

**THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT
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IAN RITCHIE

The Public Role of The Architect

Architecture is the Medium - What is the Message?

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[This is a time of worldwide political fractionalisation and growing social and economic disparity. Ian Ritchie discusses the public role, responsibilities and self-created myths of the architect and how these are communicated vis-a-vis society, the public, the profession and the greater world]

Communication is the very essence of architecture: a building's materials and fabric, form and relationship with its environment convey encoded messages to the public and users interacting with it. While transmitting specific information about how the building is to be used and experienced, they also record the cultural and financial ambitions of those who commissioned it, the economic and socio-political structures and values embodied by its brief, and the architect's aesthetic intentions.

Although individual architects must be able to communicate effectively to complete a project, as a collective architects seem unable to revive the profession's dwindling reputation with the general public and its reduced intellectual role in contemporary public life. Our social and digital media-saturated age suggests the solution of hiring marketing and brand-identity firms to reposition architecture's image, but before doing so we should ask ourselves whether we have in fact sought the public's approval during the last few decades.

Unlike other media, architecture exists within and changes the real space it inhabits. The consequences of its messages are real and long-lasting because architecture transforms the economic and political ideologies it embodies into the world in which people live and interact. Buildings and spaces shape and structure, facilitate and limit the human emotions, interactions and activities that take place within them: architecture has an inescapable civic and political content.



Ian Ritchie Architects, Mercer Walk, Covent Garden, London, 2016. The Mercer Walk concept creates part of a new east-west pedestrian route through Covent Garden, London. At its heart is a new piazza reflecting and reinforcing the *genius loci* and urban structure of this part of the city. Orientation is made simple through the massing of traditional warehouse forms, each with its own colour, and through the paving design.

It follows that we have an ethical obligation to the public, as well as to the client and our own art, to create spaces in which human flourishing and social progress can best occur, and which support the state of physical, mental and social well-being which the WHO defines as 'health'.¹

Too many architects have abdicated these professional and ethical responsibilities. Responding to financialised housing markets which cater to the preferences of wealthy global investors and individuals rather than the needs of communities, a media-fuelled orgy of architectural narcissism has resulted in stylistically incoherent cityscapes dominated by buildings lacking any sensitivity to each other, cultural context or community aesthetic traditions, expressive of little more than the desire to be iconic.



Trident Park, Malta, Gardens A yellow & B orange SK0376_180525 © Ian Ritchie Architects

Ian Ritchie Architects, Architectural Rendering, Farsons Old Brewhouse and Trident Business Park: yellow and orange gardens view, Mrieħel, Malta, 2017. At Trident Business Park wayfinding is communicated and facilitated primarily by the use of colour. Straight covered external routes - at each floor level and connecting all buildings - offer views into the gardens either side of each building.

Architects who regard themselves as experts in creating environments for users who are not conscious of formal design principles, and whose aesthetic values may differ from theirs, have ignored the public's valid and justifiably strong opinions about the places in which they live and work.

Worst of all, the ashamed commerciality of the profession has created cities and developments explicitly supporting the notion of inequality. They present glittering facades to people who can't afford to live there, exacerbating divides along economic and social fault lines and fuelling political discontent.

The architectural profession has actually been conveying a clear message to a public who have no real choice about the degree to which they interact with the environments we create and little say in the design process: they don't matter. Why should a public whose opinions and needs we don't care about, respect us? It is no surprise if public opinion discounts the profession's benefits and exaggerates its flaws.

Changing the message requires listening: listening begins with a commitment to awareness and understanding

Architecture still has enormous potential for delivering significant social and cultural value and there has been a perceptual shift in values and attitude within the profession, especially among the younger generation of architects and in parts of the world of minor interest to a western-focussed media.

Although the dominance of contractors has eroded the architect's influence, and the client's wishes and the planning system reduce the architect's agency, practices which apply intelligent rather than stylistically driven design, and a genuine concern with public process and end user needs to their projects, are creating buildings and spaces which combine beauty and functionality.

Their work is helped by the growing body of scientific evidence which is quantifying the biological, neurological and emotional ways in which architecture and environment affect human minds and behaviour. 'Designing with the mind in mind' from the inception of a project is easier knowing that a visual balance of simplicity and complexity rather than blank walls communicates accessibility to passersby, that access to green spaces and light increases our physical and mental well-being, and that the ability to have some control over one's environment is crucial for human happiness. There is also less justification for ignoring such factors during the design process.



Sainsbury Wellcome Centre @ UCL - West wall projection © Adam Scott

Ian Ritchie Architects, Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for Neural Circuits and Behaviour at UCL, London, 2016.

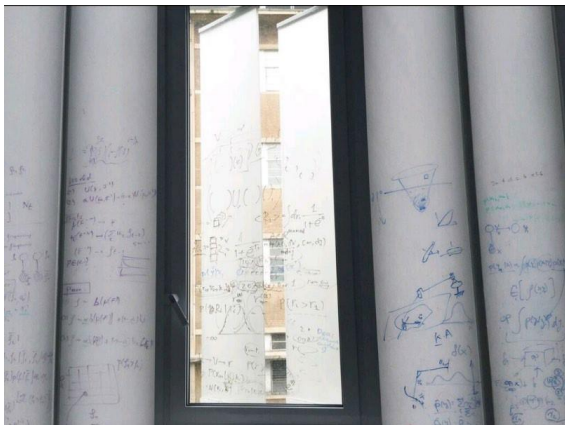
The SWC's west end provides a small public park and at night images are projected upon the building's white cast glass façade. The image shows a highly magnified neuron firing. The idea of a building communicating its interior activities - science research in this case - rather than commercial advertising is not new, but is an important aspect of a façade's role.

Architects who use their advantage as experts to engage with and enlighten ultimate users rather than force solutions on them, gain access to their specific knowledge and experience. Doing so greatly increases the probability that their architecture - articulated according to the ultimate users' specific demands and preferences as well as aesthetic and commercial principles - will be the better for it.



Sainsbury Wellcome Centre @ UCL - The writing is on the wall - getting ideas down wherever you are © Grant Smith
Ian Ritchie Architects, Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for Neural Circuits and Behaviour at UCL, London, 2016

The SWC's interior architecture facilitates communication by providing opportunities to collaborate and interact easily. The image shows transparent glass walls used as whiteboards. Scientists explained to the architect that ideas often arise spontaneously during conversation, and that thoughts often need to be exchanged immediately and visually.



Sainsbury Wellcome Centre @ UCL - The building as a whiteboard © Ian Ritchie Architects
Ian Ritchie Architects, Interior wall, Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for Neural Circuits and Behaviour at UCL, London, 2016

Many architects find it easy to talk about what they are doing, but difficult to explain why they are doing it. Architectural concepts can be complicated and communicating these ideas often becomes mired in discipline-specific terminology.

The interior surface of the SWC's main structural and white insulated cast glass façade assembly is designed to be used by scientists in the labs, write-up and offices as a whiteboard, as are the transparent opening windows carried by the structural cast glass. Among their key languages is the algorithm - a set of rules used in calculations and other problem-solving operations.

Developing skills to communicate at a level that a general audience can understand requires deliberate practice, careful attention to language, and a willingness to listen with the modesty that comes hard to a profession which regularly discounts the public's taste while forgetting that some of the world's most beautiful, visually intricate and complex buildings are also the most popular with the general population.



Sainsbury Wellcome Centre @ UCL - Exterior Colonnade suspended pixels - Bach's Musical Offering to Frederick the Great IMG_5421 © Eva Menuhin

Ian Ritchie Architects, Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for Neural Circuits and Behaviour at UCL, London, 2016.

The SWC's traditional colonnade communicates with passersby through a set of five informative vitrines and a 'ceiling' of suspended pixels. The score of Bach's great Prussian Fugue is printed on one side. On the other are eleven partial portraits of Nobel Lauréates who have spent parts of their career at UCL. Viewers' brains fill in the gaps between pixels to create complete portraits.

Genuine communication begins with integrity

A good place to begin regaining our credibility is by cleaning our own house. If our institutions want to become the first port of call for developers, politicians and the public on questions of development and the environment, they must be seen as a powerful agency for change and good. They must become known as guarantors of integrity and intolerant of corruption - and individually we must cry out when we see it, and behave accordingly. As the late Cedric Price wrote: "Withdrawal of labour is an activity insufficiently considered by the architectural profession."²

Let's use our imaginations and skills at persuasion to ameliorate the worst architectural excesses of wealth and power. If a star architect's services are so valuable that they lend 'value' and attract funding to a project, then a bit of arm twisting by such individuals has the potential to be effective. A united front or collective boycott might be an even more powerful mechanism to help initiate change.

And most important: if as architects we want to be capable of engaging in a genuine conversation with the public and fellow professionals, our common agenda as humans and inhabitants of a planet stressed to the breaking point must now outweigh all other considerations.



Trident Park, Malta, Garden C magenta © Ian Ritchie Architects

Ian Ritchie Architects, Architectural Rendering, Farsons Old Brewhouse and Trident Business Park: magenta garden view, Mrieħel, Malta, 2017

The gardens and vertical circulation towers located at the south end of each garden at Trident Business Park are colour themed. Vertical circulation between the buildings is shared by everyone and is designed to encourage interaction and use of the gardens - which are a traditional spatial structure of the old Maltese palaces.

The real cost of every architectural project is born by every individual, society, and the world as a whole. One action we could take for every design decision, independent of its apparent scale of impact, is to question its meaning and outcome for the quality of life on a global level. The simple act of asking the question will help us begin to develop a critical sense.

¹ <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." WHO, 1948.

² Cedric Price, *Architecture Canada Newsmagazine* v.48 February 15, 1971, page 1 <http://hdl.handle.net/10222/74874>

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