



Q3 INFLUENCE: WORLD BUILDING

A REVIEW:  
“Truth and Lies in Architecture”  
by Richard Francis-Jones

DesignIntelligence®  
Quarterly



A REVIEW:  
“Truth and Lies in  
Architecture”  
by Richard Francis-Jones

Paul Finch

Programme Director, World Architecture Festival

Letters from London:

Paul Finch shares an examination of the veracity of world building

### Can We Recover What We Have Lost?

A cry of pain might be the best description of the most thoughtful book by an architect I have read for many years. Richard Francis-Jones’ “Truth and Lies in Architecture” (Oro Editions) is beautifully illustrated and produced; the quality of production is a counterpoint to the analysis of the dystopias we have created across the globe since the dawn of the Enlightenment. Our attacks on nature as a result of industrial production and carbon generation; our attacks on Indigenous communities as the inevitable consequence of colonialism; the development of regulation-free communications systems, which become complicit in the erosion of individual responsibility and local democracy; these are just a few of the frameworks within which the world of architecture operates — becoming either resistant or complicit.

The former prompts Francis-Jones’ call to arms:

*Architecture is at the heart of humanity’s attempts to physically order the world to support our idealised life, in resistance to the overriding natural slide to entropy. In accordance with the second law of thermodynamics, this essential natural process runs only in one direction,*



Cover image courtesy of Oro Editions. Book design by Alicia McCarthy.

*towards entropy, and is not reversible. Gradual and inevitable decay, decline and a return to earth is the destiny for us all. Architecture is an essential ally in our fight against this inevitable law of nature, the irreversibility of natural processes, and the asymmetry between the future and the past.*

This should not, he suggests, “deter the project of architecture. After all, it is how you lose, how gallant the search for the grail, how glorious the ultimate failure of our quest, that is the true source of our success.” Beneath the tone of appalled cynicism, you detect in this the heart and mind of a Romantic. If only we could ...

In fact, this author offers means by which architects can, as it were, fight their corner in a story that can only end in ruins.

One “resistance” proposition is the idea of permanence as result of “impregnable materials and everlasting form” — platforms of rock; trabeated forms based on post and lintel; use of stone, concrete and bronze. From the Parthenon to the Seagram building, the ambition is similar, though the suggestion that this form of architecture is “bulletproof and impregnable” looks unconvincing in the light of destruction efficiency as practiced by the Taliban or by Russia in Ukraine.

A very different form of resistance is described as “acquiescence and embrace” — comprising “a temporal architecture, wistfully accepting that nothing lasts and will be returned to nature,” or, alternatively, the world of the avant-garde, forever challenging latest orthodoxy (or fashion), whose inevitable end is “premature death because its very success depends on glorious early demise.”



---

This broader content is all about responsibility and environmental and social issues but occurs at a time when the authority and status of architects and architecture are themselves under increasing pressure, either to do more and do more quickly, or to do it in less time and with less consideration for sustainability factors.

Another approach to immunize architecture against time is endless reconstruction, preservation, freezing buildings in time. The problem here is that the “true purpose and meaning slipped through our fingers long ago.” Can identity ever simply

comprise the outward appearance of a shell “in all its illusory completeness”? No, but the general principle of layered reuse and transformation over time finds support from Francis-Jones — continuity outgunning the idea of permanence, “a respectful acceptance of change rather than frozen preservation or perennial reconstruction.”

An excellent architect in his own right, he is well aware of the increasing challenges faced by architects on a daily basis as they try to cope with the demands of clients, particularly of the speculative real estate variety, the immense amount of data that design and construction now involve, increasingly complex (though not necessarily effective) regulation bureaucracies, the insistence that designers work at speed and the inevitably slow process of obtaining permissions and actually building.

That is just the start of it, as architects try to address problems of climate change and inequalities in respect to class, race and gender. This broader content is all about responsibility and environmental and social issues but occurs at a time when the authority and status of architects and architecture are themselves under increasing pressure, either to do more and do more quickly, or to do it in less time and with less consideration for sustainability factors.

This leads Francis-Jones to a point where the possibility of architecture, as opposed to mere development or building, becomes increasingly difficult. Although he has personally designed first-class commercial buildings, he condemns the “tragic, ubiquitous, mechanically serviced glass office boxes of the 20th century” as not being architecture at all, deeming them incapable of being so because even if ticking every environmental standards box, they lack any poetic dimension and offer no “meaningful symbiosis.”

So, we are presented with a very well-written and well-argued polemic about the situation in which architecture, and indeed the world, finds itself. It sometimes reads as quasi post-Marxist rhetoric, conscious of the failures of totalitarian regimes, but worried that the apparent freedoms of “western” democracy are all too fragile — structures just as likely to be subverted, consciously or not, by the mega-media empires streaming their own versions of truth. (There is a good section on Orwell’s “1984.”)

The book was written before the invasion of Ukraine by a regime that not only lies as a matter of regular practice but controls its own media in a way that is unthinkable in the West. Such policy is possible because it is a state monopoly, with anyone trying to utter a contrary view, or simply report what is really happening, likely to be arrested and imprisoned.

For this reviewer, at least, there is no equivalence between that real version of “1984” and what the readers of this book can expect to be able to do: make up their own minds. World building on the basis of deliberate lies and the suppression of free spirits is being attempted by the two major dictatorships in the world, Russia and China. The half-suggestion of Francis-Jones, that we are no different in our illusory democracies, can be tested by viewing what is happening in Ukraine right now. Whose values do we support?

In reading the book, you might think it the manifesto of a pessimist. In a sense, that would be difficult to dispute. On the other hand, the author’s ongoing creative architectural work suggests that he not only believes in the redemptive potential of architecture, but is prepared to lead by example.

*Paul Finch is Programme Director of the World Architecture Festival (WAF). As a journalist since the early 1970s he has edited Building Design, Architects’ Journal and Architectural Review, where he launched WAF in 2008. He has been co-editor of Planning in London since 1994. He was a founder-commissioner and later chair at the UK government’s Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) where he chaired its design review programme, and its London Olympics design panel from 2005 to 2012. He holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Westminster and honorary fellowships from University College London and the Royal Institute of British Architects. He is an honorary member of the British Council for Offices and the Architectural Association. He was awarded an OBE for services to architecture in 2002.*