

RIAS KEYNOTE LECTURE

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ON VALUE AND VALUES

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Thank you for the invitation to speak at the 2022 RIAS convention. This is the first time I've been invited to speak at one of Britain's architecture institutes, and it's an honour to share thoughts with people that care about making architecture better.

I want to take up the theme of this conference by examining the relationship between two sorts of value: Value and Values. That's Value without an 'S' and Values with a 'S'. Things we value have importance and worth, which includes usefulness and purpose. But often it is the measurement that get in the way. In relation to architecture, the word value has been so corrupted that it now almost always signifies something to do with money; thus 'value engineering', has become confused with simple cost-cutting. Under the authority of measurement, architects have struggled to articulate and codify any other sort of value. But the numbers themselves are meaningless without reference to a system of Values. These values – rationality, objectivity, progress, belief in the market, law, codes and personal freedom - are so naturalised in our cultural outlook that we rarely notice them. But they have come to construct our discipline, its processes and its myths.

Place and time matter. So to set what follows in context, I need to reference to the current state of the global economy, social life and climate. We face increasing wealth disparity, ecological breakdown and mass starvation. Architecture has always relied on an association with the rich and powerful. I am going to argue that in the face of our current challenges, architecture needs to rethink its relation with society so that it can be seen as an active player in doing good for humanity rather than just enriching those that already have. Architects can be part of the movement to reconnect with making people's lives better. This is what design should do and is the result of the Values that should underpin it, and the moral imperative that we should follow.

In thinking about this talk it is clear how interconnected the meaning of Value and Values are, and it's that which I seek to unravel. Please bear with me while I hope to make sense of it.

Cost is not Value

Value is always a cost/benefit equation. In architecture, cost stands for actual substances, intellect, energy and human endeavour. These combine into complex relationships that we manage by codifying practice into pre-defined and transferable pragmatics that can be communicated to the entire industry and explained to others outside our discipline. I'm thinking here of the Spons pricing book, or the RIBA Plan of Work, both of which use assumptions about metrics and processes to manage information. The inherent values baked into our habitual systems are usually only evident when you step outside that system, for example, as a self-builder or when experimenting with novel materials and/or techniques. This is also evident if you work in another country, where different skills, legal obligations, manufacturing techniques or geographies lead to different costs, different building systems and different aesthetic effects.

Our system of Values is supported on macro economic concepts, viz. capitalism, growth, finance, labour supply, manufacturing output, land availability, skills and training, technology, and the accumulation of profit within the marketplace. But as both Kate Raworth and Caroline Criado-Perez point out, the way in which our economic thinking is structured works in favour of the interests of specific groups and influencers. These interests are overwhelmingly those of white men, those living in the northern hemisphere, those that own land and those that control the money supply. When your quantity surveyor or contractor costs your next job, they are working within and conforming to the rules and values of this system.

Under capitalism, extraction and exploitation of natural and human resources are inherent, and have led to unbalanced accumulation and global inequality. The resulting consequences for nature are not the interest of the extractor/manufacturer, nor is its repercussion for communities, eco-systems or other co-dependents. Under current values, the task of 'making good' is not something extractors are typically required to do for the environment.

So far we've established that costs are tied to societal values and ethics. Your own personal values or convictions may depart from those prevailing, but they are always shaped by the broader public discourse and ideologies followed by our political leaders. Despite the current culture wars, which is another name for this contested cultural and ethical debate, it is fair to say that at the current moment, there does appear to be a fair degree of criticism levelled at our society's values and ethics - not least the monetarisation of everything and the disregard for the finite, vulnerable and valuable resources that are exploited as part of that system. Living within the doughnut is only one part of this equation. Our system disadvantages zero-hours-contracted and low paid workers, carers who are usually women, it destroys our beaches, rivers and seas,

pollutes our air, contaminates land, deforests mountains, melts our arctics and is bringing about mass extinction. We are all complicit in perpetrating this.

While these issues may seem distant from us, we are linked to such processes through complex global supply chains. As Future Architects' Front has pointed out, architectural workers also face low pay and long hours, and there is no system in place for collective representation of their position. Yet it is our collective failure that we have been reeled into this way of doing things. All of us, including those that represent us – our professions, our civic institutions, our governing bodies and the large practices that lead the industry - are part of the problem. If we do not challenge it, we sanction it. We have shown inertia in inventing alternative mechanisms and different value systems. It is high time that we did so.

RETHINKING VALUE AND VALUES

Now I've set out the negative effects of our current value system, I want to turn to some more uplifting issues. I'd like to call to mind the positive value architecture can genuinely provide.

Let's consider architecture's use value. In my view, the aim of architecture and building in particular, is

- To make things work better for living, playing, learning and producing
 - o This means making things that are suited to their purpose, practical to manage and easy to maintain
 - o To create places that are healthy to create, that help build skills and foster community coherence
 - o That are resilient for the future by being adaptable
- To make places that use human and natural resources equitably
- And to create places that bring meaning, pride and pleasure to those that occupy them so they care for them and value them in turn.

This is a contract for doing good for humanity. Underlying it is a manifesto for the future and a blueprint for ecological design. It is underwritten by a revised social ethic that is equitable and fair, and that rethinks value in a completely different way. This means a revised understanding of the architect's role in relation to the built and natural environments. As Scott McAuley of the Anthropocene Architecture School eloquently expressed in his Climate Champions podcast, architects have to become the stewards of the environment rather than its destroyers.

(By the way, I'm reluctant to use the word Sustainability here, for several reasons. First, the S-word has been devalued because it has been appropriated to mean anything that is designed as normal but can be concealed in greenwash – verbally or

physically – for marketing purposes. Second, the S-word suggests sustaining the current set of interests, when what the system really needs is a complete reboot. Sustainability implies we can carry on as ‘normal’, hoping that technology, like sticking plaster, can fix things.)

As our legislators create an even graver climate catastrophe by liberalising regulations and energy sources, it is even more urgent that we recall different values that challenge these disastrous policies. We need to stand up to nonsense in power and do what we know is right, best and of greatest value to humanity. Ultimately, this is how people will judge us and value what we do.

The Modernist concepts that have shaped architecture for a century are complicit in our downfall. The striving for progress, the worship of novelty, the pursuit of ‘innovation’, the faith in technology to fix what are social problems, fordist mechanisms of production and the exploitation of resources for profit - have made us – specifiers and employers - part of the problem. We have to urgently re-evaluate our goals and amend our reference points, stop drinking the Kool-Aid and start facing up to the mess we’ve made. What is desperately needed are positive narratives around the benefits of a low carbon economy, with greater emphasis on nurture, community and care. Enormous benefits could come about by embracing changes to our own lifestyles and ways of thinking & doing based on a re-ordering and adjustment to new realities. We are fully capable of doing it, but time is not on our side.

And by the way, nobody said it was going to be easy. I’m under no illusion that it will be. I’ve been fighting the good fight for thirty years trying, in the face of scepticism and inertia, to lead by example. But we like a fight, and at last the balance is tipping. The younger generation understand the threats, because they have grown up facing a scary and unstable future. So while the elders have accumulated wisdom, the younger among us have different skills; at home with social media, they are networked in ways we never were and they are critical of the prevailing system because they can see – and they care about – what is happening. The young will hold us to account and we owe it to them to mitigate the harm we and our forebears have meted out.

Forming age-spanning alliances will unite knowledge across the spectrum and halt the tired narrative that pits older people against younger ones. This is a false and unhelpful dichotomy, one that feeds the culture wars narrative. The most inspiring work is bubbling up from below, through organisations such as FAF, LETI, ACAN. We should support grass roots campaigns and movements that challenge the power accumulated by corporations and institutions until these same organisations are reconstituted to genuinely represent those that give them their authority. Incidentally, I can’t speak for the RIAS because I know nothing about it, but it seems to me that RIBA is woefully outdated and unrepresentative. Neither a trade union nor a learned

society, it doesn't show how architecture is relevant to everyday life, it has not led the way on climate action, its awards are a shocking stock take of modernist aesthetic tropes and it seems to have a never-ending crisis, whether in financial or otherwise. It is fair to ask: does it represent big business architecture or does it stand for small firms and salaried architects that make up its majority interest? Does it ally itself with public opinion or those in government, or does it represent architectural culture, and knowledge and history?

Although I am waiting expectantly for next year's President to bring about the promised revolution at Portland Place, it seems to me that RIBA has too many vested interests in the status quo; its governance is designed to block change and has lost its way. In financial metrics it is a disaster. I fail to see how it can continue to exist as the club it was founded as, a century ago, and it absolutely has to find renewed relevance. The climate is in meltdown, we can't heat our homes and there are going to be millions of homeless on our streets. How can we stand aside and not have a major role to play in addressing these massive societal issues? This is what I mean about a realignment of values, and, as collective bodies, our institutions – alongside individuals – can and must show leadership.

CONSIDERING SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The inter-connected nature of many of these issues is a massive obstacle. There are so many moving parts, so that our individual agency appears negligible. Making change feels like an impossible task, yet future generations won't forgive us unless we try. Tempting as it is to retreat into the world of beautiful details and luscious materials, such solipsistic navel-gazing will solve nothing. We must overcome the fiction of individual autonomy and personal artistic license so prevalent in architecture. This divides us and prevents us acting collectively for the common good. Similarly, the Darwinian concept of competition and survival of the fittest is divisive and unhelpful. Capitalism's mechanism of divide and rule also feeds this, by making us competitors rather than collaborators. As with so many other things, this doesn't work any more. We are in an era when working collectively is the **ONLY** solution.

We do not have to conform to these corrosive values. Small acts of resistance can help us adjust our horizons and feel better about ourselves. There are many small, practical steps each one of us could take that will help us move towards a position of empowerment and advocacy for a better ethic. Here, then is my manifesto for change, designed to liberate the architect so we can provide value where they can best do so.

1. Value your labour, aka Fees

Answer: Stop giving away our work for free, and charge properly according to task and value accrued. Once this happens, pay your people enough to support a full and varied life.

I know of no other business that gives away for free its design ideas and intellectual property, and moreover, no self-respecting one would dream of it. Yet it is custom and practice across the architectural industry. In part this is because architecture is only understood as a product. But we are not product designers, and while a building or environment is a by-product of our skillset, its real value arises from the process of becoming, and the imaginative possibilities stimulated by it. It is the journey that leads to the destination which can only be gained through genuine engagement with a problem. Don't use your superior power to beguile with beautiful imagery, peddling sanitised fictions to the willing viewer, and please don't assume the answer before you understand the question.

Architects must start valuing their own work so that it is not given away for free. We need to initiate a new discourse and find new relevance. We must communicate our connective and spatial skills to the external world. We must show the public that the value we bring is about making life work better through design. Aesthetics may be part of that, but it can only be scratch the surface. If we pin our value to aesthetics we are sure to fail.

Reject small amounts of compensation for large amounts of work. If a client without the requisite skills needs a lot of hand-holding, charge a management fee. Make sure completely unpredictable events are chargeable events. Remember that 95% of what we do is admin, so charge for it. Reject percentage fee scales but align your fees to the value accruing to the client. Enter joint ventures with your clients to benefit from the uplift in property value after you've gained planning permission or built the building.

2. Change procurement values to align with the value we bring

Answer: Procurement questions should relate only to those things that will add value to a client's aims.

The competitive culture we have established corrodes our business and leads to isolation, low self-esteem and disillusionment. Tendering for work in the UK context wastes millions of pounds of valuable income for architects, creating a hidden tax on our work. It often demands answering irrelevant questions which will result in broadly similar submissions. This bureaucracy is unnecessary, as other countries working under the same rules have shown. Instead of asking how the architect can add value to their project through their wit and skill, we are drowned in a mountain of form-filling that cannot possibly substitute for well-considered goals. The 'three similar projects'

criterion is an admission that the client can't judge value within their own parameters, and relies on track record – but this is not the same thing at all. It is the value of risk that drives this mechanism.

Currently tender processes are often administered by people that have little knowledge of architecture or building and are far removed from a project's *raison d'être*. Project managers appear terrified of being creative, incapable of using the procurement system to do what they want it to do. Risk is used as a tactic of avoidance, rather than something to be weighed up and evaluated too. The risk and responsibility equation needs rebalancing, with better understanding of the shared value that will result from mutual risk taking and common purpose.

In the meantime, I'd recommend avoiding procurements that use standard questions unrelated to the project and its goals. Quiz the client on what their goal is before committing time to tenders. Clients expect the architect to do the thinking for them because they haven't have considered what they want to achieve in advance and don't have suitably qualified people to do so. In the longer term we must advocate for public bodies to assign more qualified and knowledgeable personnel to manage their tenders. This would at least have the effect of streamlining the process for the architect and adding value for the client.

3. Value Continuity and Responsibility

Answer: Architects must reacquire the role of being the golden thread of continuity throughout the design & construction process.

The development of D&B, the severing of projects into packages and the re-tendering of work throughout a project creates discontinuities in knowledge and goals that threaten to undermine the value inherent in the design. This is particularly critical where environmental modelling and fire spread are concerned. The new Defective Premises Act recreates a role similar to that formerly held by the architect, and arguably, this is good, for it undoubtedly adds value. But the penalty for this responsibility will be competency and insurance. Will small practice survive this change? Is it viable for one entity to bear the responsibility, or is the value drawn from collaboration and sharing? Shared risk is the only way forward.

4. Value Collective endeavour: new models of Insurance

Answer: Integrated Project Insurance is the only way.

The insurance market is completely unsustainable. Once again, it is a huge tax on our income, and doesn't cover much of what we are required to deliver. There is a better way and we need to go there fast. It means Individual Project Insurance, a model in which goals and values are defined at the outset, risk is shared and collaborative

working and programming go hand in hand. Such investment by each actor is the only way to reinstate sanity in an increasingly unstable situation.

5. Value Technology

Answer: Be sceptical about technical fixes. Find the right solution for you to do what you do best.

In the past the most complex of buildings were produced without computers. It is not clear to me that the constant urging to upgrade to BIM is as important as we are told. Contractors love it because it makes their lives easy, and for really large projects it can no doubt be helpful for maintenance, management and replacement, assuming the software is capable of being updated in 15 years' time. For the type of project my firm carries out, which is modest publicly-funded work, our clients are not prepared for BIM and have no idea what they want it to do. If they did, they also probably don't employ people with the relevant knowledge to obtain it. As with so much in our society, BIM is spun as a technical solution. But what problem is it solving? Yoked to annual license fees, is it worth a small practice such as ours to skill up? This illustrates how technology creates a value system that is exclusionary and unnecessary.

6. Know your own worth

Answer: only work with those you trust and that understand how to work with you to deliver the right goals.

Local authorities have been hollowed out so much they barely function. There is absolutely no slack and it's set to get worse. Project Managers have been lost and expertise is missing in action. Public Practice is valiantly filling a gap, but it can only do so where the LA recognises its need. The planning system is completely dysfunctional now it has lost so many officers. The process is increasingly devoid of expert judgment, a tick-box exercise with competing interests by multiple consultees holding a project to ransom. All the while the struggle to reconcile policy plays itself out. How can this be adding value to our economy when it acts as such a millstone to development?

We need to support Local Government and make sure they are properly funded entities capable of managing this workload. Playing with policy is not the answer: we need capable people on the ground. Architects can form alliances, spreading their abilities wide, showing how our admin and management skills can be used positively to assist public sector clients deliver their goals. We must continue to stress the need for design professionals to be embedded in planning departments so design skills are recognised and promoted. And while Design Review helps mitigate the worst proposals, their lack of statutory power is no substitute for proper scrutiny in the formal process.

7. Value the Planet

Answer: be ahead of the game. See it as the opportunity of a lifetime – even an opportunity for all time - and lead the way.

We have been complicit with systems that are leading to our destruction, living under the tyranny of innovation and the promise that technology will solve the problems we have made.

Arguably the climate crisis is the most serious and threatening issue we face, and we often feel powerless because the issues are so complex and inter-connected. Care, nurturing and regenerative planning must replace the current goal of ceaseless growth, exploitation of human beings and natural resource depletion. We need to re-conceptualise buildings as an embodied carbon, as a collection of materials in transit in the journey from one state to another in an endless loop. We should be calling all manufacturers to ensure materials and products are reused and reinvented through each cycle in the circular economy and promoting cradle-to-cradle manufacturing. We should be using materials that are natural and break down again at the end of their life. We must take responsibility for the selection we make when designing buildings, re-educating our eyes towards a new aesthetic based on different criteria. Instead, we should learn from the past how to live better: more equitably and collaboratively, with less.

The current structures that have led us here will not get us out and we need to invent different ones. There is nobody to do this but ourselves. We must become lobbyists, agents of change, infiltrating local government, sitting on councils, going into parliament, starting movements, becoming activists. While nobody said it would be easy, we have no time to waste. We must find more meaningful Values, skill up, be awkward and demanding, demonstrate the way and hold our political, financial and manufacturing masters to account.

In conclusion

I strongly believe that, by allying ourselves with the moral and ethical imperatives for a survivable future we will reconnect with society and signal our commitment to the broader good. Narrow protectionism, professional boundaries, fear and entrenchment have no place in this mission to do good for humankind and for the world. We must start by valuing ourselves, look to the horizon and demonstrate our relevance. Then we will have secured our value going forward.

Thank you.