David Chipperfield

On the 4th March 2019, at his Berlin Office, DJ (Ana Tostões, editor, and Michel Melenhorst, guest editor) interviewed David Chipperfield, an internationally renowned architect, founder of David Chipperfield Architects (1985) whose work is recognized with important awards such as the RIBA Stirling Prize, the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture (Mies van der Rohe Award) and the Deutscher Architekturpreis.

DJ The lecture you presented at the RMB/**docomomo** Germany conference on the occasion of the Bauhaus 100 Anniversary was very thought-provoking because you addressed what drives **docomomo**; its ambitions, aspirations, purposes and inspirations: the meaning of today's architectural discipline in connection with memory, future and collectivism. We share the belief that buildings deserve to defy time, earn to be used, deserve to be transformed keeping their character and finding its construction system. It is amazing to realize that you approached your very particular education assuming a search for the idea of pre-existence.

DC I was at college in the mid-1970s, at a time when modernism was in many ways collapsing. There was an emotional and intellectual reconsideration of the modern movement taking place and, as a consequence of that, a complementary reinterest in history. In architectural terms, it was called post-modernism, which was a strange title in a way because it wasn't very poetic. It was a rather literal idea compared to post-modernism in literature and philosophy. The mid-1970s was a very interesting period in which the heroes were being re-evaluated. So, the first part of my education was Le Corbusier (1887-1965), Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) and Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) then, all of the sudden, new heroes were brought to the fore like Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940) and Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944). Everyone was talking about *Beaux-arts* and Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), architects that were a little bit unfashionable to the mainstream modernist education from before. There was an understanding of why the collapse of modernism as an ideology was occurring. Suddenly in England, it was very difficult to argue against the criticism that modern buildings were awful. Modernism had not refreshed itself, it was just using up that last energy of what started off as a very visionary series of ideas. Eventually the ideology disappeared and just became a loose style. Moreover, in the hands of developers and bad architects it became an excuse to build something without much thought. So, the rethinking and the re-energising of the architectural debate through a desire to look for something richer was needed. As modernism had lost its physical strength, buildings from the 19th century were being re-evaluated and people like Henri Labrouste (1801–1875) were being studied. The Smithsons gave a lecture at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA), on Labrouste, and Henry Russel Hitchcock (1903–1987) came to the *Beaux-arts* Exhibition in London, which previously had been at MoMA.[1] So, you had Henry Russell Hitchcock, who in a way invented the "International Style" at the Museum of Modern Art, in a conference about the *Beaux-arts*. Full circle.

DJ Incredible. It is interesting because in different parts of Europe the situation was not completely the same, for instance in Delft ten years later it was still pretty much modernist, and certain things, like what was going on in Italy, *la Tendenza*, was just not spoken of.

DC I think that modernism was more societally embedded in the Netherlands whereas in England we had so much bad modern developers' architecture in the 1970s and 1980s. If you went to Sheffield, for example, and you asked people what they thought about modern architecture they would say they hated it. Taking into consideration the modernist housing projects, now we have a bit more objective distance to them, both in terms of their architecture and their social weaknesses or strengths, which allows us to think and debate whether these were good options or not. But, I would say that at the time there was a very sentimental emphasis in Britain about a past time, and an architecture which was richer and stronger. And there were two things happening at the same time; a re-interest in history and a re-interest in the city, intellectually allied with the Italian position of Rossi and others. Of course, they were both coming from the same core anxieties. One of those concerns was slightly more emotional and the other was slightly more intellectual ... one was a little bit more humanist and one was more about the fabric of architecture. I think it was a very interesting period. It wasn't only about killing modernism, but it was a critique.

DJ Would you say that, at that time, what society expected of architects was clearer than it is nowadays? If we read the introduction of your 2018 book "David Chipperfield Architects" you

say that one of the challenges in every commission is the fact you have to deal with different participants, locations, contexts, but it is often the need to fulfil the expectations of society that has become extremely difficult because this expectation is so vague and unclear. Do you think there is a big difference between now and then?

DC Well, what I think is that the focus has shifted. Clearly, after the war, there was a programme of rebuilding, reconstructing not just physically but societally, and architects played a very important role in that. So, we were building universities, houses, schools etc. To be an architect in Britain in the 1950s or 1960s meant that you had a societal role.

I would say that back in those days being an architect was a professional vocation like a doctor. You could have a sign on your door saying "architect" and customers would come. I think the role has changed, and society has too. In Britain we had Prince Charles condemning modern architecture and Margaret Thatcher (former British Prime-Minister) saying that there is no such a thing as society. Everything we believed in, as architects, which congregates individual actions into some sort of collective activity, was questioned. Margaret Thatcher said the role of the State is no longer to be of a caretaker, and that the commercial sector knows how to do these things more efficiently. And there was some truth to that. However, when you privatize the world, who builds social housing? As an investor, you would never build social housing because you can't make any money out of it. It is a contradiction to build social housing for profit. So, who does that? Who is going to take a responsible attitude towards the building of schools, or public spaces... The whole idea of responsibility is a societal challenge, and the Anglo-Saxon method was to push the responsibility to the private sector and be reluctant to direct it.

DJ Perhaps one interesting example on how things can change is the project you are doing on Eero Saarinen's US Embassy, in London, which of course was also built at a time of transparency as a need for democracy. And, we all know, that the US government used the Embassies to promote cultural values of the free Western world in Europe but also outside of Europe. Nowadays, many of these Embassies have become completely blocked because of security reasons, and all this transparency disappeared. Now you are working with a new program, a hotel, with a private investor, and you can open up the building again which is quite interesting ...

DC Yes and no. I would say that there is now another issue as private investment brings its own protections and limitations. Yes, we are opening up the building and increasing the publicly accessible area around it, but how truly democratic the rest of the building will become is also questionable as it will be a hotel. However, our ambition is to follow the manner of old grand hotels, which were exclusive places but still had a sense that they were public buildings in the city.

DJ In your lecture, you spoke about your worries about certain types of buildings from the 1950s and 1960s, a kind of generic modernism at risk of getting lost. Do you think we can save them and continue to use them by improving them, by changing them?

DC Yes. But the problem is that this rarely happens. Why are we knocking down post-war buildings? We ourselves have been responsible for this. For example, in Essen we knocked down a museum building from 1985. In this case it was a decision by the community, as it was well understood that it didn't work well as a museum. Nevertheless, there still has to be some sort of criteria, you can't become nostalgic about everything. There is still good and bad architecture in every period.

The problem we find with 1960s and 1970s buildings is how to distinguish between good and bad, and how to argue for keeping the bad. I think the only thing we can do is to bring new criteria, which has to do with sustainability. We should shift the emphasis: investors should have to give good reasons why we should demolish pre-existing buildings. One of the most common reasons is the efficiency of the building and one that is always a little bit baffling is the ceiling height but we haven't become bigger or smaller. There has to be better coordination of decisions and resources, which ultimately depends on political intervention. Planning cannot operate on laws of investments or free market. I think that growing awareness of sustainability and environmental issues will help to change this approach. It has to change.

There is another problem in relation to investment. Global money is not particularly worried about reward, it just wants to be planted somewhere. There is money to be invested, and it can be more neatly invested in a new tall building. This is the big danger for London and other cities. It's not logical but the market has rules that we can't even understand.

DJ And how can we act in this process if we are not the investors? How can we, let's say, push things in the direction of sustainability?

01 Eero Saarinen, 30 Grosvenor Square (US embassy), London, UK. © Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Balthazar Korab Archive at the Library of Congress, [LC-KRB00-425].

02 Mies van der Rohe, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany, 1965–1968; refurbishment by David Chipperfield Architects, 2012–2019.
© Ute Zscharnt for David Chipperfield Architects.

03 Mies van der Rohe, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany, 1965–1968; refurbishment by David Chipperfield Architects, 2012–2019.
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DC The societal issues and the environmental issues that are happening will force us. I was recently on a round table with the Mayor of Oslo and he described the type of city he wanted Olso to be. He didn't talk about urbanism. Instead he talked about clean air, reducing private cars, increasing public transportation, providing more green space, providing better and more affordable housing in the center of the cities. Through this, however, he did describe an urban vision, but in a completely different way to how architects talk about it. We would talk about density, urban and public space but he used political language that is more universally understood. Every politician understands the issue of clean air, the issue of social inequality, of a lack of housing. These are the new words that have gained traction in the last 10 years. No truly credible politician can afford to say "Yes, but that's left-wing stuff, it doesn't mean anything to us".

I also think that quality of life and the quality of a place are the things which we have to start talking about more. For instance, we are sitting in a city, Berlin, that is successful and it is now full of young people who are not coming here because they can earn more money. Berlin has no economy. So, why did they come? The answer is the quality of life. They come because young people like to live here. It is a city whose success is based not on the financial sector, not on commercial, not on manufacturing, not on anything else, but is based on low rent and quality of life. Nowadays, however, we are facing a crisis in Berlin because all of a sudden rent is going up. Interestingly, it is a city that has such an embedded anxiety about investment, to the extent that it even rejects it. Berlin is therefore on the front line of "quality of life" discussions, where the impact of investment is being treated seriously and cautiously in a way that other cities have failed to do.

In terms of **docomomo**, there is another quality in Berlin — it is a city highly sensitized about history. So, even now there are complex discussions about German Democratic Republic (GDR) projects, done during the GDR period, whilst, straight after 1989, there was no interest whatsoever. Now, there is a sort of anxiety because so much has disappeared. This is quite interesting because some of these projects were done as recently as 1974. It's very unusual. In a way, you have the sense that they are reasonably protected now. But what is interesting is that they protect a phase of architecture, on the one hand, but they also protect a social structure because you cannot gentrify these places. You cannot speculate very easily on *Plattenbau* buildings because, whatever you do, they still have low ceilings, and tiny rooms and bad insulation. And no one is going to, all of a sudden, pay two million euros for it. Again, in London, these would be knocked down because there is such a respect for the market, and the people say "it's crazy, in the centre of the city this land has so much value…" But I think that this is something fantastic in Berlin that, in the center of the city, there is a protection of social mixture as much as architectural mixture.

DJ We really do think that reuse, adaptative reuse and rehabilitation is the right way to go.

DC The problem is that in most cases this has been hijacked as part of the tourist industry, or even the heritage industry. Tourism gives a very weird dimension to heritage. What is the point of protecting a whole building if it is just going to be occupied by expensive shops in the ground floor?

DJ If we go back to the 1950s and 1960s housing projects, there were many that were built as large housing estates? Do you see possibilities for repairing, for reuse, for updating them?

DC Absolutely. The concept of just getting rid of that housing is based on what it looks like, and what would sometimes seem to have been badly socially engineered. The architectural ugliness thing is gone a little bit because there is a nostalgia and growing appreciation, especially in a younger generation, and secondly the more often that they try to move people out of these places to "save" them, the more we uncover stories of deep personal attachment.

04 David Chipperfield Architects, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK, 2008-2018. © Simon Menges.

05 David Chipperfield Architects, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, China, 2006–2011. © Simon Menges.

06 David Chipperfield Architects, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK, 2008–2018. © Simon Menges.

07 David Chipperfield Architects, Rockbund Project, Shanghai, China, 2006-2011. © Christian Richters.

DJ If you look at Moscow, for instance, they want to knock down ten thousands of the so-called microrayons, multi-story residential buildings constructed in the Soviet era on the outskirts of Moscow. And, what you are describing is happening there: people are saying "I was born here... this is my personal background, these are my memories, it is where my grandmother still lives" you know...

DC Well, I just think we have to understand the rush between hardware and software. The reason that architecture means something to us is not just abstract. The history of architecture as we read about it in books is important, but that is not the whole of architecture. The rest of architecture is not read about, it is experienced on another level. Indeed the reason that it is truly interesting is that it is connected to society.

DJ What could be your advice for architecture students?

DC I think that the next generation has to think of a different way of practice. I do not think that large architecture practices are necessarily the only way to work in the future. I think they have to be more agile and more grounded, connected to structures and real life.

Notes

1 *The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts*, the exhibition was directed by Arthur Drexler and it took place at MoMA, in New York, October 29, 1975–January 4, 1976.

David Chipperfield

(b. United Kingdom) Architect and Professor, CBE, RA, RDI, RIBA. David Chipperfield established David Chipperfield Architects in 1985. He was Professor of Architecture at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Stuttgart from 1995 to 2001 and Norman R. Foster Visiting Professor of Architectural Design at Yale University in 2011. He has since taught and lectured at schools of architecture worldwide. David Chipperfield was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2004, appointed a Royal Designer for Industry in 2006, and elected to the Royal Academy in 2008. In 2009 he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and in 2010 he was knighted for services to architecture in the UK and Germany. He has received the RIBA Royal Gold Medal for Architecture, and the Praemium Imperiale from the Japan Art Association, both given in recognition of a lifetime's work. In 2012 David Chipperfield curated the 13th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale.