

## In Dialogue with IAN RITCHIE on the Profile of The Future Architect

SHARE Conference, BELGRADE April 24th 2018



**"Designing the Profile of the Future Architect"** is an international editorial project initiated by the ABplus Events Association through SHARE Architecture Conferences -that are organized every year in 10 locations from Eastern and Central Europe. Over 100 contributions from our 2018 repertoire of discussions will be gathered in a volume answering the current theme that reflects what expectations do we have today for tomorrow and in which directions young architects should invest the most.

**Andreea Movila:** *How do you perceive the role of the architect today and how will it change in the future?*

**Ian Ritchie:** I think there's a duality in the architectural world at the moment between the technology-driven explosion of changes in the process and theory of architectural design and fabrication, and our social responsibility as architects.

**AM:** *A duality... in the architect's mind?*

**IR:** You've asked me about architects... so yes. That duality is about staying up-to-speed with the digital explosion of design and information technology and at the same time trying to retain a value-based measure of what you're doing as part of your social responsibility to society. Architects are servants of society, fundamentally. And I think philosophically it is a big challenge to bring it all together within a framework or philosophical structure which relies on what I call 'metaphorical intelligence'.

**AM:** *“Metaphorical intelligence”- but do you believe in architectural intelligence?*

**IR:** No. I think architecture like art, like poetry and like music has structure. And I believe structure is fundamental whether you're doing a painting, writing a sonnet, composing a symphony, or designing a building. Architecturally, that structure is what physically holds the 3-dimensional frame, whatever shape it is, together. In architecture recently it has become fashionable to play with the envelope or shape of buildings without considering the reasons and philosophy underpinning their structure. To put it another way: 'architecturally' speaking human beings have a skeleton - a bony structure - and muscles covering our bones, and the muscles and tendons act in unison with the bones (a sort of kinetic tensegrity) to make it possible for us to stand upright and move. We cover all that - our bodies - with clothing. What has been happening in architecture is as if we had suddenly decided our clothes should determine our physical structure! Architects have become seduced by their buildings' 'clothing', without a deeper understanding of their function and of the human biological and neurological history that goes into the way buildings and urban development affect us. That is part of what I call 'metaphorical intelligence. Did I answer your question?

**AM:** Yes.

**IR:** And to carry the metaphor further: if you consider what is in-between our clothes and our bones, that is our infrastructure: that's all the servicing, your heating and cooling, your flows of energy, and also your senses and emotions. And that's the metaphorical intelligence in architecture and that's also the servicing infrastructure of the architecture. It's something architects have to get hold of as well, because there's no point in putting on a beautiful garment if your systems don't work. So the completeness of architecture, which has been a bit undermined in the last thirty years, needs to come back. Architecture is often incomplete nowadays because architects have been more focused on the skin, not on the structure or the services, or whether their buildings work for the human beings that will use them. So to integrate all of these things is very important. Once you've brought them all together you can have an architectural intelligence.

I'm very interested at the moment in what some would call 'collective intelligence', and it's the way in which my practice operates. Our 'modus operandi' is that we have satellites throughout Europe; they are owned by graduates of our office and because when they start an independent practice after having been with us they need help to get going my practice helps them, and then works with them on projects which they would ordinarily not be able to bid for. I recognise them as the next generation, in fact we are now at the second generation of this system, and it's very different than in most architectural firms. For most architects, if somebody decides to leave their firm, generally they don't care about them anymore.

I have a different approach. The structure and philosophy of our office is like a finishing school: some spend ten years with us, for some it's five years, before moving on, and of course some have stayed. Working with our graduates in this way since 1996 has grown into a kind of newish structural idea: the **Richie-Net**, as we call it. The beauty of having this structure is that they understand how we work because they have been trained by me and senior colleagues, and we can easily come together in a very loose way, or serious way, or they can get together with each other themselves, and that collective intelligence idea begins to have an identity. So similar training, similar methods, similar processes respond to different cultures. Work done by Ritchie-Net architects in Lisbon is very different from that done by Ritchie-Net Leipzig architects - and that absence of formulaic thinking is one of the unique characteristics of our architecture.

**AM:** *Kind of satellites, isn't it?*

**IR:** Yes, we call them 'sister studios' and are members of Ritchie-Net, because they have their own identity, they have their own name, they are financially independent. The only requirement I have is: if we are overloaded in London they help us, but they are paid correctly. But it's an idea and ideal to try to structure a collective knowledge. For example, extra knowledge possessed by each of us, which put together, produces better architecture.

**AM:** *Do you have continuous training, or something like that?*

**IR:** That's a bit like that, yes - Continuous Professional Development (CPD). At the moment we're doing a project on housing in London with the Lisbon studio (NOZ), we're doing an underground tube station competition in Hamburg with Leipzig (Tagebau), and we're designing a theatre in Cairo with Hamburg (Braker).

**AM:** *We plan on doing something similar within the SHARE community for the near future: We're working on a web platform where you and the other speakers (fellow architects of SHARE) are to be mentors for our young community. They will build a profile and a portfolio and will eventually working under coordination of our Fellow Architects Society. It will be a platform that will connect mentor architects, young architects and architectural beneficiaries. It's already on the way.*

*Well, I am impressed by the inventor's mind; we found out that you patented a lot of inventions.*

**IR:** I've only been involved in patenting two, although we have invented many new systems and material assemblies. The first one was in 1985, not that I was keen on doing it, but it seemed like the only solution. The French government was giving it to us because we had invented it so I assumed the French government would want it, but

they had no mechanism to hold a patent. And the second one is very recent, the cladding system of the SWC neuroscience building: the glass skin is toughened structural cast glass as against toughened structural float glass.

**AM:** *How important is studying the mind of an architect for you?*

**IR:** The mind of an architect? Wow! I think the mind of an architect is often trapped between a very private personal exploration, a necessary self-centeredness, and the architect's role of working collaboratively with other people. A mistake architects often make, which is mental, as well as actual, is to assume that they can start an idea without the other members of the team. Because the consequence of that is that later the other members of the team don't feel equal when sitting around the table during discussions. They sense they've arrived later. Thus they become servants to the architect - and I don't like that position. We're all collectively servants.

**AM:** *This is how you empower people.*

**IR:** Yes, otherwise you end up with a hierarchy, and that's not healthy for creativity.

**AM:** *But this is the most common business model all around the world.*

**IR:** Yes, but that's a business model, it is not a creative model. And a lot of practices play the hierarchy game because they think that's the way you should do it. We have no hierarchy in our office, people say to me: well that's not possible! But it is. I'm the ultimate design boss, and I do my own photocopying, I do my own work. A student will not be the slave of anybody, or servant to anybody in our office - they are as intelligent as we are. And by not pushing, but giving, responsibility to each individual to work together collaboratively and also individually, it enables them to be their very best while they're learning. You can't be a slave to anybody else and be truly creative, it's impossible. You can collectively come together to create something, and that psychology is really *vital* and it's what keeps our office very creative, very open. When I'm told there's not enough money to put into research on a project I will argue for research every time and I always have. Little profit goes out of our office, it goes back in - I don't take anything. It's reinvested in research to get better solutions for society, basically.

**AM:** *What would be the question you would ask a young architect who would like to come to your office asking for a job?*

**IR:** Well... you have to have a foreign language to work with us. It is very difficult for British students straightaway, because languages are no longer taught as a matter of course here. I make exceptions and accept that they may have a high level of competence in maths or music as a language.

**AM:** *Because architecture is a kind of language, at a certain level.*

**IR:** Yes, the second requirement I look for is they must have made something with their own hands, full scale, that somebody else has used. And not a spoon, something more inspiring/complex. Because the hand- mind physicality, understanding of materiality, the understanding of being human and that buildings are haptic environments and we respond to them with our senses; you can't do that on screen- it is impossible. You have to get beyond technology and back to being human being, so that side of architecture is very important in our office. And don't come and ask me in the interview "what project will I work on?" That's a big mistake. I'm not taking on the person for a project; I'm taking on the person to come into the studio for who they are. And they might work on anything.

**AM:** *They should be adaptive, is this an important quality? For psychologists adaptability is an important criterion in the definition of intelligence.*

**IR:** Well, it is. I've just written an article for a magazine called *Intelligent Glass Solutions*, and they wanted me to talk about smart glass to which I said "there is no such thing as smart glass"

**AM:** *But smart architecture?*

**IR:** Well, not even, because the word smart as we are using it today means whatever it is has to be connected to the Internet of Things. A piece of glass can switch from clear to opaque, it can play music, it can do anything but if it's not connected, it's not smart, it's just chemical.

**AM:** *What is your view regarding these new concepts of Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence?*

**IR:** I'm not afraid of it. It is a natural consequence of the "digital explosion". However, being a master of digital explosion could be very difficult, which is why I think you need this collective intelligence and not an isolationist approach to things. As for artificial intelligence - well I don't know, it has been around for 15 years already at least. We're already linking ourselves with it whether we carry it with us [showing his cell phone] or whether we end up implanting it or sticking it onto our skin. It's part of that extension of ourselves that began with tool use tens of thousands of years ago. I think I'm working a bit at the periphery of AI at the moment, but I may get more involved later with a neuroscientist to get rid of the 2D screen world, such that you'll be right in a 3-dimensional shared environment which you can enhance if you wish to.

But, in my opinion artificial intelligence will always remain a servant to us, human beings, providing we don't forget what a human being is.

**AM:** *They are working on an ethical code for Artificial Intelligence as some people really fear the implication it will have.*

**IR:** Yes, sure, they are, the ethics are important.

**AM:** *I do not think that the fear should be in the sense of 'it will kill us' or something like that, but in a sense that someone would use these technologies in a bad manner.*

**IR:** Exploitation. It's inevitable, because unfortunately it is part of human nature. There's a good side and a bad side to AI and we don't all have the same measures of what is good and bad. And in our age today, we all are faced with bullshit [have you heard the term?] and bullshit is not concerned with truth or lies. The people who generate bullshit don't differentiate between good and bad, they say whatever suits the purpose of achieving their desired end. That's the danger of bullshit and there's a lot of it in the world right now. And it's not only in the world of politics, it is in architecture as well, it's everywhere.

**AM:** *In which direction do you think young architects should invest their time the most today.*

**IR:** I would encourage them not to forget the value of philosophy. It's been forgotten, the value of literature, the value of history, the value of, if you like - understanding the myth of the representation of things. That's also one of the biggest fears I have about architecture: you have plagiarism without knowledge, you're taking visual clues, applying them throughout the work, and you don't know why the original was done the way it was done. And that again is a human characteristic: to copy. But you must invest time to understand why you're copying, why the original thing you're copying was done. Because without that, there is no meaning, it's just decoration.

**AM:** *Architecture without Meaning. How serious this is! Well, I would dare to ask... what was the best piece of advice you've received during your career?*

**IR:** Well, in an architectural sense probably the most informed and most consequential advice was given to me by an engineer called Anthony Hunt, during a discussion about a house I had designed for my girlfriend's parents in France based upon a lightweight, small-span steel grid structure. I explained that quotes for materials and construction took it over the client's budget and he said, "Why don't you just go and build it yourself to reduce the cost?" I thought why not? We did! And I physically built a building. If I had waited for other 24 hours I would not have taken the risk. But I decided with my girlfriend to just go and do it.

**AM:** *Take risks?*

**IR:** Yes, but risk is mitigated to some extent. People often ask, "You do a lot of research, you invent things - isn't it difficult to do? Yes, it is difficult, because clients don't want to pay for research, they don't give you the time, and clients assume that it's

a risk if it's new. It's like pioneers; you're in front so you risk getting shot in the back! I've always taken the view that there must be better ways of doing things. Not for the sake of newness, but just better ways to make things, and more economically, so they last longer and work better, and thus I'm prepared to invest research time and money in that. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But we always test before we use something new, and that's where you have to work with industry. We collaborate with industry a lot because if they see the advantage of an idea they will invest in it. In the end they even get the benefit of the patent, which is better with the industry than with me, because they can exploit it better instead of me spending my time with a lawyer running around the world checking on who is copying this or has done that. That's not a life.

**AM:** *Researching is part of your philosophy?*

**IR:** Yes, I don't want things to be the same: we wake up in the morning and we know the world has changed. We have to read the world anew every day and find better ways of doing things for everybody.

**AM:** *This is reflected in the deepness of a project. I believe that if a project is well researched, no one can copy it.*

**IR:** You can't copy the projects. It's like us: we can't do the project we did yesterday, because my mind has changed, we have a new client, we have a different viewpoint. Architects who have a formula - an architecture formula - don't interest me that much.

**AM:** *Do you have a professional statement, an idiom?*

**IR:** That's called marketing, and I don't do marketing.

**AM:** *So do you believe that marketing should not be done by the architect but by the satisfied clients?*

**IR:** Yes, if you like, or architects doing real research about what and why buildings work. But if they read the magazines or the websites of other architects, they'll see that nearly all architects say: we're clever, we have done the biggest, the longest, the tallest, the shortest, whatever. I mean, it's bullshit, really. If you understand that you serve society, you serve a client, you serve the people who use the building, you'll be a better architect. Your first measure of how successful you've been is with those people using those buildings. I can have my opinion: I may think the building is beautiful, somebody else might think, "I don't think it's beautiful." Is that important? Up to a point yes, but can you come to a consensus of what is beautiful? No, you can't, particularly if you're slightly avant-garde or inventive, because people will never have seen such a building before, so they won't have a basis upon which to make an aesthetic judgment, although they will still make one. But the people using the building - they are the real measure, and in our practice we actually spend time in the buildings we design after they're finished, with the users, talking with them.

**AM:** *So, you stay in the building trying to understand how it is functioning?*

**IR:** Yes, genuinely. And their insight of the building is interesting because they're interesting people in there. I would go back year after year incognito to social housing I designed and just talk to the people. People will use the building in ways you don't expect.

**AM:** *Probably because you make a specific scenario for that space, but the scenario changes and the architect has to change too.*

**IR:** We designed a primary school in France; I was quite a young architect then. One of the guys who worked on the project, now in the sister studio in Leipzig, has a brother who is a spatial psychologist and 5 or 10 years afterwards we asked him to go and spend a week at the school talking with the students from the primary school - young children and teachers. He wrote a report and it turned out that the biggest mistake we've made, right at the beginning was to assume we knew something about primary schools from our own childhood experiences at school. You are 30 years on, and things are changing, and you're in a French culture. Otherwise it works very well, but we made mistakes, and that's why ever since then I don't have preconceptions about anything.

**AM:** *But how can you be detached, as an architect, from your own life experience?*

**IR:** By a process of thinking, which is why I write before I draw, I explore.

**AM:** *Write and...then draw?*

**IR:** Apparently writing and drawing happen in two different parts of the brain. But for example, if I draw this [draws] and this is going to be a house, I can throw that in a bin but I will remember that shape, that image, I'm stuck with it. Now if I wrote 'a house' in German, I'm still free, visually- structurally free, although I have begun to create a concept.

**AM:** *I am very interested in how do you approach writing?*

**IR:** If I were to design a house, that house would have to be for a client. And the relationship with the client is going to be so personal that you must almost fall in love with the client, in the sense that you become so intuitive in regard to them that you can anticipate what they will need and want. And you're going deep, and you can't possibly design anything, in my opinion, until you understand who the person is. Are they interested in their children, are they interested in grandchildren? There's a whole evolution to come.

**AM:** *So, do you write down everything?*

**IR:** Yes, and that's prose.

**AM:** *For... every project? Well, Alberto Pérez-Gómez in a lecture said a very interesting thing regarding writing: "A simple architectural practice without a theoretical position it is not enough." Did you feel that?*

**IR:** Yes, I'm on book number 93. I started in 1980 roughly, and you find prose in there and text. I write prose, and then I write a poem, if I can, for every project. From the poem, if I'm very lucky, I write an aphorism. For example: Sometimes I grow to dislike potential clients - their values are wrong - and I will then say no. Unlike many architects, I don't take projects just for the sake of it. I remember writing an aphorism in 2005. It was a big project and I thought "This is amazing", but the longer I talked with the client at different meetings, the more I thought, "Hmmm...", and I wrote down: it seems he values shares more than we share values.

It was all about money for them and we had no values in common, so I said no to the project. And more recently, I was asked to write about Brexit, just before and just after the vote, and I ended up with an aphorism which has not been published: "Water connects the world but divides people". 5000 years ago you could walk to Britain from France. There was a bit of climate change, and now we have the English Channel, and that gives people the feeling that they are independent, which is completely insane, totally insane. For me, the idea of a united Europe was a stepping-stone to a better understanding of the world as a whole, it wasn't just simply creating a huge economic market place. It was a philosophical attempt to stop beating each other up, work together and eventually, in the end, for the benefit of the planet as a whole. I've written about an alternative economic model, which is still competitive, but it's altruistic, and the beneficiary is the planet. It would be like flipping the current economic model on its head. It could still work equally well; it would be equally valid, equally valuable. But it would be more valuable for everyone, in the same way that writing an algorithm to undermine the exploitative economic model of Snapchat and Facebook could still allow profit, although the data collected would be yours, not theirs. Nobody has done it yet, but someone will.

**AM:** *Does this theoretical approach of architecture help you in the relation with the client?*

**IR:** My clients criticise me quite regularly because I don't communicate clearly enough what's going on in my head. It's interesting, because I think I do, which might mean they don't understand what I'm talking about. Or, sometimes I get comments about materials, which makes me think that I have been a bit different to what they expect. But once I've written the concept and begun to make the first calligraphy, I'm beginning to picture the total project. And at that stage my mental image is total, it's special. It begins to comprise the totality of the light, the sound, the physicality of the space and materials. And I know exactly what we're after, from the macro-scale to the micro-scale, and I know how the door handle will feel and function at a special occasion, such as the formal opening of the building.

**AM:** *Have you published all the books of texts?*

**IR:** Yes and no, there's a book of poetry I've published. There is my own autobiography called "*Being an architect*", and the first volume is about being/ becoming an architect and all the projects, and the other volume "*The Architect*" is theoretical writing.

**AM:** *We will definitely have to look for them. Thank you for this amazing journey in your life, your work and design philosophy!*

**END**

**Andreea Movila**

*The syntheses of our talks until now on the subject of "Designing The Profile Of The Future Architect" can be followed here:*

- *A summary of the discussions that took place at SHARE Bucharest can be traced here: <http://share-architects.com/which-are-the-directions-young-architects-should-invest-the-most/>*
- *The radiography of Tirana talks, February 2018 can be read here <http://share-architects.com/tirana-2018-the-second-chapter-of-our/>*
- *A synthesis of the talks in Bucharest, March 2018 here: <http://share-architects.com/reflecting-briefly-on-the-present-devoting-all-your-energies-to-the-future-a-resume-of-our-talks-at-share-bucharest-march-2018-on-the-subject-of-designing-the-profile-of/>*