

Richard Rogers 2007 Laureate Essay

Revitalising Modernity

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Richard Rogers collected the Pritzker Prize in 2007 in London in the magnificent setting of the banqueting hall designed by Inigo Jones, for the royal palace that he was never to finish for Charles I. The 17th century monarch's reign came to an abrupt end when Oliver Cromwell had the New Model Army march him under the great ceiling painted by Rubens, through one of the hall's windows, and onto a scaffold outside to be beheaded in the climactic episode to the English Civil War. Given that the king's 20th century descendant, the Prince of Wales, the future Charles III, has been the most highly visible critic of contemporary architecture in Britain, it was perhaps a somewhat unlikely setting for a ceremony honouring one of Britain's most prominent architects, especially for one associated with an embrace of modernity. Rogers has been the target of the prince's criticism more than once. It was the prince who put an end to Rogers' chances of winning the commission to rebuild Paternoster Square, the flawed 1950s setting for St. Paul's Cathedral. Rogers' entry was one of the competition's most talked about submissions to build an extension on the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. The competition precipitated the Prince of Wales's intervention into the architectural debate with a famous speech in 1984, in which he called the project "a carbuncle on the face of an old and familiar friend." The bitterness of those conflicts has faded, but at the time, they were vivid, and very real. And they certainly shaped British architecture for a decade, or more. Careers were put on hold because of them.

As a member of the House of Lords, Rogers now has a seat in the upper chamber of the British parliament. He has won the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture, the Stirling Prize, and just about every conceivable honour and distinction in the architectural world. His practice—the name was changed to Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners in 2007—through which many hundreds of people have passed over the years, is active across the world, from Taiwan to Ground Zero. In Britain he built two of the defining landmarks of Tony Blair's government: the new parliament for Wales in Cardiff and the Millennium Dome in London, as well as the headquarters of the public broadcaster, Channel Four, and the new fifth terminal at Heathrow airport. The outsider had become an insider.

The most eloquent of several speeches at the Pritzker ceremony in May 2007 was made by the then mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. He was there because of his close working relationship with Rogers, who had spent the previous eight years as the mayor's advisor on architecture and urbanism. It was a partnership that oversaw a radical transformation of the city. It reflected a degree of political sophistication unusual among Britain's architects who have mostly been content to preach to the converted within the professional ghetto, rather than engage with the wider world. After he helped frame the urban and architectural policy for the Labour government of Tony Blair, Rogers served as the mayor's advisor for two terms.

Urbanism has been a continuing preoccupation of Rogers over the years. He has consistently campaigned for compact, high density cities that celebrate the quality of urbanity, and encourage their ability to support street life, social diversity, and high quality public transport. It's a stance based as much on an idea of what the city can be in an aesthetic and social sense, as it is on sustainability.

Inigo Jones brought the architecture of Italy to England in his rediscovery of the language of Andrea Palladio. And in a way, Rogers, too, has brought something of Italy to England. His ideas of urbanism are rooted in the monumental Italian cities, the Galleria in Milan, the arcades of Bologna, markets and pavement cafes, rather than their bleak new suburbs. Like the River Café, the restaurant run by his wife, Ruthie, and based in the complex of wharf side buildings in which his practice is located, which has tried to inject a taste of flavours richer than Britain is used to into its food, so Rogers has attempted to go back to some of the fundamental pleasures of urban life. Rogers looks for streets full of people, casual interactions with strangers, and a public realm that creates a strong sense of civic identity.

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Rogers, the older of two sons, was born in 1933 in Florence into a family, which despite its British roots and its Anglo-Saxon name, had lived in Italy for two generations. His father was a doctor and his mother Ermenegilda was a potter.

His cousin Ernesto Rogers was one of the most distinguished Italian architects of the 20th century, as well as a founder of BBPR, the studio that built Milan's Torre Velasca, and an editor of *Domus* magazine. Rogers' parents took the decision to move to Britain before World War II, as the climate became more difficult for those without a taste for compromises with fascism. He went through the English public school system, an experience that, given the handicap of a case of undiagnosed dyslexia, was not a happy one. His two years of national service in the British army, poignantly took him back to the city of Trieste in 1950, his mother's birthplace. He studied architecture at the Architectural Association in London and then moved on to Yale for two postgraduate years, in the era of Paul Rudolph and Serge Chermayeff. It was at Yale that he got to know the architect Norman Foster. On the teaching staff was James Stirling, another British architect, though a decade older. In the 1980s the three of them were to become the dominant voices in British architecture. After a road trip driving across America looking at every Frank Lloyd Wright house that he could find, and a brief job with SOM in San Francisco, Rogers went back to Britain to establish his first architectural practice. He set up Team Four with Foster when he secured his first independent commission to build a house for his father-in-law in Cornwall.

Also part of Team Four was Su Rogers, his first wife, who had been a planning student at Yale, Norman Foster's wife, Wendy Cheeseman, and her elder sister, Georgie, who had the only license to practise architecture among them.

Team Four was short-lived and dissolved in 1967 after just three years. The two key buildings Team Four built were very different. Creek Vein, the house at Feock, a suburb of Truro on the Cornish coast, was buried into the landscape with an intricate cross section that had part of the roof landscaped with a garden and a bridge entrance that brought visitors in at high level. Rogers has always cited the experience of those Frank Lloyd Wright houses as the key influence on the design. Built of grey block work, with slate floors, it seemed very different from colourful high tech imagery that was to make Rogers famous. It was built as a house for a couple in their 60s with an impressive art collection. It felt intimate and modest in scale, yet offered a series of strong architectural experiences as one space opened into the next and framed extraordinary views of the landscape outside.

The other major project that Team Four built was a factory for Reliance Controls outside Swindon, and long since demolished. Unlike Creek Vein, Reliance Controls seemed to point to the future direction that both Rogers and Foster would be taking in their independent careers. Its main building had an external diagonally braced structure that contained a strong hint of what was to become the Rogers trademark. It seemed to reflect some of the work that Rogers had come aware of in America, such as the Eames House in Santa Monica.

The factory was also a forerunner of the socially engaged work that Rogers went on to embrace. At a time when industrial Britain was still divided by class, Reliance Controls was designed to offer both managers and shop floor workers shared amenities and shared entrances. It was a genuinely innovative work, an early attempt to wrestle British factories out of the 19th century. It was subsequently demolished, a victim of changing production methods. But it was not demolished before it had suffered the indignity of having a rectangular gash hacked into its profiled metal walls to make way for a randomly positioned off the shelf window frame.

A lack of work led to the dissolution of Team Four. Richard and Su Rogers set up on their own. They took part in a number of architectural competitions, including one for the design of a prefabricated house of the future staged by a daily newspaper. Their design, the Zip Up house from 1968 was not built, but it demonstrated many of the ideas that Rogers had embraced. Rogers planned to use

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insulated panels designed for refrigerated lorries for the walls of the house and placed them on an independent structure that would have transformed the nature of the building process, creating a house that was capable of a high degree of prefabrication and which could be installed on a prepared site, more or less, instantly. It was a reflection of one of the recurring dreams of modernity, the idea of making building as mechanical and repetitive a process as a production line in a car factory.

In 1971 Rogers formed another partnership with the Italian architect, and much later on, Pritzker winner, Renzo Piano. Success came quickly; they won the competition to design the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Rogers himself still remembers a certain reluctance at entering the competition in the first place. In the aftermath of the Paris riots of 1968, an art centre dedicated to the memory of Charles de Gaulle's prime minister, who subsequently himself became president, Georges Pompidou, the project seemed like nothing more than the glorification of an authoritarian regime for Rogers.

In the end, Rogers was overruled by his partners, and their design was selected in 1971 by a jury chaired by Jean Prouvé, the master of architectural engineering, and with Philip Johnson as a member. It was a project that brought together a number of themes. On the one hand, the design for the Pompidou Centre could be understood as a descendant of the engineering brilliance of the Crystal Palace of 1851, the astonishing apotheosis of the Industrial Revolution. The vast glass and iron exhibition hall was built in just nine months to Joseph Paxton's designs, thanks to breathtakingly impressive prefabrication techniques. On the other, the Pompidou was a kind of summation of the utopianism of the 1960s, with its emphasis on playfulness, fun, and a communication wall.

Completed in 1977 at the low point of architectural modernism, the Pompidou—or the Beaubourg, as it used to be called by those with no taste for Pompidou's politics and who referred to it by its street address—served as a massive shot in the arm for architecture. The utopianism of modernism had been degraded by the soured hopes of the 1960s. Award winning apartment buildings, such as the Pruitt-Igoe flats designed by Minoru Yamasaki—who went on to design the twin towers of the World Trade Center—were being dynamited because nobody would live in them. Conservationists were determined to stop even the most mundane 19th century buildings from being demolished because they were convinced that whatever replaced them would not be as good. Countless local communities fought successful campaigns to stop their neighbourhoods from being comprehensively redeveloped, preferring messy vitality, to sterile modernism. Contemporary architecture had run out of energy and seemed to have become, at best, boring if not downright oppressive. Rogers was entirely sympathetic to these concerns. Despite finding himself on the wrong side of the barricades for some projects, such as the unrealised development of the Coin Street area in London, Rogers saw himself as fighting for the vitality of the city and against faceless and monolithic development.

The Pompidou Centre seemed to demonstrate how these contradictions could be resolved. Despite the ruthless demolition of Baltard's old market pavilions of Paris to make way for it and the neighbouring Les Halles development, the Pompidou turned out, somewhat unexpectedly, to be a huge, popular success. It attracted more visitors in its first year than the Louvre. Piano and Rogers had demonstrated that an unashamedly radical piece of architecture could transform the identity of a large part of a city in a very positive way, and that ordinary Parisians could enjoy its uncompromisingly industrial looking, though playful, aesthetics. The Pompidou Centre brought together a range of cultural institutions, most notably, the French national collection of modern art and a public library, as well as a design collection. But it is also an urban catalyst, thanks to its relationship with the huge open space created in front of it. And it has its external escalators, slung from its muscular exposed structure, taking visitors up to the roof and the best view of Paris in the city. The sharpest criticism, and to Rogers, the most sobering, was not the tabloid press' habit of describing the Pompidou as an oil refinery dumped in the middle of Paris, it was the essay written by Alan Colquhoun, a former tutor of Rogers, who suggested that the ultimate failure of the building was that it had no face. Its façade had been dissected to reveal the nervous system behind the skin. And to Colquhoun, a public building must address the world with more than its structural necessities.

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It is a point which given the direction that architecture has taken in the last 30 years, seems irrelevant now. The bravura qualities of the Pompidou's elegantly crafted structure and its carefully composed components give it a powerful and unmistakable presence. And while this is not a building that pays much attention to the traditional sequences of spaces that have defined architecture for centuries, its scale and its relationship with the world outside more than compensates for that.

Almost 40 years after it was designed, and even after two makeovers, the Centre Pompidou is still an extraordinarily powerful and extraordinarily convincing work. There is so much in it that can be traced back to other places and other times, from Jean Prouvé's idea of a cultural centre in which no floors or walls were permanently fixed to Archigram and Cedric Price. But nobody else had actually realised these ideas on such a large scale and nobody else had managed to make them look so beautiful.

The Pompidou is not made of as found industrial components simply assembled in pragmatic, ad hoc ways. Every part has been specially made and specially positioned with care. When it was built, the outrage that saw it as an oil refinery dumped into the city centre faded with the delight that Parisian took in occupying the space in front of it and swarming across its façade. A delight that was not entirely dispelled even when the charm of the legions of sword swallowers, fire-eaters, mimes and bongo drummers faded. The interior was remodelled for the first time by Gae Aulenti, who face-lifted the exhibition galleries and then reconfigured in a more controversial way, which led, much to Rogers' regret, to the transformation of the escalator from public to private space. These days you have to buy a ticket to get to see the view that used to be free.

There was never any question of allocating credit to who did what on the Pompidou; it was a joint effort. Both Rogers and Piano always pay tribute to Peter Rice, the remarkable engineer from Arup who made the structure both possible and beautiful, and to a team of gifted collaborators, including two who later became Rogers' partners, Mike Davies and John Young. During the Pompidou years Piano and Rogers became a magnet for every bright young architect looking to gain experience in one of the most stimulating offices in the world. At various times, Eva Jiricna, Jan Kaplicky, David Chipperfield, Ian Ritchie and Alan Stanton all worked there.

For a young practice, the Pompidou was an all absorbing project. The early 1970s were still a time when a large architectural office was 25 people. Pretty much the whole Piano and Rogers team set up in Paris to build the Pompidou, and there was not much attention paid to securing the next big project, a task that, in any case, became more difficult as the architectural climate darkened in the 1970s.

So Rogers found himself in the paradoxical situation of being fêted as co-author of the most spectacularly popular piece of contemporary architecture of the decade, featured on album covers, turned into table lamps, and used as a film set, but with very little work after the Pompidou was finished. The partnership with Piano came to a natural end, although not their friendship, which still endures to this day. After the split, Rogers considered moving to America to take up teaching but managed, in the end, to maintain the practice until he won his next major competition: to build a new headquarters for Lloyd's of London, the insurance market that was looking for its third new home in 50 years, having outgrown them one by one.

The Lloyd's building clearly belongs to the same architectural impulse that triggered the Pompidou, though there are also significant differences. This too is an astonishing tour de force in structural virtuosity. This time, the structure is in poured concrete, rather than the steel used at the Pompidou. But it also follows Louis Kahn's concept of the division of a building between served and servant spaces. At Lloyd's, the key generator was the need to create a dealing room that would allow the insurance market's traders to continue the tradition of face to face contact in a single space, established by their coffee house forbears. And to do it in such a way that more dealers could be accommodated as business grew. Lloyd's does this by creating a soaring glass vaulted space that puts the dealing room with its famous bell, rung to signal a shipping loss, on the ground floor and

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connects it with banks of escalators that link it to tiers of further floors that can rise up the building as required. The higher levels are self contained and used as more generic office space. All the service elements—the escape stairs, the lifts, the washrooms—are pulled out of the main envelope and accommodated in externally expressed towers. It's a device that serves not just to articulate the facades, giving them a deeply modelled character that is very different from the blandness of too many conventional buildings in financial centres, it also makes the served spaces more flexible and adaptable.

The impact is spectacular, especially at night when the lighting scheme, devised after the building was completed by Imagination, is switched on. It is an exceptionally well-crafted piece of architecture, with every piece shaped with the care and attention to detail of a piece of jewellery. The imagery is of machinery and has the dynamism of a piece of Futurism, yet on one level this is a very traditional building project, a piece of bespoke architecture for an owner-occupier. It is a kind of Saville Row suit, albeit one of a mildly eccentric cut. As a technical achievement, Lloyd's is unsurpassed; very few architectural practices could have matched the unflagging energy and inventiveness and the beauty with which its component parts are put together.

The Lloyd's building contained within it many of the elements that were subsequently to become part of the language of the Rogers' office. It represents an attitude to the practice of architecture, as a social as well as a technical and spatial art, concerned not just with the creation of mute objects but with a wider understanding of the possibilities of design.

Rather than creating introverted, closed buildings, the practice has worked to make them permeable, bringing life to the spaces around them. In contrast to the traditional methods of the construction industry, which was organised on craft lines, architecture can now be the product of repetitive components made in a factory. It is an approach that makes the building process more precise and more economical. As a result, architects need to design buildings in ways that recognise this, rationalising the details, understanding structure as an assembly of carefully engineered pieces.

The practice has a preference for lightness and transparency, rather than the monolithic and the heavy, and not only for aesthetic reasons. In the past, architecture has been used to represent traditional hierarchies. Transparency breaks these hierarchies down, as well as opening up buildings to light and view.

Legibility in architecture finds order, scale and expression in the process of construction. The practice designs buildings that make it clear how they work, and how they are made. Structure is exposed and visible, each element in a building—stairs, services—is articulated. Lightweight structures achieve more with less material. It's a strategy that reflects an attitude to the careful use of resources and is the route to an elegant economy of means.

As the Lloyd's building took shape in the course of the 1980s, the practice, now constituted as a trust with carefully drafted principles about profit sharing and charitable activities, began to consolidate its position by working on an increasingly global scale. Rogers was an early participant in the Japanese building boom of the bubble economy, completing a number of modestly scaled buildings there that took full advantages of Japanese building skills and tiny urban sites. There was one more substantial project in Japan that, had it been built, would have been the summation of the impulses that began with the Pompidou and were developed in the Lloyd's building. The Tokyo Forum, a submission in a competition to replace the old Kenzo Tange-designed city hall, was a remarkable combination of structural gymnastics and urban space. Three auditoria were hoisted up in the air, and suspended from a series of structural frames, leaving the ground below open, a part of the city's public realm.

Another key project in Asia was also unbuilt. When the mayor of Shanghai began planning the transformation of his city from a victim of Maoist suspicion of its cosmopolitan tendencies to the first

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physical expression of China as a capitalist economy, he invited a number of architects from what was still called the West, to take part in a competition to re-plan Pudong, the ship building district across the river from the Bund. As well as Rogers, they included Toyo Ito, Massimiliano Fuksas and Dominique Perrault. It was a huge opportunity to create a master plan for a new city housing several million people.

For Rogers, whose last attempt at re-planning a major urban site had been a polemical look at London as it could be, in a riposte to the Prince of Wales's views, Pudong was a fascinating challenge. It confronted him in the early 1990s with what was going to become one of the most feverish construction sites that the world has ever seen. Rogers came up with a diagram for a high-rise, high-density compact development that would minimise its carbon footprint, maximise public transport and create a vibrant 24-hour city. But the mayor's office declared all the contestants winners and announced that it would be adopting the best elements from all of them. Even in the brief period between the announcement of the competition and its inconclusive outcome, Pudong had already sprouted several dozen high-rise developments that indelibly marked any future plan for the area. Rogers recalls, in particular, his suggestions for a city that made use of the bicycle as a means of transport and the response of the city authorities, who continued to see bicycles as an obstruction to their plans for a modern city.

For the Rogers practice, the early 1990s were marked by a number of smaller scale projects. The court complex in Bordeaux took the practice's ideas about structural clarity and gave them a symbolic meaning by treating individual courtrooms as if they were timber-lined wine vats.

But by the millennium, Rogers was working on one project, the London dome, whose high profile was not entirely welcome. In fact, it was actually a cable-supported tent, where economy of means and structural and spatial clarity were, for a while, overwhelmed by the controversy about the content of what was presented as Britain's official millennium celebration. Rogers had the new Welsh parliament in Cardiff under construction. And in the early years of the 21st century, the practice was riding the crest of the boom. It started building a major skyscraper in central London, with a distinctive wedge-shaped profile—though construction was halted by the credit crunch. It is building office towers in Taiwan and in New York, and it finished two major airport buildings. The new terminals at Madrid's Barajas amount to an entirely new airport, distinguished by an elegantly attenuated structure, and a deep section designed to bring daylight into its heart. In London, Heathrow's fifth terminal is more compact, but it shares the idea of a circulation route that makes the building legible by always allowing travellers to move forward towards daylight.

In a profession not noted for its generosity, Rogers has built a practice that has allowed successive generations of young architects to flourish. He has built a practice that has continued to mature and develop, and despite the care with which he is keen to acknowledge the contribution of those that he works with, without him, some of the most remarkable architecture of the second half of the 20th century would not have been built.

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