

RICHARD ROGERS: AN ARCHITECTURE OF REINVENTION

Prof. Rohit Shinkre



Beaubourg ...not a remote monument but a people's place.... a live centre for information.
(Photo courtesy: Alain Bachelier Flickr)

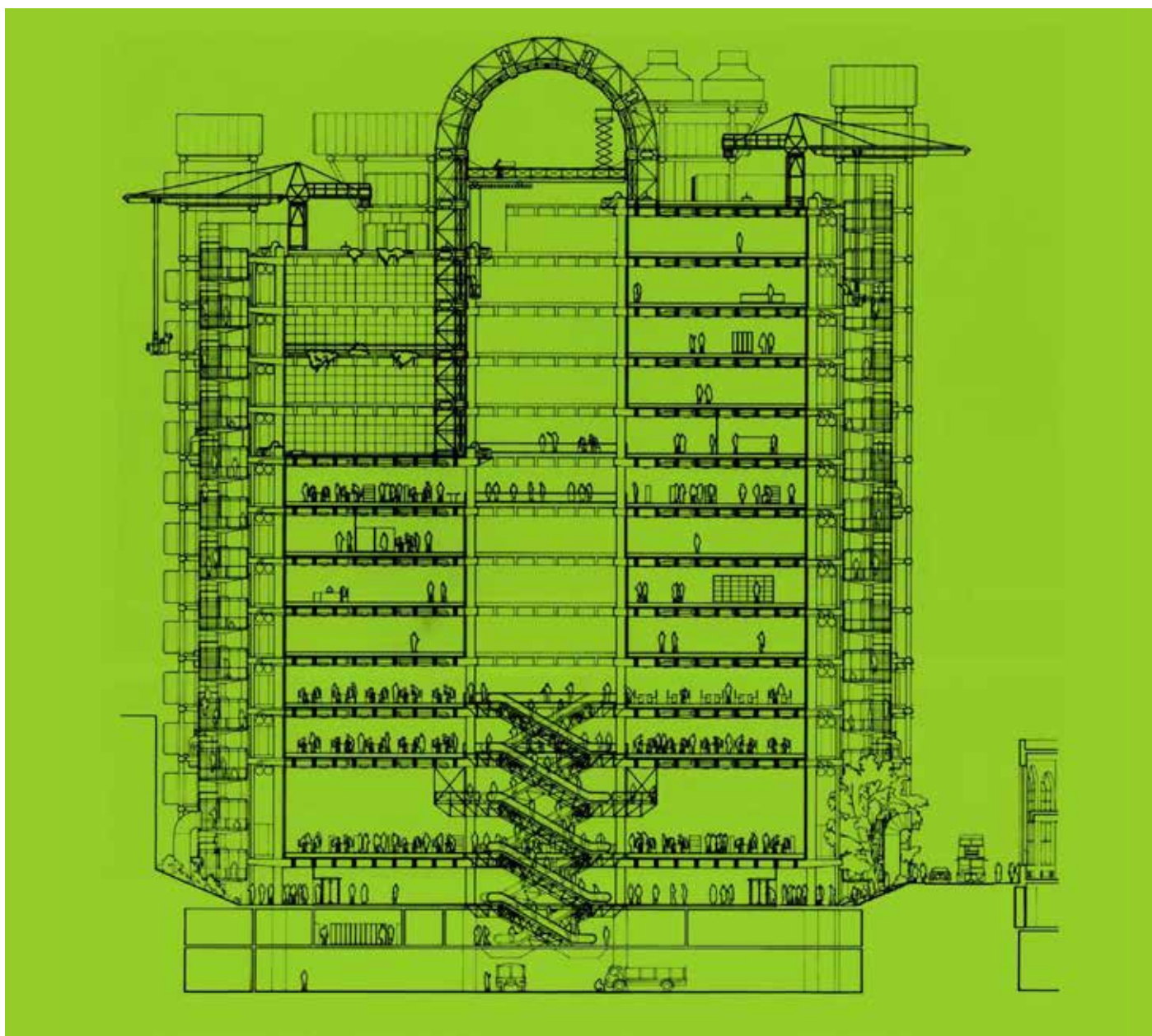
"It is totally immaterial whether you like it or not; ... because it hits you on the head, because it makes you think ..." was Nehru's comment on Chandigarh. The Centre Pompidou, a factory-like structure amidst the historic city centre of Paris had a similar impact when it was built and yet continues to.

This article shall discuss the architecture of Richard Rogers through 3 milestone projects; Beaubourg (1971-76), as the Centre Pompidou is called, Lloyds HQ, London, (1978-86) and Drawing Gallery at Chateau Lacoste, Provence (2021) his last project. His work draws on many avant-garde influences; the visual idiom of Russian Constructivists, the crafted details of Jean Prouvé and Mies, Buckminster Fuller's preoccupation with lightness, the neo futurism of Cedric Price, Archigram Yona Friedman, the organicity of the Japanese Metabolists, and the colours of Pop-art. Rogers' work along with his contemporaries Renzo Piano, co-author of the Centre Pompidou, and Norman Foster, was labelled as 'hi-tech'. However, a finer analysis reveals more than the

unfettered use of technology challenging established norms of buildability; it is an architecture of reinvention.

Contextuality: The Beaubourg competition rules required the new building to be inscribed in the ilot, the urban block, adhering to the street alignments of Paris. Instead, a building twice as tall on one side of the site created a parvis or open plaza that quickly became and remains the most animated public space in the city. The project is as much about the activity outside as the art and information inside. The built defies the formal integrity of Haussmann's Paris and the unbuilt is space for spontaneous animations and assembly. Metaphorically, it is the people reclaiming their space in the power centre.

The drawing gallery at the Chateau Lacoste is both, an isolated white exhibition gallery and a frame of the vineyards and picturesque ruins of villages on the hill across. The structure, an 8m wide and 27m long cantilever over the hillside of a vineyard in Provence, is minimal yet dramatic.



Section on the Central Atrium of the Lloyds Building
(Image courtesy: rshp.com)



The gallery projects out and frames views across the vineyard.
(Photo courtesy: James Reeve Dezeen)

Program: Roger's designs build upon a contemporary interpretation of the program. He stresses new values of transparency, flexibility, and indeterminacy. In Beaubourg, the intent to provide a re-modellable space led to a structural system for a multi-storeyed column-free floor plate of 150mX50m. The structural innovation supports a strong architectural intent. The project predicted the information age that we are now living in. At Lloyds, the space program is dissected for parts of it to be built in situ and significant other parts to be fabricated remotely and assembled at the site. The grand central atrium and its battery of escalators transformed the work culture of Lloyds which had outgrown 3 premises within the last century. Rogers' brief was to lead it well into the 21st. Rogers sought and recognised the contribution of Lloyds in formulating the vision of the project. He was among the few 'Starchitects' to seek partnerships and dialogues to enhance the project brief. A process he saw as necessary to address the increasing complexity of our institutions.

Movement and cinematics: Mechanisation and cinema are two of the most importantly new experiences of the 20th century. Both inspire Rogers and are an integral part of his architectural vision. Equipment like escalators, lifts, and cranes are elements of architecture to him. The flight of escalators on the façade of Beaubourg is iconic. So are the glass capsule lifts of the Lloyds Building. Both offer a unique cinematic discovery of the surrounding city as we rise. Conceptually and experientially, they reflect a truly contemporary understanding of architecture and its urban integration. The cranes crowning the Lloyds building project facilitate its maintenance and express the fact that the building continues to be a 'work in progress' after handover and occupation. This is a radical departure from the static permanence associated with architecture.

Modern classicism: Rogers's architecture is classical in its constructive logic and the way the structural system defines the spatial order, the served, and the serving. The elements of construction are elegantly crafted and essential to the architectural expression- like the gothic or the early renaissance. It is, however, devoid of any linguistic references to the classical; no symbols, ornamentation or decorative elements of the past find a place in his vocabulary. Rogers' architecture does not glorify anyone or anything other than the place, the people, and the updated purpose. It is deeply Modern; reasoned, secular, and republican. It is hardly surprising that the then Prince Charles was one of his most vocal critics.

The exchange between the architect and the prince is epic and archetypical of the ideological oppositions between a progressive and a conservative view of art or architecture and of the world. Rogers' book '*Architecture: A Modern View*' (1990-91) may be an attempt to explain his position. I would consider it essential reading for any young architect and not the least because it is written lucidly as a practicing architect, an identity Rogers claimed as his foremost. It places architecture as an act of construction for the spatial organisation of social activity and touches upon *inter-related themes: patronage and capitalism, Modernism, Post-modernism, and the future*. The book is refreshingly concise, honest, and critical of both architects and their patrons. Rogers cautions about the dangers of the loss of an ethical ground leading to

the global trends of 'form follows profits' or '¥€\$ is more' as Koolhaas coined later and the cultural inertness of romantic historicism. He is unequivocal about the need for human institutions to reinvent themselves to address the challenges of their era, sustainability being that of ours, and the role technology and ethics need to play therein. For Sir Richard Rogers architecture is an instrument for this reinvention. Its history is that of social and technical innovation and not of styles. He remains the quintessential modern humanist architect.

For further reference & reading:

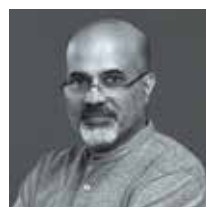
Architecture: A Modern View, Richard Rogers, London, 1990-91 ISBN 0500342938

Cities for a small planet, Richard Rogers, London, 1998 ISBN 0813335531

Richard Rogers Complete Works 3 volumes Set, Kenneth Powell, London, 1998 ISBN 0714848662

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Prof. Rohit Shinkre is a practicing architect, urbanist, researcher and educator based in Mumbai. His practice has over the past 25 years successfully delivered design and planning projects for very diverse users from communities and corporates to consular missions in India and overseas. He is Professor and former HoD at the Rachana Sansad's Academy of Architecture, Mumbai and a doctoral candidate at the Faculté d'Architecture La Cambre Horta, ULB, Belgium. His research interest is informality and urbanism. rohitshinkre@rsarchitects.net