

**RIAS FELLOWS' DINNER**

**CENTENARY TALK**

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**Now and Tomorrow - Innovation & Responsibility**

I am honoured to have been asked to give the RIAS Fellows' Dinner centenary talk.

I have been advised that ad-libbing with plenty of humour and, if you wish, ending on something serious is a good formula for an 'after dinner' speech. And not to read from a text that you've written! Well, failure starts this speech. I've written something and I will try, wine permitting, to follow it.

My autobiography, 'Being: an Architect' was published two years ago.

I contacted Roger Connah, a professor currently at Carleton University in Ottawa, and explained that rather than follow a classic biographical model I wanted to explore other ways of writing an "archiography."

I wanted to present the story of my life as an architect but enriched with an openness about how I start to think about a project—writing (often poetry) before drawing, engaging with colleagues, learning from others, collaborating, exploring and expanding design horizons—and also to reveal the important social and ethical concerns that seem so lacking in today's stand-alone architectures and which concern me.

I wanted to include a record of the often unglamorous hard work that goes into architecture - even the unbuilt, abandoned and rejected! And the struggle that so often accompanies the realisation of the architectural dream—so central to being an architect. It was an unconventional approach, and certainly with regard to exposing failure, the trials, as well as the pleasures and successes of being an architect.

In this vein I will try to be open and honest about how I see the RIAS.

I work in the world of engineering where the Laws of Physics reign, and in the Arts where style, taste and fashion change rapidly and where beauty is held to be in the eye of the beholder. For me, beauty lies in nature's non-linearity - the flickering flame, light dancing on water, autumn leaves falling, changing clouds.

Operating between art and engineering generates a constant search - a search for human values in the world of facts, for beauty in the sciences and the science of beauty, the symbiosis of the arts and sciences within the larger whole - for culture is indivisible.

I'm reminded of different approaches to design; the engineer is shown the target, pulls back the bow and his arrow strikes the bull. The architect, looks at the target, pulls back his bow and his arrow sails upwards into the sky. The engineer avoids lying, for the structure must not collapse; while the architect is free to explore, to tell stories.

I will hover between these two worlds a little by looking at truth, lies and bullshit.

*An American and a Scotsman were discussing the cold experienced in winter in the North of Scotland.*

*"Why, it's nothing at all compared to the cold we have in the States," said the American. "I can recollect one winter when a sheep, jumping from a hillock into a field, became suddenly frozen on the way, and stuck in the air like a mass of ice."*

*"But, mon," exclaimed the Scotsman, "the law of gravity wouldn't allow that."*

*"I know that," replied the tale-pitcher. "But the law of gravity was frozen, too!"*

## **PROFESSIONAL CONDITIONS INVOLVED IN *BEING AN ARCHITECT*.**

The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland's Fellows' Dinner recognises the most knowledgeable and experienced architects in a special class of membership: one of meritocracy. The founding Charter of the RIAS describes the purpose of the Incorporation as bringing its members together in Fellowship to the benefit of architecture.

And it is expressive of the wisdom of the Scots that the Incorporation, unlike other architectural organisations, has chosen to retain 'Fellowship' as the pinnacle of its membership - words are important!

Fellowship comprises comradeship, friendship, sociability - and mutual support and respect. These have a bearing on what follows.

I would also say that the RIAS is an elite institution, and there is nothing wrong in being recognised as elite.

As a football fan I use the word with delight - who would want anyone but elite players in their team?! It's about quality, and I believe in a fair society that is free to nurture, spread and give access to that quality.

An elite institution such as the Fellowship of the RIAS is about culture, and as such it carries a huge social responsibility. Its distinguished members are busy people. Yet its potential power rests upon its membership's willingness to give of their experience and achievement, time and energy, to provide a strong direction for the RIAS. For only the membership can control and define what the RIAS is, and what it is for.

And what should the RIAS be for? Excellence is a good place to start. Aristotle said it this way: "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

## ACTING RIGHTLY:

Profile and status are extremely important in our profession.

Celebrity culture appears to have become an integral part of our collective nature and indeed our celebrities in the RIAS help define us as an institution and so, our public image.

Anachronistic, even committed and sensitive practising architects risk remaining critically impoverished if they do not pay attention to media that often distorts or rebrands their work.

However the past twenty or so years have seen many architects trapped by a media-frenzy. The media's demand for their identities - identity being fed only by novelty or by self-celebration – has created a new generation of 'architects' indifferent to their surroundings, victims of their own egos, which are measured solely in 'column inches', and unconcerned with the wider society, the socio-political dimension. Their buildings stand alone, they do not share walls; they rarely make streets or city squares. They stand isolated, like their architects, in an over-affluent society where any formal proposal is possible if it attracts the consumer.

I was told that the ambition of one architect was to have a building in every major city in the world – the global archi-ego map exists – and I suspect he is not alone in this ambition. It has nothing to do with anything cultural.

I am reminded of T.S. Eliot's distinction between two kinds of achievement - those acclaimed during our lifetime and those that last through the ages.

Nevertheless, we have to use the media to enable the RIAS to become newsworthy and to achieve institutional celebrity status.

To engage with the media, the great institutions of our age - including the RIAS - must change. They must no longer be seen as a protective harbour or private club for the profession, but as a generous launch pad for the many to become a powerful agency for change and good.

It has to achieve a real and positive identity in the hearts and minds of the public. Architects meet so many intelligent people, and reaching out to them, thinking how much the RIAS could help and inform them, is now very important.

And we must show courage - "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality."<sup>1</sup>

We must have the courage to stand for integrity, and to do this we must stand together against the forces that control, direct, abuse and censor the well-intentioned, critically engaged approach to architecture.

And the forces are often subtle, ever present and so is the temptation to relax our ethical stance. As C.S. Lewis said: "Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."<sup>2</sup>

Down South, the battle may have already been lost. You may have heard of the Garden Bridge: It's the 'brainchild' of an actress who boasts publically of being able to twist London's mayor around her little finger.

It's designed by someone who had several meetings with the London mayor Boris Johnson and Transport for London before a so-called competition for an unnecessary pedestrian bridge across the Thames was even started.

The transport need is not in the London Plan, there is no business case, and the design procurement process was manipulated.

The bridge was to be privately funded.

It's a kind of cosy deceit when the mayor, who also chairs TfL, insists on £30m of taxpayer's money going towards it, followed by cajoling his old school chum, the Chancellor of the Exchequer to cough up another £30m of the public's money. Why? Because the private sector cannot raise the £175m. But that does not stop it being shut once a month for private corporate events.

It's all met with a shrug, even though it's a vanity project - a conspiracy to impose a tourist attraction masquerading as transport. As if London's South Bank can take any more tourists! It's the taxpayer who stumps up in the end.

Although the head of the RIBA initially called for the process to be halted before more public money is spent, in the end that body - which should have had the guts to make a stand for integrity - has caved in. And the architects and engineers that went through a farcical bidding process? None protest, and very few in the professions at large because of the fear of losing future work from TfL has muzzled them. This has issues which are more important than personal gain. Banana republic?

And to use the sports analogy again - imagine yourselves in a rowing crew: Unless you are all rowing in the same direction you're not going to get anywhere. Our actions and practices will be obvious in the final result; therefore we must diligently look to watch over our actions

A *united* stand: that reputable architects will not be a party to such a process - that reputable architects will withdraw if corruption is shown to exist - could have done much to send the message that as an independent yet collegiate group of individuals - a true fellowship - we all recognise our responsibilities to the communities we create a built environment for, and will not disenfranchise them, and will stand together and let that ethical stance be known. It's not an unknown tactic - trade unions have used it to excellent effect over the years!

The RIAS should become a first port of call for politicians and public on questions of development and the environment, and a galvaniser for the art cultures of Scotland. The RIAS will have to make and nurture new alliances to become Scotland's 'Mothership of the Arts', and we Fellows will be vital to achieving this.

However we must measure how we communicate and what we communicate.

We live in an era drowning in “bullshit”. I do not use the term to shock, rather as a wake-up call. I believe the word originates from “bull” - meaning twaddle or hogwash - and emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The communications revolution has made it ubiquitous. TV and the Internet have created an unending demand for information, and there simply isn't enough truth to go around. So, we get disinformation and bullshit instead. Indeed, there are some troubling signs that the consumer has been trained to *prefer* bullshit. In choosing guests to appear on TV news, bookers will almost always choose a glib ignoramus over an expert who can't talk in clipped sentences. Bullshit is thus endemic, a contagious process and product, and architecture is not immune to its contagion.

But how is it defined? Harry G. Frankfurt, a retired professor of philosophy at Princeton, defined it in his essay “On Bullshit” in 1989.

*“Both in lying and in telling the truth people are guided by their beliefs concerning the way things are... For this reason, telling lies does not tend to unfit a person for telling the truth in the same way that bullshitting tends to. The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether.*

*He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.”*

Truth versus bullshit, truth and the media - a communication dilemma.

## COMMUNICATION ABOUT WHAT ARCHITECTURE IS

For our profession, to speak plainly and to increase the public understanding of architecture has become the major task.

Architects should be worried that the term ‘architect’ is too often used as a disparaging term by the general public. It is a direct result of architecture practiced purely as a personal manifesto - high art sufficient unto itself - without reference to how the occupiers feel about working or living in their buildings.

All of our work has a public content, whether the entire building or just its façades. We rarely, if ever, construct with our own money for ourselves. We act as the intermediary group between the public and the client, and together we have an obligation to both.

It is also because the public do not understand how we do what we do. I recognise that if we wish to increase the public understanding of architecture, the solution is not only to deliver quality architecture in its broadest sense, but to learn how to write and communicate architecture.

A first move could be that the RIAS, say, with the University of Edinburgh join forces to establish a Chair for a Professor of the Public Understanding of Architecture.

Sir Martin Rees, former astronomer royal, said that one human brain is far more complex than the entire universe.

There are a some 150 billion neurons in the average human brain, the same number as there are stars in our Milky Way galaxy, and a similar number of galaxies in the universe have so far been 'seen' through the Hubble telescope as we look back in time.

Although the majority of us Fellows may well be past the halfway stage of our professional careers, our wisdom, DNA and the very nature of our work tell us that we should look forward. Working alongside neuroscientists during the past five years I have learned a great deal about how the brain is structured to navigate, interpret and inform how we behave in spatial environments. I have also learned some of their language - and they mine - during the design process for my practice's latest building - the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for neural networks and behaviour at University College London.

It embodies some of the results of this research within its design and communicates aspects of neuroscience to the public on the outside.

As architects we need to be aware that what we design really has a huge impact on people's lives, and of the role our creations play in influencing human behaviour and why. We can all begin to apply some knowledge from neuroscience to design better buildings, urban spaces and environments.

I am so convinced of the value of neuroscientific research to design that I am working towards establishing a base for a neuro-design research centre in London. Research has always been important to me, and if it informs how we can build better, to be more socially responsible, then that must be good.

I maintain that the moral is inextricable from the responsible act, and the architect knows exactly what this merger means. We fellow professionals should be as capable of realising this as anyone else, and in terms of our influence on society and the physical environment, we have a moral obligation to do so.

We all have a role to serve - not ourselves, but society. And if we don't get the design of cities and neighbourhoods right, then all the work on crime, education, housing, health, jobs, and social exclusion will be undermined.

Who or what determines the evolving structure of our cities and their expansion, gentrification and densification? Is it democracy or the capitalist dictats: land values and profit?

Currently very few, if any, architects make those decisions. But at least we should be at the table where such strategies are being formulated. And we should support each other - in fellowship - in maintaining the integrity of the political and professional processes that go into creating the buildings and environments we design.

And this is where the collective wisdom of the RIAS Fellows should come to the fore, through public participation and the promotion of design and civic values through architecture.

Successful people have a social responsibility to make the world a better place, and as architects and Fellows of the RIAS we are in unique position to use our creativity and expertise to do just that.

Consider the Ephebic Oath made by young Athenians:

*"I...will not leave my country smaller, when I die, but greater and better, so far as I am able by myself and with the help of all."*

Perhaps we could consider adding this or something like it to the RIAS Fellowship's public manifesto.

*A Glaswegian went to spend a few days in London with his son, who had done exceptionally well in the great metropolis. After their first greetings at King's Cross Station, the young fellow remarked:*

*"Feyther, you are not lookin' weel. Is there anything the matter?"*

*The old man replied, "Aye, lad, I have had quite an accident."*

*"What was that, feyther?"*

*"Mon," he said, "on this journey frae bonnie Scotland I lost my luggage."*

*"Dear, dear, that's too bad; 'oo did it happen?"*

*"Aweel" replied the Aberdonian, "the cork cam' oot."*

Well, let's hope there is some left in the bottle. Please lift your glasses and give a toast to: Another century of increasing influence and success for the RIAS.

Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* 1942

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*