



Richard Rogers: 'To discuss with the Prince is very, very difficult when everybody is bowing and scraping and bending their knee'

The Modern Principle

Richard Rogers is Britain's best-known architect and a staunch defender of the hi-tech modernist architecture exemplified by the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Lloyd's Building in the City of London. Beatrix Campbell interviewed him

Tell us first of all about your 1986 exhibition at the Royal Academy. It was called 'London As It Could Be'. What was it all about?

I've always been interested in London as a meeting place for people, a human, beautiful place, which it might have been in, say, Georgian times. It was full of inhuman back-to-back housing but the great parks were built, the Nash terraces, all those things which probably gave London

great culture in comparison with other cities, which I think it is losing now.

In 1983 the National Gallery held a competition for an extension to one side of the Gallery. Instead of just doing another building we recommended a pedestrian route to link up Leicester Square with Trafalgar Square. One of the problems with Trafalgar Square is that you can't do anything there - except feed the pigeons or occasionally

have political meetings. So what was once called 'the heart of an empire' in the 19th century has become a traffic island. We said: 'No more offices in Trafalgar Square: it's a public place. There should be shops, cafes, public activities.' And by saying it would function better with shops and so on, we were making a statement about changing the economic structure of that area as well. **Had you previously thought about London as a problem, about the extinction of the River Thames as a focus?**

I'm an urban person by nature. I've always been interested in beautiful squares, whether it's Piazza San Marco or Il Campo in Sienna, places to walk and so on. I lived for five years in Paris, and one of the nice things there is that you can actually walk all over the place, whereas London, because of all its great parks (which are fantastic), and the fact that it has all grown out of villages, is all dispersed. Bicycle's the only way you can manage it, you certainly can't walk. The idea of weaving and linking together spaces has been seriously eroded by traffic. Traffic is the big city problem of the 20th century: it cuts cities up in all directions.

The Coin Street development on the South Bank at Waterloo gave a tremendous opportunity to look at the Thames. In London the Thames is a barrier. Most of our bridges don't actually go just from bank to bank: just take Waterloo Bridge: it's actually double the length of the distance between its banks. There's also traditionally very few shops and so on around our bridges, whereas in nearly every other city the bridge forms a sort of nucleus.

Why has it happened that way in London?

The British love has been pubs, clubs, private gardens and parks, as against street life and cafes. We're basically an inward-looking society.

Over the Coin Street development you found yourself on the 'other' side - against the local community and with the capi-

talist developer.

Yes. I was. But I think the real argument was about whether that South Bank area was *local* or *national*. I saw it as an opportunity to try and create a stepping stone between the richer northern and poorer southern river banks. I didn't see it as a very good place for your two-storey house. I don't have anything specifically against offices. If offices are bad, it's because the society that we live in tends to give all the goodies to private enterprises. There are offices right down to the ground on major thoroughfares. That means that the public has lost the public realm. Only 2% of all the ground in Coin Street was to be private riverside offices. All offices were to start at the second floor, whereas all the ground was to be either shopping, leisure or housing.

People always say to me: 'If you had the possibility of creating a sort of Pompidou Centre, would you do it there?' The answer was 'yes', but I didn't: unlike France, the government wasn't going to produce the money. There were good arguments for fewer offices and more government-financed situations there. The next best thing one can do is to persuade the developer to put in as much money as possible for public activities.

Coin Street took a long time in my life: a year at the public inquiry, being torn to pieces by the local community. Sure, that was uncomfortable.

What did you feel about their grounds?

If I had been the local community I could well understand their point. There were people saying: 'Look, but I've always had a view of the Thames here.' And I would say: 'Yes, but we should try to create a *place* around it; to maximise the river. I think I can give back more to it by doing it this way than by doing it small.' Heseltine ended up by saying yes to both as and the local community. I think Heseltine's thinking was that we, the commercial developer, obviously would find the money and the local

community wouldn't. Little did he realise that Ken Livingstone would step in. He said: 'Well, the GLC will and the money for the local community.' And the GLC bought the sites.

The worst part about that whole thing, was firstly that it immediately drew up the Left versus Right lines, so I found myself on the Right - which wasn't comfortable, especially after the Pompidou development, and since I had much admired Ken Livingstone. And then there was no central government, no organisation that could look at it in broader strategic

statement of 'how much money can I go for?' But I think that if you are looking for real patronage, the encouragement has got to come from the state.

And the state isn't going to do it. Does that mean that your clients are inevitably banks or financial institutions?

Yes. There are practically no other clients. I'm just trying to think ... I don't have a public client in this country. But there's an intriguing thing. It's quite clear that France, broadly speaking, is very determined to be a cultural centre of 1992. Mitterrand, certainly is in-



Hi-tech Vision: Plan for London's Hungerford Bridge

terms. It was down to the developer.

There has to be a broader context to make the modern city work. I don't see any signs at all of it in this country. The only people who can do truly far-seeing things are those with the power of patronage, if you like. You've got to have something like the GLC - not small boroughs or private money-oriented commercial organisations.

So what's the effect on you of dependence on the patronage of what can only be large developers?

The Royal Docks in London is one of the areas where we do quite a lot of work where there is still a certain amount of pressure being put upon some of the developers to try and produce something which is more than just a straightforward private

interested in glory, but he is also very clear that if he can make France the leading place, it will end up benefiting financially. We should be looking at why we've got such a mess in this country, and the answer is that we're too profit-motivated and looking too much for short-term returns. The latest attacks from Prince Charles and his entourage have had the effect of camouflaging the problem that they should be examining: which is the ethics of our society and *why* we choose mediocre architects rather than the best?

There was a tremendous interest in building a vast amount at the lowest possible cost in the postwar era, and most serious of all, there was no realisation that you had to maintain those buildings: even more so if you want to

build cheaply. We dumped all these poor people who'd never lived off ground level into these big blocks, basically cars and tarmac all the way round, and then were surprised that things didn't work. We all have to carry the blame for that, including architects. It's the rotten way we build flats somehow in this country that's created this situation: a poverty of imagination.

So what you're saying is that two distinct things have been conflated? One being maintenance and management, and the other an architectural problem. And what Prince Charles does, by implication, is conflate the two. But he is speaking to commonsense intuitive dissent from what British cities have become. Clearly this is a fantastically important moment for architects and planners. Don't you feel driven to get stuck into the argument?

Well yes, I am.

But in a way in which we don't hear you.

I'm the world's slowest writer. I am quite happy to talk. Prince Charles has taken issue with many individual architects in a way I find very vicious - and very questionable democratically. In fact I think one must question the ethics of the Prince.

Why?

Well, because in the end, how do you argue with a Prince? **You argue.**

You try. I've had three meetings cancelled by Buckingham Palace - different discussions like the BBC, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Royal Academy - because it's not a thing the Prince should do. So it's not quite so easy. This is the reason that in the past some countries beheaded their kings! To discuss with the Prince is very, very difficult when everybody is bowing and scraping and bending their knee - in fact it's impossible. If princes want to argue they should stop being princes.

I absolutely agree that the cities are an appalling mess. But as to whether the public like modern architecture or not... more people go to the

Pompidou Centre than to the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower. Thousands of people go to look at Lloyds - they can't all go there because it's hideous, I hope. So people *are* interested in modern architecture. Of course, it's probably a minority, but the idea of democracy is that minorities should have a chance to say something as well.

Why is 'community architecture' so attractive?

The word community is like, say, 'motherhood'. You can't be against it. But the idea of community architecture is important: it's about quality. There has been a tendency for clients and architects not to take notice of what people want.

So part of this crisis of architecture is about the assumed authority and autonomy of professionals, and that people are demanding a level of accountability?

I don't know. No country has probably such a democratic way of making decisions through elected councillors. But the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 has created the slowest machinery of decision-making in any country I've worked in. This is bureaucracy dulling democracy. Somehow you have to find a way in which participation starts very early on.

If you were, let's imagine, hired by the people living in a housing co-op or a council estate, can you imagine the conditions in which you would make your Lloyd's Building format for those people?

But you are seeing it, if I may say so, as the creative act of the architect, as somebody who approaches the client and says: 'I've got it - it's a Lloyd's Building.' But it isn't at all. It's a very slow process, needing the client's full involvement.

What I am trying to get you to defend is modernist principles, in this atmosphere where there is such a comprehensive retreat from modernism. Given the public debate and people's pessimism, how can people imagine modernism being translated in the local and the domestic context?

But that's because you are looking at the form and what I'm saying is that it wouldn't

be the same anyhow. The first thing the Lloyd's people said to us was: 'It won't look like the Pompidou Centre will it?' My answer to that was: 'I've no idea at this point what it will look like.' I approached the problem without any specific form. The Pompidou Centre is more an isolated machine of a building than Lloyd's is. It reflects a certain '60s' consciousness. It was designed in 1971/2 but reflects that whole period, including 1968. **What is it about '68 that is expressed in the building?**

I think it's the importance of the community, the whole

given human scale. Flexibility for growth and change lies at the heart of modern architecture, and some parts have longer lives than others. What we call the 'service elements' have a maximum life of between a few months and 50 years. So if you plug in those elements to the middle of the building, then somehow you're going to have to get at them. Putting them outside also means that your floors have the versatility of a warehouse and can be put to many uses. And then there is also an element of enjoyment: who wants to go in a lift to rub shoulders -



Covent Garden: Sketch of Rogers' replica of Inigo Jones' piazza

idea of being anti-monument, the idea that there shouldn't be great entrances, or a great statement about the importance of an institution. It's really a children's climbing frame, into which museums fit rather like drawers, plus a big piazza where people come. It is a big building but it's very open-ended.

You are committed to a kind of candour in architecture, that buildings should own up to what they are. There is an argument that this is just another caprice. You put your lifts outside, you say lifts have to be mended after 20 years, and outside makes it easier. Some would say: 'Bullshit, it's just because you like this fancy idea of lifts and services being on the outside.'

I believe that through the legibility of parts, interest is increased and the building is

even more if you're a small person - with people you don't know in a dark hole! Obviously if you're outside, you have a view. What's as good as a view?

Architecture is about the play of light and shadow on urban form. What is it that interests you when you look down the middle of the street? Why does it interest you? These movements are very, very important. So, the lift is both a glorification of vertical moving, because it's a wonderful thing to do: and in another sense it has a functional purpose. Of course, Lloyd's is basically a headquarters building and has a headquarters' building budget. The Pompidou Centre was a really low-cost building: about all we could afford was escalators!

You stress the theme of move-

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ment in buildings as a source of pleasure. But what about a different relationship to movement in public buildings or workplaces, which is to do with privacy, like going to the toilets, or to hide and have a cigarette! Maximum visibility is also maximum surveillance.

Yes, but that's also your decision. It is the job of the architect to translate the needs of the user. I don't need very much privacy. I was born and brought up in open plan, therefore I quite enjoy it. It's like the restaurant downstairs where you can see the food being cooked - I enjoy that, I like the theatre of life. Ruthy loves cooking, and our kitchen's in the middle of the living room, otherwise I'd never talk to her probably if I disappear behind the door. That's my relationship with my wife! It enriches our life.

I had a professor at Yale who wrote a book called *Community And Privacy*, which was really all about privacy. His life was all about privacy. He didn't get on with his kids, and had even more difficulty getting on with his wife, so it was just perfect to have lots of little cells where he could escape. I'm just taking an extreme of course! But the way you run your life gives a certain form to the building.

Now, what does that mean for your visualisation of cities?

The most serious criticism of modern society - and of course architects - is not so much that we have forsaken history, but that we have failed to fully use today's science and technology to solve today's problems. The culture of greed has stopped us achieving what for the first time is possible in a great global society. For example, we and our cities are being destroyed by being servants of the car. We should have technology that can control it, public movement systems so that if the car needs to travel, it should do so in ways which don't force us off our bicycles - or kill us! We haven't been sufficiently sophisticated in using the machinery of the 20th century. I think the 20th century will be remembered for science - it

will be remembered for its poverty of ethics as well - and the problem is that of the control of science. Science is a great tool, but it's *how* we use it.

It's very interesting to hear, let's say, Prince Charles saying: 'What we need is an architecture that is sympathetic to nature: classical architecture.' Classical architecture is about the *separation* of nature and building. The sadness about modern architecture is that there were great pioneers in the early-20th century, but because of commercial pressures in the 1920s and 30s we ended up by creating this monster called 'international style' which is an excuse for not thinking about architecture. It's not the failure of the modern movement, the failure is of the architects and the patrons who have isolated just one tiny core of the modern movement, and even that core is now rotten. We have concentrated on the commercial forms of architecture, and these cheap, nasty forms of building we see all over reflect exactly the victory of short-term values: money, over long-term values.

What would the long-term values be?

A humanist city where there is perfect balance between individual needs and public concerns; where a child can roam happily and at peace. If such a society existed, then the architect who builds and designs today's vulgar places for the prevailing society, would design beautiful places, parks, squares, tree-lined avenues and buildings.

Your presentation at the Royal Academy of a pedestrianised heart of the capital followed the GLC's transformation of the South Bank, and with the cheap fares policy, lots of Londoners did begin to feel it was *their* city. Did any politicians or political parties, approach you about the possibility of networks or alliances to pursue a more democratic vision of the capital?

The only politician who came to the opening was Madame Pompidou. •