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DESIGNERS

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Oration given by Deyan Sudjic OBE at the Minerva Dinner 2007

“We are here to celebrate the remarkable career of one of Britain’s greatest architects.

We could begin by talking about Richard Rogers’ architecture, his passionate concern for urbanism, or the enormous energy and commitment he has brought to his work in helping to shape the future of London.

But instead perhaps I might for a minute talk about Richard Rogers himself. Architecture is the least generous of professions. By and large, even the most successful of architects tend to react as if every job that one of their peers gets is bread snatched from their children’s hungry mouths.

Richard, on the other hand, is a man who has gone out of his way to help others, putting work their way when they need it, offering advice and counselling. He is also, unlike some practitioners, a man who knows when to stop being an architect. He understands that there is more to life than work.

His generosity and hospitality, always somehow at a permanent lunch table with Ruthie his wife, are all signs that he knows how to live a full life, rather than only a narrowly professional one.

But, let’s talk about the architecture. With his former partner Renzo Piano, Richard built the Pompidou, a structure that history will see as one of the key works of architecture of the 20th Century. It’s a project that looks all the more powerful now than when it was finished 30 years ago.

When contemporary architecture was at its lowest ebb, the Pompidou was a triumphant reassertion of optimism about the future. Its exposed colour coded structure was copied everywhere. It was on album covers, in effigy, it became a table lamp.

It was even used as the set of a Bond film. Long before the success of Tate Modern, or the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Pompidou demonstrated that museums could be enormously popular. It was a new kind of museum, open, adaptable, one that visitors could explore in their own way rather than being dictated to.

It was a project that Piano and Rogers won in an open, anonymous competition, a reason perhaps for Richard’s continuing support for the competition systems as a way to get young untested architects a start in their careers.

The Pompidou was also a competition that Richard Rogers did not want to enter. He had to be talked into it. He was convinced the museum would end up being nothing more than a lifeless monument to an authoritarian regime.

This was after all the Paris of 1968, when the boulevards were barricaded for weeks on end by the students. And Richard was, and is, an enthusiastic embracer of radical causes and radical politics.

He was born in Italy and came to Britain with his parents just before World War Two. He had what he described to his biographer Brian Appleyard as a miserable time at boarding school, not helped by dyslexia.

But after national service, he discovered architecture at the Architectural Association, and later at Yale where he did graduate study. This was where he encountered another student who was also going to be seriously successful: Norman Foster.

Together with Richard's then wife Su, they set up British architecture's first super group, Team Four. They came back to Britain to build a remarkable house in Cornwall for Marcus Brumwell, one of the founders of the Design Research Unit, and Richard's father in law.

Richard's Italian cousin, the distinguished architect Ernesto Rogers wrote a famous essay, from the city to the spoon, in which he suggested that from a careful enough study of a spoon you, can predict the kind of city that the culture that produced it would build.

He was suggesting that there was a kind of DNA running through Design, that the apparently little things depend on the same attitudes to design as the biggest. And it is certainly a theme that has sustained Richard throughout his career, from his work on that first beautiful house overlooking a Cornish creek, half buried into the landscape to his visionary master plan for Shanghai's new financial district, Richard has believed in doing small thing well, as well as big things.

After the Pompidou success, Richard came back to London to build the Lloyds headquarters and to deal with a climate in which for a while contemporary architecture was not exactly popular.

There was a famous episode with a certain extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. To put the record straight Richard's design was not what Britain's most famous architectural critic once referred to as 'a carbuncle on the face of an old and familiar friend'.

But it did suggest that times were hard for Richard's particular brand of architecture. He began to think of design on a different scale. The exhibition at the Royal Academy that he shared with Norman Foster and James Stirling, gave him the chance to think about London as it could be.

London is a city that has gone through an unimaginable transformation since then. Richard speculated about new bridges across the Thames. About newly pedestrianised areas. About a high density revitalized city, open around the clock. And remarkably, it is a London that the changes of the past decade have started to suggest might be really possible.

It's a transformation that Richard's patient work behind the scenes and in his public role as advisor to the Mayor have had a vital role in bringing about. As has his work for the Government's urban task force.

Richards's studio now a team hundreds strong backed by his partners is working all over the world. They have built Madrid's new airport, one of the most civilized in Europe. I hope it's a pointer to what we will get when terminal five at Heathrow finally opens, next year.

There are law courts in Belgium, towers in Manhattan, but at the same time Richard is essentially a London architect. He has built some of this city's key landmarks and there are more to come.

Architecture has, like much else, become part of the celebrity culture. The media, and I confess that I was once a member of it, tend to present architecture as if it was the product of a single individual. Of course it never is. A great building is the product of many people from those who actually built it to the engineers and the funders.

And yet there are few people like Richard Rogers who have the capacity to make extraordinary things happen, and that I suspect is really why we are all here tonight to pay tribute to him.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

The Chartered Society of Designers (CSD)

www.csd.org.uk

Founded in 1930, CSD is the professional body for designers.

It is the world's largest chartered body of professional designers and is unique in representing designers in all disciplines.

CSD is governed by Royal Charter and as such its members are obliged to practice to the highest professional standards.

The Society is also a registered charity and adheres to best practice as a membership organisation.

Membership is only awarded to qualified designers who must also prove their professional capability during an admission assessment.

The Society exists to promote concern for the sound principles of design in all areas in which design considerations apply, to further design practice and encourage the study of design techniques for the benefit of the community.

In so doing, it seeks to secure and promote a professional body of designers and regulate and control their practice for the benefit of industry and the public.

With members in 34 countries around the world, CSD offers a truly diverse and inclusive base of professional designers, each committed to operating to the highest professional standards in whichever field or country they practice.