A Peek At The Invisible Man: Times Oct 5th 2004, Tom Dyckhoff

ARCHITECTURE Stirling Prize nominee Ian Ritchie can't shun the limelight for ever, says **Tom Dyckhoff**

"AM I going to win? Win what?" Ian Ritchie is amazingly laid back. Come on, man! You should be cracking open the Krug and going round yelling, "I'm on the Stirling Prize shortlist, hooray, hooray", like a demented Jimmy Stewart. True, this is the third time he's been on the list without a win. And, true, up against big boys such as Foster and Libeskind, Ritchie's project – the Spire, Dublin's impossibly slender national monument on O'Connell Street to replace the Nelson's Column infamously erased by the IRA in 1966 – is unlikely to win. But still, give us a yahoo!

But demented Jimmy Stewart isn't Ian Ritchie's style. This man is the personification of understatement. His demeanour oozes subtlety – dark slacks and jumper, cropped mop of grey-white hair, kind, avuncular face behind precision-engineered frameless specs – but he's never dull. Relaxed, yes, but sharp as a tack.

In an age (and shortlist) of bling buildings dressed in the latest showy number, it's a relief to find Ritchie. One of the finest of the post-Fosters and Rogers generation of high-tech architects, he's also the most taciturn, living and working away from the headlines for 30 years in a limehouse, a commuterville corner of inner London so quiet that you can almost hear your heartbeat. He shies from the media, which is why he's no household name.

But, as a Royal Academician and founder of the Government's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, he's an influential behind-the-scenes operator. He's just allergic to both hyperbole and the media's and architect's increasing propensity for reducing architecture to an "iconic" image. "You've got to win awards to get the work," he notes disconsolately. "But I'd rather be measured by how our buildings are used."

Ritchie worked with all the high-tech greats during the 1960s and 1970s – Foster, Rogers, Hopkins, Arup. And, like them, he takes obvious and slightly nerdy delight in a bolt exquisitely tightened. His website lists his scientific firsts obsessively – my favourite: "World's first combination of extruded silicone/liquid silicone glass to glass jointing, applied externally only" at the Leipzig Trade Fair Hall. The Spire itself is a technological masterclass in stopping a 120m (394ft) high, 3m wide metal prong from falling down in the wind (cunning built-in dampeners, apparently).

He's quietly intellectual, well read ("books, not architecture journals"), casually pinballing the conversation between Aristotle, Calvino, robotics and Roger McGough. He drifted into architecture after three weeks studying medicine. You sense, though that he might have become a poet ("the English language is far more interesting than architecture"), a painter or a town planner. Or all of them: "architecture is where it all comes together".

The science of architecture may excite him, but not so much for its own sake as for the poetry it can release. On the Pompidou Centre and the Lloyds Building, Richard Rogers used service ducts as neobaroque. Wilkinson Eyre, twice winners of the Stirling Prize, go down the Santiago Calatrava route: flamboyance. Foster, at his best, goes the other way: purism. Ritchie at first followed suit and was known in the 1980s and 1990s as "the glass man" for a series of homages to the Crystal Palace such as that hall in Leipzig.

He wants, he says, to be an anonymous designer designing non-anonymous buildings. "How do you recognise and Ian Ritchie building? Maybe there's a subtle quality…"

Indeed: the trick up Ritchie's sleeve is in his very subtle, sensory approach to materials. Even glass to him is "lickable", magic more for how it stimulates and "contradicts" – hard yet fragile, transparent, then opaque and reflective – than its function. His buildings aren't built for the camera, but to be felt. They look austere, neobrutalist. Instead of delivering instant gratification, his buildings reveal themselves slowly.

Ritchie counts as decoration the cloudy patterns that galvanised steel makes when it ages, or, on his concert platform at Crystal Palace Park, the red of rusting metal: or maybe a strip of gravel or a gardenless rock garden and walls made from duvets of woven copper at the Theatre Royal Production Centre in Plymouth. The buildings are built to age.

A bunker-like ventilation duct that he designed for the Jubilee Line in Bermondsey bloomed only when its copper-strata skin turned green. The buildings become for him meeting places between the big hefty philosophical themes that underpin his reading, such as man and nature, space and time. All of which, perhaps, owes itself to the student years he spent in Japan. There's something of the Buddhist about him, his office and his buildings, as far from architectural bling as you can imagine.

The Spire, though unmissible, seems to dissolve in Dublin's pewter sky, an unmonument, perfectly appropriate in a spot outside O'Connell Street's famous Post Office, so heavy with history. You can buy souvenir Spire candles. They disappear too, under the flame. I think it's a (subtle) Ritchie joke.

Too subtle? Perhaps for this age, this prize. Not that he cares. "I'm just being me. It either works or it doesn't. When you've no work you just find other things to do."

No chance of that. After two decades mostly working on the Continent, his charms have finally revealed themselves to his homeland.

He's masterplanning a vast new shopping centre at White City, West London, "a 21st-century souk": he has been appointed to sort out the British Museum post-Great Court, and he has plans for a Crossrail station and to rebuild Powell & Moya's famous Festival of Britain Skylon on the South Bank. The fate of a series of proposed pepperpot apartment towers on Potters Fields, opposite the Tower of London, is in the hands of John Prescott.

We're going to see a lot more of Ritchie. Not, of course, that you'll know it's him. "We had a debate early on in the 1980s: could we survive as architects without a recognisable style? Everybody we asked said no. But I think we have done all right by ignoring everybody. We're working on £3 billion of projects. But can you feel it?"

He waves to the peaceful studio. "It's zen."