

Building Ideas

With more career awards than you can shake a pencil at, Sir David Chipperfield was an inspired choice for architecture mentor in the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. **THERESA HAROLD** meets the 63-year-old as he reflects on his year of dialogue with Swiss architect Simon Kretz

BEST KNOWN FOR his sensitive and yet daring reconstruction of the Neues Museum in Berlin, Sir David Chipperfield CBE RA RDI RIBA BDA (to give him his full title) has built a career on designing monuments. And yet in recent years, he's become much less interested in architecture per se. What drives him now are the societal concerns of architecture,

the question of how we should shape our cities, and the issues of public and pseudo-public spaces.

That's not to say that he's taking a hands-off approach to his practice. David Chipperfield Architects, which he established in 1985, currently employs more than 250 people in offices in London, Berlin, Milan, and Shanghai. Today, Chipperfield remains involved with ongoing projects including the Nobel Centre in Stockholm, a new concert hall in Edinburgh,

and the renovation of London's Royal Academy of Arts. He's a man whose body clock must be on its own special time zone, zipping as he does across the world on such a regular basis.

I'm here in London (on boring old British Summer Time), to meet him and Simon Kretz after their year of mentorship, which began in June 2016.



SIR DAVID CHIPPERFIELD IS INCREASINGLY DRIVEN BY THE SOCIETAL CONCERNS OF ARCHITECTURE, AS RAISED IN THIS DESIGN PROPOSAL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FORMER GOODS YARD IN LONDON'S SHOREDITCH. OPPOSITE PAGE: SIMON KRETZ (LEFT) WITH CHIPPERFIELD





“ARCHITECTS HAVE A TENDENCY TO MAKE WHAT THEY DO SEEM COMPLICATED”

Sir David Chipperfield

“One thing I should say firstly, the mentor/mentee programme is not a student/teacher relationship,” reveals Chipperfield. We’re sitting in the airy white space of his studio in Waterloo, with his protégé Kretz by his side. I say “protégé”, but as it quickly becomes clear, the pair have long abandoned the mentor/protégé titles.

“The concept is two professionals at different stages of their career in some sort of dialogue; sharing different experiences and different perspectives,” says Chipperfield. “The learning goes both ways. It’s an opportunity for an older generation to be more in touch with the younger generation, and I think that’s the spirit in which most people enter this.”

“This”, of course, is the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. A philanthropic programme set up in 2002, the idea is to match gifted younger artists from around the world with masters of their disciplines for a year of

one-on-one mentorship. Architecture is the newest strand of the programme (having been introduced in 2012), and this partnership between Chipperfield and Kretz is the third time Rolex is running it.

Architecture falls into that strange limbo of practical art – after all, even the most committed philistine would concede that we have a need for buildings. What makes it even more of an anomaly within the programme is the time scale required.

“In architecture, one year doesn’t actually represent very much,” Chipperfield notes. “Even doing an extension on the back of your house takes three years. So the question for this discipline was, how do you find moments that are meaningful within the 12 months? Architecture, insofar that we’re not a performance-based activity, doesn’t tend to have the same moments of intensity as theatre, or dance, or even film.”

Having rejected the idea of simply asking Kretz to come into the office and sit in on a few meetings, or walking him around a building site (“The most boring thing in the world – I mean, you’ve seen paint dry”), Chipperfield decided the best way to approach this gift of time was to suspend actual practice and to take a more

theoretical position. So they chose a plot in London that’s currently being redeveloped but which neither of them are involved with, and used that as a springboard for their discussions. Over the course of the year, the duo explored the role of architects in urbanism within the context of this real site.

“We tried to apply a Swiss planning procedure to this development, to find out what the core differences are between the approaches of the two countries,” says Kretz. The results were illuminating. Where the English system has the planning parameters defined by the ownership boundaries, the Swiss system sets the planning parameters in relation to the whole city and the adjacent neighbourhoods.

“In England we’ve eroded the proactive potential of planning that used to be in place,” says Chipperfield, who chose Kretz precisely for his interest and experience in enhancing the urban environment. “It seemed very interesting, [to work with] someone from Switzerland, where there’s still this strong notion of proactive planning, of civic society, and the idea of regulating the planning process, in comparison to London where we have a very relaxed, free-market attitude, which says that regulation is anti-enterprise so we’ve softened regulation.”

Deregulation is a subject close to Chipperfield’s heart. At the annual RIBA International Conference in July, he claimed that Brexit is an attempt to get out of European regulation and that the Grenfell Tower disaster in West London is “what happens if you don’t have red tape”.

If it sounds like Chipperfield is getting on his soapbox, that’s because he is – and thank God. Because we need somebody of his profile to take on these issues, to question the system, and to challenge the investors. In London, as the skyline fluctuates and

developers slap nicknames such as the Gherkin/Walkie-Talkie/Cheesegrater on their buildings to make them seem familiar, Londoners have started to feel that the city’s evolution is something that’s happening to them. That they have no say. And this isn’t just about London; it’s a global issue. What is good, responsible urban design and how do we hold investors accountable to these ideas?

Well, there are no simple answers, but Chipperfield and Kretz will try to address these issues at the Rolex event in Berlin early next year. “At that moment, we will present the work in a much more formal way,” explains Chipperfield. “We will exhibit the work and there will be a publication to try and conclude this. We’re having a discussion at the moment about how we can make this both a serious piece of research, but at the same time accessible in its principle concepts.”

Because, as Chipperfield points out with a grin, “architects have a tendency to make what they do seem complicated.” And as I pack away my voice recorder – showing 108 minutes of audio – I wonder what the complicated version of this would be. **P**



MUSEUM MAN

Chipperfield’s monumental legacy

River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames

The first major commission in the UK for Sir David Chipperfield, this bold and modern museum (left) won the RIBA Building of the Year prize when it opened in 1998. Located close to the river in Mill Meadows, the design was inspired by local river boathouses and the traditional wooden barns of Oxfordshire. It has three permanent galleries and five temporary exhibition spaces. Featuring a pitched roof and an English oak-clad exterior, the building celebrates the history and heritage of the sport of rowing, the River Thames and Henley itself.

Neues Museum, Berlin

Arguably Chipperfield’s calling card, his rebuild of Berlin’s Neues Museum on the city’s Museum Island is often held up as the ultimate example of a thoughtful blend of the old with the new. His practice was appointed to the project in 1997, and in 1999 the entire Museum Island was added to the Unesco World Cultural Heritage list. Having suffered considerable bomb damage during World War II, the building spent more than 60 years a ruin before being reopened to the public in 2009. Currently, Chipperfield is designing a new entry building to the Island.



Figge Art Museum, Davenport

Opened in 2005, the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa was Chipperfield’s big American debut. Prior to that, his work in the US had been limited to designer stores and hotel renovations, but this 100,000-square-foot glass structure on the banks of the Mississippi put his practice firmly on the map. Today, the building not only houses one of the finest art collections in the Midwest, but it also has become a much-loved landmark in the city.

America’s Cup Building “Veles e Vents” (Sails and Winds), Valencia

Rather remarkably, this striking building (left) was completed within 11 months of winning the competition that engendered it, in June 2005. As the

America’s Cup Organisation and the City of Valencia intended, it opened in time for the regattas staged in May and June 2006. To meet this tight deadline, Chipperfield pared the form and structure of the building down to a minimum, but without compromising on design. Indeed, this four-storey concrete building has won numerous architectural awards, including the 2006 Emirates Glass LEAF Award and the 2007 RIBA European awards.

Museo Jumex, Mexico City

Completed in 2013, Museo Jumex was Chipperfield’s first foray into Latin America. For this project, he collaborated with local studio TAAU on the design, which has a sawtooth roof and walls made of exposed white concrete and locally sourced taverline. One of Chipperfield’s recurring themes is the idea of giving space back to the public, so he designed this building to sit on a raised platform, thus allowing the ground floor to become one with the public plaza. Located in Mexico City’s Nuevo Polanco, the museum is home to the largest and most important private collection of contemporary art in Latin America.