

Home Art - Questions for Architect Ian Ritchie

When you were elected to the Royal Academy of Arts in 1998 and became Professor of Architecture at the RA Schools in 2004, did it change your style of architecture? What are the best parts of the Royal Academy for you?

No, my style of architecture did not change. My work is not influenced by architectural trends or the work of other architects. Academicians are elected by all the current Academicians based on the quality of their work over their career until then, which must show a certain consistency to have merit.

I have enjoyed meeting other artists, notably painters, sculptors, etchers and printmakers since being elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, and many have become friends.

What is an "intelligent design" for you? What are its most important elements?

An intelligent design is one that meets the urban context, considers the area's social and economic parameters, meets the client's needs and - most importantly - the user's requirements. Time or energy are not wasted in the process of realising intelligently designed architecture. Some important considerations which should be taken into account during the design process are the origin and transformation of the materials to be used, and their appropriateness for the project. Intelligent design minimizes long-term maintenance costs. It is not about digital controls and superficial 'green-washing'.

When you start a project how do you compose the connection between construction and its social role?

I write first - prose, then a poem. It is the way I search for the underlying 'essence' of the project. This essence may be philosophical, social, political, economic, visual – or a combination of any of these.

The words reveal the essential direction of the project and allow the social dimension to be part of the earliest concepts. If one draws first without sufficient reflection, these initial images can become locked in the brain and can frustrate real development of ideas.

One of the most important features of eco-friendly buildings are energy use and efficiency. Today, how is energy efficiency for buildings provided?

First, compactness of volume should be considered.

Second, the natural environment within which the building is placed should be thoroughly understood. Then consideration should be given to exploiting the orientation to take as much advantage as possible of natural energy and environmental protection, such as shading, wind breaks, orientation, etc.

Third, care should be given to the choice of construction materials. The most energy-intensive aspect of construction materials is in their production or manufacture, not in their use. Thus, it is important to consider every aspect of the assembly of materials to ensure longevity.

Fourth, the level of insulation required to meet the environmental demands must be considered – both in terms of retaining heat and maintaining coolth throughout the year.

What are the golden rules of sustainable architecture?

1. When in doubt, don't. This may mean not building at all, or renovating an existing building instead of building a new one.
2. Recognising that we, as designers, are not so very intelligent. We may think we are, and that we are doing good. However, the reality is that we are more *homo faber* than *homo sapiens*. This awareness can help us avoid designing simply for the sake of it.
3. Think long term, and make the building robust.
4. Keep in mind what you would do differently if it were your money being used to build the building. It is easy to spend other people's money thoughtlessly.
5. Avoid creating a high maintenance building.

In this point, where does the use of glass stand for all kind of buildings? How does using glass affect the building and the environment?

'Glass is the answer; what was the question?'

This seems to me to be the response of many architects world-wide. They assume glass will be the major material of the architecture without thinking about why glass should be used. This is because glass is a very attractive material to work with for an architect - it is magical! It can be transparent, translucent or opaque, and any colour. It can be structural or not. It can be assembled to become an insulating wall. It can offer support for communications, art and technology. The possibilities for the use of glass are still virtually endless.

One of the biggest risks of designing with glass in a city is the way it reflects both light and sound. The effects of glare are not considered by many designers. It is not just the first reflection, but secondary and even tertiary reflections which can render a cityscape quite hostile. This can easily be avoided with a little thinking by the architect.