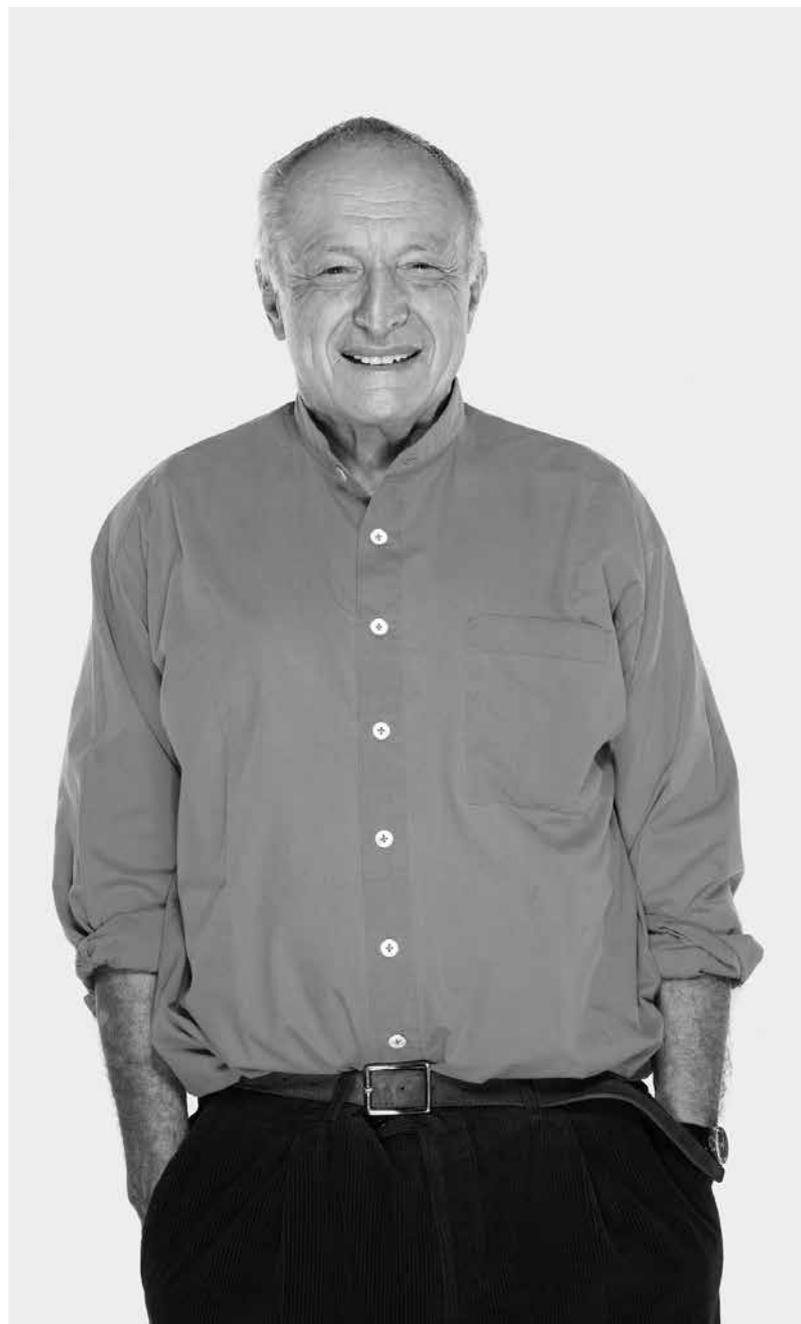


Richard Rogers: 1933–2021

Jeremy Melvin

The reputation of Richard Rogers (born 23 July 1933, died 18 December 2021) must be assured well into the future. Over the course of his career spanning around sixty years – from his earliest work to his retirement from the practice of Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, since renamed RSHP – he won most of the major awards available to architects, including the RIBA's Royal Gold Medal (1985) and the Pritzker Prize (2007) [1]. His firm twice won the Stirling Prize for the best building in a given year in the UK (2006 and 2009), a rare achievement. And his work has helped to shape major cities across the world including Paris, London, Tokyo, Sydney, New York, and Barcelona. In parallel to these conventional tokens of architectural success are his less appreciated achievements as a politician and public servant. Among these public roles, he was a member for the Labour Party of the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British parliament (which granted him the title of Lord Rogers of Riverside) from 1996 until 2021; he chaired the Urban Task Force established by the Labour Government under Prime Minister Tony Blair to recommend how to reverse urban decline in Britain, which reported in 1999; and between 2000 and 2009 he advised the first two mayors of London on design. He was also closely involved with numerous social causes and initiatives.

The parallel between the two strands of Rogers' career comes because many of the key moments of one relate to highlights of the other. The ideas that underpinned his architectural success sprang from the same sources as his political commitment. Indeed, so intertwined are these two streams



¹ Richard Rogers: 1933–2021.



2 The front elevation of The Pompidou Centre.

of his career that it is almost impossible to understand one without reference to the other.

A ringing statement in the competition entry for the Pompidou Centre – the project, designed with Renzo Piano, which brought Rogers' work to global prominence – that it should be 'a place for all people, something like Times Square and the British Museum' hints at the overlap between the architectural and the social in his thinking. Similar conditions could be found in numerous projects and initiatives, from the Bordeaux Law Courts and the Welsh Assembly, to the Urban Task Force's recommendations to reverse urban decline in Britain and the '100 Public Spaces' initiative that came from his work as the London mayor's advisor.

Few people – whether politicians or architects – have seen, in this way, the relationship between political activity (such as takes place in the House of Lords or any parliamentary chamber), the public realm (more or less co-terminal with public space, for Rogers) and the possibilities that individual works of architecture,

from homes to institutions, could offer to their occupants and inhabitants. Rogers conceived these different but necessarily interrelated phenomena as an almost seamless arc. Many architects share the same belief but very few have the wherewithal, intellectual and professional, to put it into reality. That Rogers was able to do so, I will argue here, depends on several sources and influences. They start with his background and early experience, more through his relationships and achievements as a young adult, through to the establishment of a stable practice with a constant flow of challenging projects on which to develop ideas and from which to draw fees, which in turn allowed him to dedicate a certain amount of his time to public and political action. His numerous writings and texts of lectures amount to an index of his evolving thought.

A biographical sketch

As with any other thinker, positions develop through an iterative process of nature and nurture. Born in Florence in 1933, Rogers' background had significant

cultural and intellectual constituents: his father was a doctor who became a specialist in chest conditions; his mother was a talented potter. As a young child he lived in an apartment with a view of Brunelleschi's dome. The broader family contained intellectuals, musicians, and architects, most notably his father's cousin Ernesto Rogers, a founder in the 1930s of the pioneering firm *Banfi Belgiojoso Peresutti and Rogers (BBPR)*. After the war, Ernesto was one of the leading intellectual forces in Italian architecture as editor of *Domus* and *Casabella*, and designer of the Torre Velasco in Milan. He reshaped modernist thinking in Italy to engage with the past, setting the scene for others such as Aldo Rossi. As a young man in the 1950s, Richard came to know Ernesto who shaped his interests in architecture.

The influences would have been nothing without intellect and ambition. Being dyslexic, Richard's intellectual abilities were easy to overlook at that time, particularly in the unrelentingly prescriptive English education system into

which he was thrown when the family left Italy in 1939. As late as the 1980s, the belief that all his panache and flair lacked an intellectual underpinning persisted. Rogers used to remember with some glee, how, when he was giving evidence in favour of the tower designed by Mies van der Rohe at the Mansion House Square inquiry, James Stirling, another witness, spotted the pile of papers Rogers was holding and remarked, 'I've never taken you for an intellectual.' Any lingering doubts were finally dispelled by the BBC Reith Lectures, *Cities for a Small Planet*, Rogers gave in 1995, also published as a book, which demonstrated both the significance of his themes and the quality of his thought.

The intellect was always there, but its lack of recognition fuelled Rogers' ambition. He remembered arriving in Britain in 1939 in one word: 'hell'. Cut off from Italian food, family, and other comforts of an *haute bourgeois* Florentine lifestyle, he was thrown into an English prep school with all the rituals and restrictions of that sort of institution at that time. Arbitrary discipline contributed to his growing sense of the importance of fairness in society. By the time he was a teenager his father had progressed from being a house doctor in a TB clinic (generally considered the lowest rung on the medical ladder, but the only job available to him as a refugee) to being a specialist in the nascent NHS. Many years later, Rogers recalled enthusiastically discussing the prospects for the NHS at this time with his father.

This brief sketch merely indicates how Rogers, by the time he came to study architecture in the 1950s after a stint of national service in the army (partly spent in Trieste, his mother's hometown), already had a series of formative influences that spanned across social and cultural experiences. The interrelationship between them set the pattern for how his thoughts would develop in architecture and public life. Rediscovering Italian urbanism as a young adult, he intuited how aesthetic and social experience could merge in the public realm.

Rogers progressed steadily through his architectural education at London's Architectural Association, only standing out among his peers in his fifth and final year. That gave

him enough momentum to win a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Yale in 1960. His first sight of New York from the harbour introduced him to a concept of modernity still lacking in the UK, and accompanying him were two people who would become very important influences: his wife Su Brumwell/Rogers and Norman Foster. While at Yale he and Su, an LSE graduate who studied urban planning, stayed with the sculptor Naum Gabo (a friend of her art collector parents), and with Foster they travelled across the US. Rogers particularly remembered their fascination with some of the vast industrial machinery that they encountered. Though thrilled by the sights, he understood such technology as a means rather than an end, something to extend human capabilities as well as a way of harnessing scientific progress to human benefit.

Fairness, technology, and the public realm

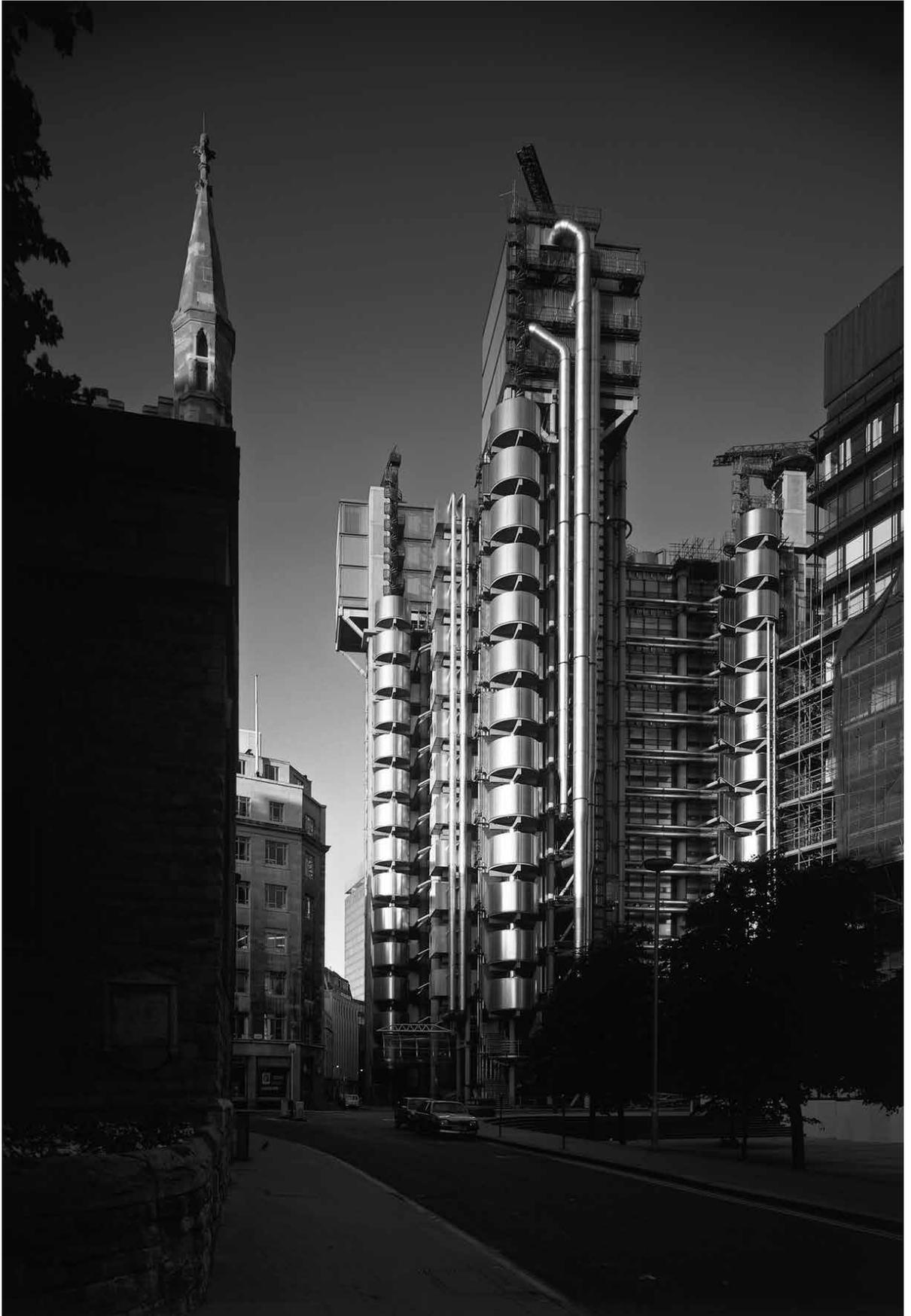
By the time Rogers returned to the UK from Yale, the seeds of his work in architectural practice and public life were already present. These included: fairness as a foundation of society; the role of the public realm in stimulating an inclusive social life; the importance of art; and the idea that technology could be harnessed to deliver a series of fair and stimulating social opportunities. He had also developed strong bonds with a small core of people who would be important collaborators early in his career: Su, Norman Foster, and the Cheeseman sisters, Georgie and Wendy. All would work together in Team 4, his first practice. Georgie was the only fully qualified architect in the initial stages and Wendy would become Foster's first wife.

Traces of these ideas are apparent in Team 4's work. The Creek Vein house, completed in 1966, was designed for Su's parents, who had a significant collection of modern art: they sold a Mondrian to pay for it. Its cost and time overruns also showed that conventional means of designing and procuring housing would probably not meet future need. More significant was the Reliance Controls factory, 1967, both for introducing an industrial aesthetic but even more importantly for beginning to reconfigure the hidebound industrial relations

that prevailed in the UK at the time, proposing that workers and managers would use the same entrance. Both Foster, for instance in his work for Fred Olsen, and Rogers in later factory designs, would pursue this further. For the latter, such an approach to industrial relations began to lead to another important theme, the investigation of the brief for potential to engineer change, as well as reinforcing his concept of fairness, and the importance of an inclusive public realm. Much later the idea of 'humanising the institution' would grow out of the same line of thought and is evident in the Bordeaux Law Courts, 1992, and the Welsh Assembly, 2006. At this stage though, the prime field for his endeavours remained in architecture rather than the public sphere.

His next major project after Reliance Controls, the Pompidou Centre, 1977, remains one of the single clearest statements in a particular project of the developing social ideas that would inform his subsequent public career [2]. Initially reluctant to enter a competition for what might have become a monument to a self-aggrandising politician, Rogers was won over by the persistence of his new partner Renzo Piano, of Ted Happold from Arups, and by his growing realisation that by a shrewd and imaginative interpretation of the brief, it offered an opportunity to show a wide spectrum of architectural possibilities and close to the full range of his interest in them.

The myriad achievements of the Pompidou are well known. For our purposes we might focus on one much cited but extremely important element, the structural connection known as the 'gerberette', for what it shows us about his working method. The concept called for a series of huge horizontal planes (floorplates) uninterrupted by columns (his personal notebooks record, in relation to one of the factories more or less contemporary with the Pompidou: 'the column is the enemy in the factory as it needs to jump and change [...]'). This posed a structural problem because the concept precluded arches and the span was longer than any reasonable truss could achieve. Peter Rice from Arups realised that, to fulfil the vision, the two forces that make up the 'bending' of the floor needed to be separated into



3, 4 The Lloyd's Building, viewed from St Mary Axe, and the trading floor.





5 Richard Rogers with Graham Stirk (left), and Ivan Harbour (right).

its two basic constituent forces of tension and compression that could then be channelled to the ground. The gerberette, in effect a short beam that spans from the edge of the floor slab, pivoting via a column to the outer filigree of tension members, is the device to do this. The column carries the compressive load while the gerberette carries the tensile forces to the outer filigree, whose delicate rods can carry it highly efficiently. This was much more than just an engineering masterstroke. It was an engineering masterstroke which resolved an architectural concept (the uninterrupted floorplates), conceiving of technology in service of an idea rather than as an end in itself. It was also achieved through the collaboration of individuals with different talents. And it plays a fundamental part in the appearance of the centre, especially from the piazza, stressing the lighter, outer layer while concealing the heavier compressive elements, while the zone defined by the gerberette's length becomes space for services and vertical circulation, mixing movement with colour and light.

The legendary film director Roberto Rossellini made a movie about the Pompidou Centre to record its completion and opening. In one sequence, the soundtrack consists of numerous messages on

the security guards' walkie-talkies as they prepare to open the doors for the first time to the crowds gathering in the piazza. When the doors finally open, people surge in to fill the vast empty spaces. Almost instantaneously, this was truly a 'place for all people', an affirmation of public life and of the part that culture plays in it.

Practice in the public realm

With the Pompidou Centre, Rogers became a force in world architecture. With Lloyds, the next significant project, he became a leading force in British architecture, just as the post-Second World War settlement was about to break down [3, 4]. In architecture, this settlement was expressed most clearly in the distinction between working for the public and private sectors (for example, Powell and Moya, Howell Killick, Partridge and Amis, and RMJM; or Gollins Melvin and Ward, Richard Seifert, and Elsom Pack and Roberts). Rogers indicated a completely new direction for architecture at Lloyds, remembers the painter Michael Craig Martin, just as the stale and formulaic standards of the time were breaking down, both from their inherent contradictions and external forces such as the speeches given by Prince Charles against modern architecture in the mid-1980s.

Rogers remembered, almost with awe, the report his colleague Marco Goldschmeid produced, setting out options for Lloyds that would help them meet their aim of commissioning a building to last into the next century. Lloyds also consolidated the Rogers practice. His leading colleagues Goldschmeid, John Young, Mike Davies, and Laurie Abbott had all worked with him since Team 4 days. Younger designers like Ivan Harbour and Graham Stirk were beginning to make their mark too [5]. Throughout the lifetime of the Lloyds project, they were wrestling with the structure of the practice, eventually coming up with a constitution designed to ensure that long-standing employees would have a share in the firm's success and achieve a reasonable degree of affluence. The constitution also prevented the firm undertaking certain types of work, for example prisons or military installations, and vested ownership in a trust rather than individuals. What it did was to achieve a stable organisation that attracted and retained talented people and which allowed it to grow with a generation of projects that followed Lloyds including: the European Court of Human Rights, 1995; Terminal 5 of London's Heathrow Airport, 2008; and two further buildings in the City of London, 88 Wood Street and Lloyds Register of Shipping, 1998 and 2001, respectively [6].

As the practice grew, the division of labour within it became more marked. Goldschmeid oversaw the finances and organisational issues with remarkable success, while Davies, Young, Abbott, and increasingly Stirk and Harbour took responsibility for the design and delivery of individual projects. Rogers himself assumed the role of introducer and animator of ideas, often not specifically architectural ones but which could be advanced in some way through architecture. This coincided with his increasingly public role, such as chairing the trustees of the Tate Gallery (where he oversaw the appointment of Nicholas Serota).

It was also during this period that a series of great polemical projects began to flow from the practice. Much of their agenda can be traced back to the ultimately unbuilt Coin Street Development on London's South Bank. It would have been a vast mixed-use commercially-led scheme – though

lacking housing – covering much of the area between the IBM building adjacent to the National Theatre and the Oxo Wharf. Rogers' notebooks of the time record how he tried to shape a social and urban agenda, including an intriguing page on the theme of the street. It is divided into two columns, one headed LK (Louis Kahn) and the other RR. Under various headings he attempted to calibrate and define his notion of a street against Kahn's.

Such thinking informed the Rogers entry for the first National Gallery extension competition of 1982, where the building was an almost incidental polemic in relation to the idea of connecting Leicester and Trafalgar Squares via a pedestrian tunnel leading under the road across the latter's northern side into the square itself. A tower contained a high-level restaurant while the new accommodation comprised temporary buildings within a frame, meeting the brief for commercial accommodation to pay for the gallery extension, but allowing for the gallery in due course to expand into and replace

those buildings. Most significant of these polemical projects was 'London as it could be' presented around a large model at the Royal Academy exhibition held in 1986 [7]. This vastly extended the pedestrianised area between the National Gallery and Coin Street, including the Thames Embankment with access to the river itself. It was a rallying cry for the importance of the public realm, long neglected in the UK.

As Rogers' public profile expanded alongside the social impact of his architectural work, he began to give major public lectures, which explained his thinking in another medium. These included 'Belief in the Future is Rooted in Memory of the Past' at the Royal Society of Arts in 1988, and 'Architecture: A Modern View', the Walter Neurath lecture for 1990. Both addressed the relationship between past and present, a theme that Ernesto Rogers had sewn into his thinking. The second lecture made a specific link between technology and aesthetics: 'The buildings of all epochs have celebrated the technology with which they were

built'; it is this relationship, he argued that obliges architects to embrace new technologies. But modernism added something new: 'the aim of the modern movement as to produce a democratic architecture', in part by using modern technology that makes it recognisable to the people for whom it is built. Incrementally, he was setting himself up in opposition to the powerful influence of Prince Charles.

Becoming advisor to the MP Mark Fisher, who would have had a significant government role had Labour won the 1992 General Election, gave Rogers a reason to make explicit what had long been germinating: the relationship between architectural and political thought. This resulted in the co-authored book *A New London*, which set out the deficiency of infrastructure and the public realm in London compared to continental cities – such as reviving Barcelona and Berlin – and proposals for transforming it, via planning and architectural infrastructure and 'enlightened' development.



6 Heathrow Terminal 5 check-in hall, 1988–2008.

The spatial dimensions of government

Rogers' 1995 Reith Lectures, 'Cities for a Small Planet', here marked another stage in taking his ideas out of architectural practice and into another medium. By then, urban masterplanning had become a significant part of the practice's work, for instance in London's Docklands [8], various locations in Italy and the Pudong district of Shanghai. The lectures confirmed what he had written in an *Architectural Design* monograph a decade earlier, that 'the architect's responsibility extends beyond the

client's responsibility into the public realm', recognising that architecture 'reflects our attitudes to society, equality, death, war, freedom and our personal and public values'. In the Reith Lectures, he made a cogent case for the need for imaginative urban planning to prevent what would be called, twenty-five years later, the 'climate emergency', and for the ameliorative and nurturing social benefits of a dynamic public realm. Around this time Rogers and his friend the legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin started visiting the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena to study Ambrogio Lorenzetti's paintings

depicting the Allegories of Good and Bad Government. The lawyer and architect had different emphases, but essentially agreed, Rogers remembered shortly after Dworkin's death, that quality of government had a spatial dimension.

These themes expanded into the debates held under his chairmanship of the Architecture Foundation in 1996, where many points about London were expressed, and then-Leader of the Opposition Tony Blair explicitly made the creation of a post of London mayor Labour Party policy. Rogers' peerage followed later in the same year. By the time he thus became an active politician many of his political positions were already formed. What had been lacking was the political structure to put his physical interventions into practice. Membership of the House of Lords, chairing the Urban Task Force and the role of Mayor's advisor filled that gap.

The Urban Task Force set out to investigate the causes of urban decline in Britain and to recommend how to reverse it, as well as how to meet the projected need for four million new homes, largely on brownfield sites. Under the rubric of 'people make cities but cities make citizens', there



7 Richard Rogers at the 'London As It Could Be' exhibition, 1986.



8 The Millennium Dome formed a key element of the masterplan for the Greenwich Peninsula, 1996–9.



9 The main entrance of the National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay, 1998–2005.

was a whiff of social engineering, but many of the conclusions of its report still seem prescient more than two decades after its publication in 1999. The report made explicit the need for a national urban design framework to ensure that brownfield rather than greenfield land would have priority for new development. It spoke of pyramids of density and, in particular, mixing uses as important factors in reversing urban decline, together with housing-led development and improvements to transport and infrastructure. It attempted to turn the thoughts of *Cities for a Small Planet*, essentially the idea that compact, liveable cities were essential for social and environmental reasons, into policy. A White Paper published in 2000, *Our Towns and Cities – The Future: Planning Policy Guidance 3: Housing*, enshrined much of the task force report into legislation.

As advisor to London's first directly-elected mayor Ken Livingstone for much of his tenure, and briefly to the second mayor Boris Johnson, he made significant contributions to planning on design and development. Explicitly he contributed to the 2004 London Plan and the one hundred spaces initiative, but his subliminal influence lay behind the later bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games and its planning, including the improvements to public transport and the so-called legacy.

Since taking his seat, Rogers was a regular attendee and fairly frequent speaker in House of Lords debates. Many of his contributions

were on subjects in which he had expertise, such as debates on: planning and compulsory purchase, 2004; architecture, 2008; urban regeneration, 2009; and national infrastructure, 2015. A more important measure of his influence was the frequency with which other peers from all parts of the political spectrum cited his work, in what were often wide-ranging debates informed by people with various types of relevant expertise.

While some of these policies have since been eroded, there is no doubt that Rogers played a significant part in planning policy and the framework for delivering it. But above all he remained an architect, albeit one with an unusually substantial ambition and frame of reference. And it is a work of architecture that most evocatively shows how he engaged architecture with politics. This is the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff Bay, completed as part of the Blair government's plans for devolution among the constituent nations of the UK. A series of three diagrammatic sketches drawn by Ivan Harbour, the partner responsible for designing and delivering the project, starts with three horizontal lines, the generic condition of water, land, and sky. The next diagram shows how the top line can become the roof, and the middle line broken into steps to represent different levels of floor. Finally, the sky deforms to create the distinctive funnels that connect the lower levels to the sky – and play a significant role in the building's environmental strategy,

which Harbour explains is still the most sustainable building that the partnership has completed twenty years on.

These three diagrams show how the generic elemental conditions of land, water, and air can be adapted through design interventions into a space for *demos*, where people can gather and their elected representatives debate and decide policy, aware of but not interfered by their voters. The first stage is for the public to gather under the oversailing roof, to ascend the outside stairs to enter the building, to rise to the upper level where they can look down on their politicians. In an echo of his 1988 Royal Society of Arts lecture 'Belief in the Future is Rooted in Memories of the Past', Rogers and his colleagues in the House of Lords are overseen, in effigy at least, by statues of the barons who imposed Magna Carta on a tyrannical king (and some of whose descendants still sit in the House). In Cardiff Bay, it is the living, real voters who look down on their politicians. Here, architecture does not just represent participative democracy and good governance, it actively encourages it [9].

Richard Rogers is survived by his wife Ruth Rogers and their son Roo Rogers (their adopted son Bo died in 2011), also his three sons with his first wife Su Rogers, Ben, Zad, and Ab.

Jeremy Melvin is an architectural historian and curator. He is curator of the World Architecture Festival and was consultant curator for the Royal Academy's architecture programme from 2000–14, where he curated the exhibition Richard Rogers: Inside Out in 2013. His books include one with the same title to accompany the exhibition, FRS Yorke and the Evolution of English Modernism (2003), and Dreaming the Impossible to Build the Extraordinary: The formative first year of architectural education (2021) co-authored with Frosso Pimenides, a colleague from The Bartlett School at UCL where he is a Visiting Professor.

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The author declares none.