

The innovative Interview Alex de Rijke

In conjunction with **RIBA**
J

Alex de Rijke co-founded London-based practice dRMM in 1995 with Philip Marsh and Sadie Morgan. The firm is known for creating high-quality architecture that is innovative and socially useful and for championing the use of timber in modern architecture. Its best-known timber projects include the Kingsdale School Sports and Music building, Hastings Pier (which made inventive use of repurposed timber) and Maggie's Centre in Oldham, due to open this summer, the world's first hardwood CLT building made from a new form of engineered timber co-invented by dRMM. De Rijke was Dean of Architecture at the RCA from 2011 to 2015.

Alex de Rijke was a speaker at ARCHITECT@WORK in 2015.



What new materials are you researching and tracking?

We are preoccupied with making and testing new forms of CLT. Engineered timber is a broad family of different components and a fast-developing area so I definitely try to keep up to speed with all of that. The connections in particular are improving all the time. There are steel-free connections and invisible ones you can use inside the timber now that are less ugly and protected from fire.

Which architect living or dead would you like to sit next to at dinner and why?

Rudolph Schindler. He was a maverick who broke away from Frank Lloyd Wright's studio in order to develop his own timber-framed house-building techniques.

What is the one thing that would make your life as an architect more satisfying and that you would change if you could?

Having more clients who wanted timber buildings!

Is there a book (on architecture) that has had an impact on the way you work?

One that comes to mind is 'In praise of Shadows' by Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki. It talks about quality of light and how modern architecture is overly influenced by the west and there's far too much light, which means you lose the ability to distinguish between textures and qualities. I found that influential in thinking about light when designing. When do you need a lot of it and when don't you? Is it better to have contrast rather than everything bathed in masses of light? The atmosphere Tanizaki is talking about is perhaps what porcelain looks like in candlelight instead of an electric light bulb. Or the pleasure of going to an outside toilet in the dark and hearing the rain and seeing the moon as opposed to walking into a bathroom with a fluorescent strip light. It's a very poetic approach to the subject of light.

Which recently completed project has captured your attention?

I'm interested in the brick structures of an architect friend called Solano Benitez who works in Paraguay. He's doing very interesting things with brick. His thing is keeping costs low, not just because it is a poor country but because other resources are hard to come by. Brick can be made locally and he designs in a way that only requires unskilled labour. He does the most amazingly daring filigree brick structures that seem fly through the air in a way that's hard to believe.

You photograph all your buildings. Does that mean you are better able to represent your projects as you envisioned them?

Photography is what got me into architecture because again it's about how you use light and treat it as a material and manipulate it. At first I started documenting our work as a photographer in part, as you say, to present it as we intended it to be understood. Now I am older and wiser and I realize that architecture is hard to deliver and so many people have to be behind a project in order for it to be realized properly; it's a chain and if one link is broken it doesn't work out as planned. I also realize that the camera always lies! So now I have a more complicated relationship with photography but I still assiduously shoot all our projects. I always try to take the photos later when people are actually using the building. That's a lot more interesting.

words by Giovanna Dunmall

**ARCHITECT
@WORK**

UNITED KINGDOM
LONDON

register
online
using code
590



@ATW_INTL #ATWUK
www.architect-at-work.co.uk