

Jonathan Sergison

Interview CARTHA

Jonathan Sergison is a founding partner of Sergison Bates Architects. Since the beginning of his career in the mid 1990's, he has advocated for an architecture that prioritizes awareness of the place it stands on versus spectacularity and uniqueness, mediating with pre-existing conditions of a determined site while still being critical towards it. With twenty two years of professional practice and twenty five teaching, his voice becomes highly relevant when discussing conciliation in the context of architecture.

In your opinion What are the defining traces of contemporary society's identity? Either in a global or local context.

I was born in Great Britain and lived in London for most of my life. More recently, I have been living in Zurich. My view of the defining traits of contemporary society is therefore inevitably affected by my personal experiences and circumstances. In this sense I feel that European culture is founded on classical principles. Of course, these have also been widely exported through colonialism and Western cultural hegemony. But I am also fascinated by the traces of other cultures that endure as forms of resistance to the dominant cultural paradigm.

How do you position yourself towards these traces?

As an architect all that I do stems from an implied relationship to the canon of classicism. Nearly all the work we are involved in is located in Europe and we consciously engage with the numerous and often complex local traditions and cultural influences. If we take London as an example, we are dealing with a rich and culturally complex urban context, which has evolved historically as people of widely different backgrounds settled there. This has been the case throughout the long history of the city, but more so today: London is a truly global city with a very diverse population. The traces this leaves on the urban fabric are there to be read, and we find ourselves drawing upon them rather than denying their existence.

Is Architecture relevant to the building of the identity of a society? In which way? or Why not?

Architecture is always creating an image of and for society. The buildings and spaces of a city are central in the creation of the identity of society. The capacity of architecture to offer images that support the ambition of

totalitarian regimes is well documented. More recently the commissioning of buildings from well-known architects is seen by some as creating added value.

The city I currently live in, Zurich, bears no trace of such expressions of power and control, and offers an urban expression of principles of tolerance and collaboration. This is partly why I find it so agreeable.

Are you conscious of your role, as an architect, in the building of an architectural and social identity?

In my role as an architect I believe that the sum of all we have built in 22 years of practice represents a minute addition to the various European cities our projects have added to. However, because our projects have been widely published, I would acknowledge that our work has had a wider influence, although our position in architecture is a marginal one. I am happy with this. I do not believe that I could ever claim to build what would amount to the identity of a society.

The role I have had as a teacher has a much bigger influence, and involves a different form of responsibility. Over the last 25 years I have contributed to the education of many hundreds of students, who are now working as architects. While their interests and approaches may differ from my own, I hope that I have helped them to find their direction.

We would like to focus now on one of the four identity building processes from this cycle of CARTHA: Conciliation. Throughout your practice, the relation between a building and its site is a constant concern through the use of critical interpretation. Might this be a way, in the context of the contemporary European urban centers, to conciliate a meaningful architecture with the often contradictory values defined by economical and political interests?

The theme of ‘reconciliation’ is one that we often find ourselves addressing in our work, particularly in relation to the contemporary European city. A clear example of this approach can be found in the apartment building and crèche we realized in Geneva in 2011. In this project we consciously arranged the form and elements of the facades in a manner that interprets the character of the older neighbouring buildings that abut it – a nineteenth century school building and a retail and office building from the 1960s. The two buildings had an ambivalent relationship, which we aimed to reconcile, bridging the gap between them and incorporating them within a bigger urban ensemble. The Basel-based architect Roger Diener once said that ‘a place can be brought to order through the building of a single house’. I believe in this as an ambition.

Jonathan Sergison graduated from the Architectural Association School of Architecture in 1989 and gained professional experience working for David Chipperfield and Tony Fretton.

Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates founded Sergison Bates architects in London in 1996, and in 2010 a second studio was opened in Zurich Switzerland. Sergison Bates architects have built numerous projects worldwide and the practice has received many prizes and awards. The work of Sergison Bates architects has been extensively published.

Jonathan Sergison has taught at a number of schools of architecture, including the University of North London, the Architectural Association in London, was Visiting Professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale in Lausanne (EPFL), the Oslo School of Architecture and Design and the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Since 2008 he has been Professor of Design and Construction at the Accademia di Mendrisio, Switzerland.

He is particularly interested in urban questions and the conditions of the contemporary European city. More specifically he has addressed through writing, teaching and practice the role housing might play in this changing context.

He regularly writes and lectures, attends reviews in schools of architecture and is actively involved in commissions and competition juries.