needs – a 'plug and play' design approach.

The external envelope of the building is both a metaphor about climate change and to some extent the architectural expression of this adaptability and flexibility. The new kind of translucent, insulated structural cast glass modules we developed is remarkably economical. It incorporates operable windows and louvres, and was half the cost of double glazed cladding on a typical office building in London.

The inside of the building has very long views. Why?

We have learned that having long vistas in a building is important for orientation, while on the other hand completely open plan spaces can be psychologically uncomfortable - and are not generally popular with the people who must work within them.

It's hypothesised that humans evolved in the African savannah, a world of spatial endlessness made up of a variety of open and wooded habitats, open plain and endless vistas (horizons) within the curve of the sky (vertical space), all this is apparently ingrained in the human DNA - and it's interesting to note that subconsciously we still reflect these preferences: it's taken for granted that apartments with a good view command higher prices than those without a view, but no one asks why that should be.

Awareness of others without the feeling of being invaded, and the ability to spot an opportunity to join others in discussion, creates a sense of self within a community. Interiors that offer both vertical and long views, that offer individual, group and large collective spaces with acoustically and light tempered environments are vital to our psychological well-being. Add to this, views of the outside, the ability to be aware of the changing weather and changing natural light levels, the choice to have fresh air, gardens and terraces all combine to give the whole interior space diversity and interest.

Like cars, new buildings contain an amazing amount of, an artificial brain. Homes are beginning to follow suit. Are we not over-complicating buildings that rely on technology?

We're in overload because so-called 'developed' societies want to measure everything - the age of metrics. This, together with the fact that the emerging human cyborg that we are becoming can't leave his Mc-iPad alone unless asleep, and can now control his home energy bill, turn on the oven and wake grandma, is a witness to the power of technology and our desire for toys and attraction to novelty (also in our DNA). Weaning us off all this technology would be nigh impossible.

I wrote back in the early 90's that it is 'goodbye electron, hello photon'. Now that we have all become more or less conscious of how we have raped the Earth, an all electric future of non-polluting photon energy is inevitable. Once the technology enabling one photon to activate many electrons is commercialised, solar power will be ridiculously cheap. Photo-bio computers will be here soon, so it will no longer be a question of power cuts. We have just a few more years to live before we see the end of burning carbon to provide us with energy.

I'd like to ask you your opinion of Edinburgh and Glasgow's urban renewal policies. Glasgow in the Sixties wanted to become "the Chicago of Scotland". Edinburgh is blighted by indiscriminate construction. We are witnessing no cohesive policy or vision. How does an architect cope with that?

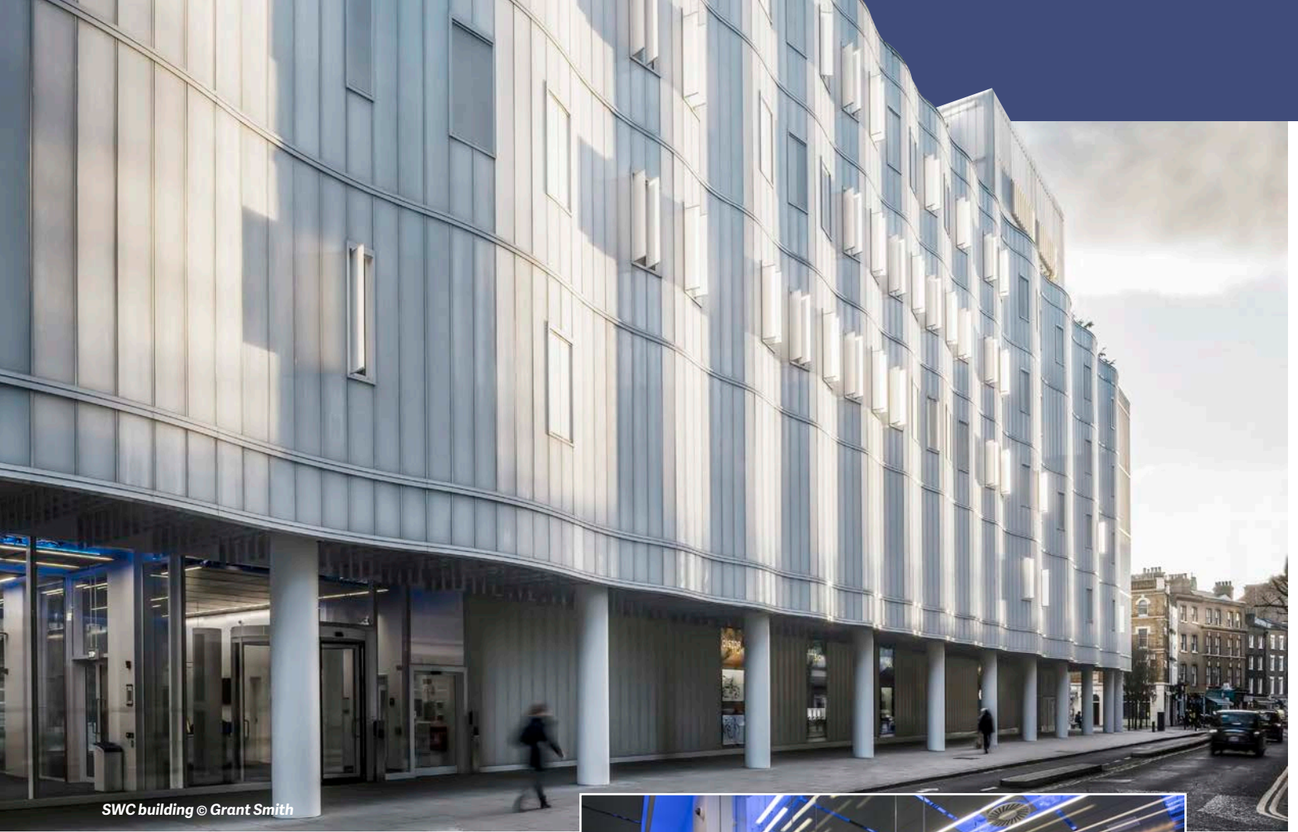
I would suggest that there are three current ways architects approach the city when they receive a commission.

i) Those who consider that individual buildings should contribute collectively to the framing of and making of streets and squares. Only exceptionally should an individual building, e.g. a town hall or church. Sports stadia are today's cultural cathedrals.

ii) Those architects who have, since the 80's, believed that the value of their personal artistic expression matters more than the street, square or city. This is hubris. The results are the over-scaled, twisted, fractured rhythm-less blobs of all shapes and sizes - whether offices or residences - which deny any other building the right to touch them.

iii) I prefer architects who want to *contribute* to the city in a sensible way, neither aping the past nor denying it, blending subtly rather than scarring violently, using contemporary and innovative ways of building and materials and techniques

The Spire of Dublin
© Barry Mason



SWC building © Grant Smith

SWC adaptable lecture theatre © Grant Smith

Ian Ritchie and Lord Sainsbury 'on site' at SWC building

to leave an intelligent and beautiful contribution to the city which reflects our own age. I am of this last group.

You're on record loving the Georgian city of Edinburgh. Putting a radical modernist building in it is always going to be controversial. Do you think that's why the city tends to end up with second-rate architecture? How can we be more adventurous without destroying the good that exists?

I love Georgian architecture. I live in a John Rennie designed house! The master-planning by Craig, (modified a little, early on) and the enlightenment of the city fathers was a stroke of timeless genius. Why? Because at that point topography, social structure and the risk of an economic exodus created an opportunity and the response was imagined boldly and holistically.

I see no difficulty introducing moments of contemporary

Stockley Park Building B8 © Ian Ritchie Architects

architecture within the historic city provided that there is a believable narrative that shows respect for the existing urban fabric, and does not produce an ugly rupture. To copy is nothing but to deny our own age. We architects have to up our game and communicate far better to re-establish trust with society.

How does a city secure the best architect for the job, and not be forced to choose the best out of a shortlist of the not so good, as in competitions?

One tactic employed by some clients, rarely a city authority, I would add, but often by publically funded organizations, is to select a practice that is headed by a 'name' to help with fund raising. We've won over 60 competitions of all sorts, but of these the ones that have given the most pleasure are those that are totally open.

To copy is nothing but to deny our own age

In the end it always comes down to the client. A good client with a good architect will always deliver quality. Committees rarely do. Honestly, I prefer direct appointment by enlightened clients who have checked us out and know that we will almost certainly exceed their expectations and those of the users, along with a twist of value-added innovation. And when these clients come back again, then we really are smiling.

You hold the Utopian ideal that Europe is not just an economic model, but a coalition of many cultures. You were a member of the European

Reina Sofia Museum of Modern Art © Ian Ritchie

Ian Ritchie 'on site' - checking prototype in factory, balcony for Royal Academy of Music © iRAL

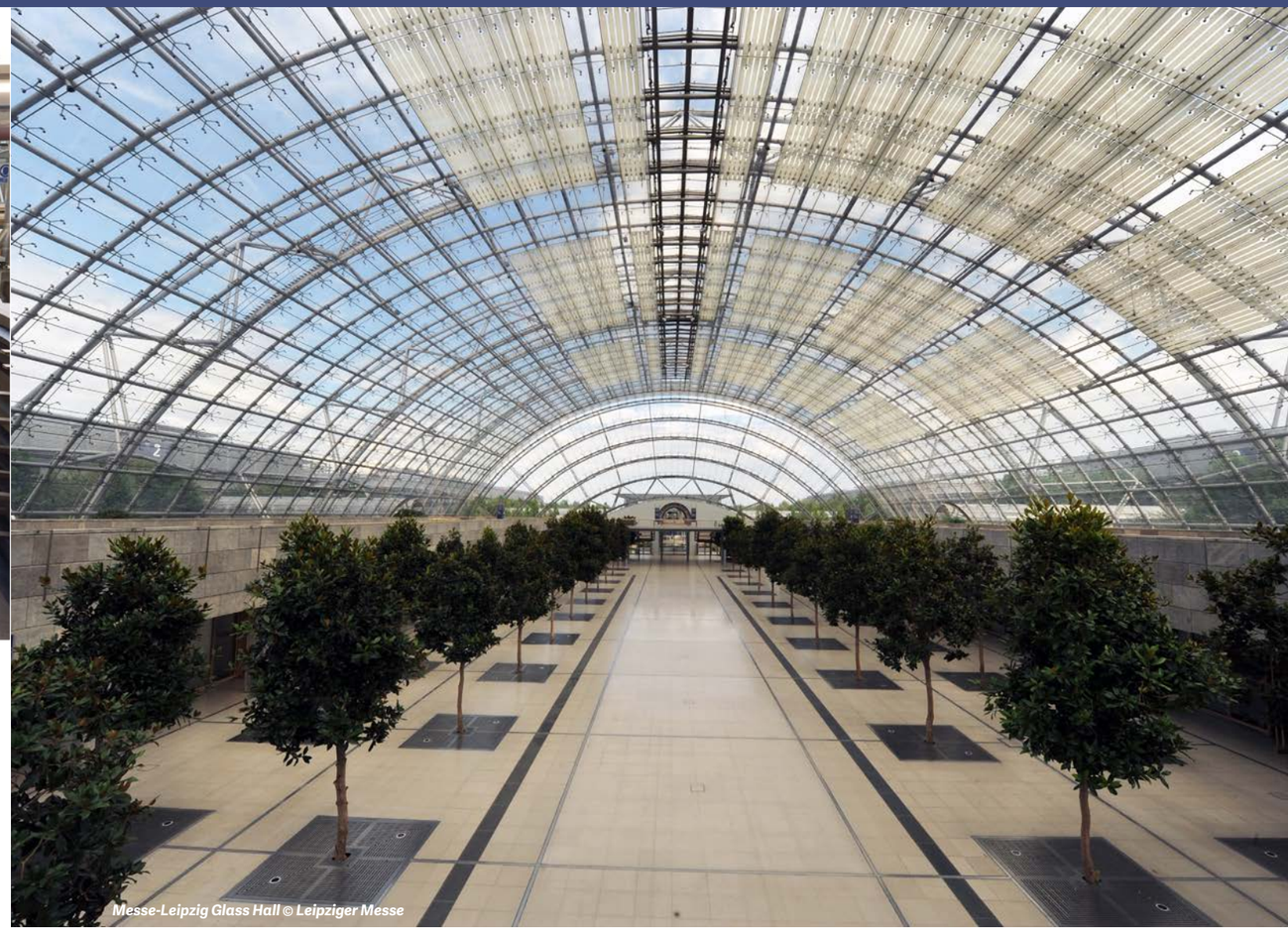
Construction Technology Platform, in Brussels, the body that decided in 2006 where €5 billion of R&D funding should be spent in the construction sector. England alone (dragging a protesting Scotland, NI and Gibraltar) is the first nation in 43 years to leave the EU. What are your feelings about this regressive act?

In answer to this question I will quote what I wrote for and was published in the Architect's Journal on 24th June 2016.

"I have a feeling of utter disgust with the many parochial, narrow-minded and bigoted little Britons who - for lack of cultural and historical awareness - believe that there exists a nostalgic past that can flourish in today's global environment. It is palpable nonsense and the repercussions on the freedom and evolving culture of our youth and that of Europe will be felt very deeply. I have developed my values and ethics, and design skills, from the understanding that interdependence is more productive than independence. Europeans are as central to my professional and social life as are the Scots, Welsh, English and Irish. I fear the impact of this foolish and misguided decision will lead to not only a dis-United Kingdom, but profoundly shake Europe as a whole. In years to come our young people may feel the bitterness of having been betrayed. It is a tragedy in the making.

Although England's constitution is 'unwritten' - the Scottish led Enlightenment created extremely good and robust governance structures. The Royal Academy of Arts for example, demands a two-thirds majority at the first and subsequent ratification of any law change with a minimum 90 day period of reflection between voting. Similar procedures exist in the American written Constitution.

Constitutional changes affect generations; opinions change. What moral right do we have to mess with future generations (who could not vote) on a misinformed consultative non-obligatory vote SIMPLY to resolve the Conservative party's catfight with UKIP?"



Messe-Leipzig Glass Hall © Leipziger Messe

Finally, is there such a thing as a recognizable Scots vernacular in architecture? Does the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh exemplify, or is it a Hebridean Black House, or a poorly built Fifties council estate?

There is a vernacular I recognise as Scottish. It's not C. R. Mackintosh as his work and style was little replicated. We have to go back in time to the baronial castles - hardly comparable to the more public architecture of Georgian areas of cities that we see in London, Liverpool and Bath or the Merchant City of Glasgow. Not the island workers' black houses, but the impressive stone buildings, often carling rendered, that sit upon islands, upon rocks and communicate: "We resist the snarling wind, the snow storms and piercing rain rods, we are curved and upright to face you all and blossom in the sun's rays and rainbows against dark skies. Our strength is born of this land, and inside our gloomy yet warm and welcoming interior is lit by a raging fire."

That's the 'vernacular' that comes to mind and presents the soul of Scotland that I sense when I'm there - landscape, music and words that create an atmosphere with its architecture that makes Scotland such a beautiful country.

Landscape, music and words that create an atmosphere with its architecture that makes Scotland such a beautiful country

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Books:

'Being an Architect', Ian Ritchie, Royal Academy of Arts Publishing; *'Neural Architects - the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre from Idea to Reality'* by Georgina Ferry, Unicorn Publishing.