

Between Chicago and the Paper Clip: The Architecture of John Ronan

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Book Review / REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

***Out of the Ordinary:
The Work of John Ronan Architects***

By John Ronan

With contributions by Carlos Jimenez,
Sean Keller and Clare Lyster

Barcelona: Actar, 2022

63/4 x 11/4 x 91/4 in. [17.15 x 3.18 x 23.5 cm]

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In spite of the numerous accolades, awards, AIA Fellowship and many publications, John Ronan has not received the recognition he fully deserves, as he is, in my view, one of the most talented architects of our time. Hopefully, this book, recently released by Actar in August 2022, will help disseminate the quality of his work and increase his visibility on the world stage.

The volume presents a selection of nineteen projects, built and unbuilt, by John Ronan Architects, dating from 2003 till 2021, and interspersed by six essays (four by Ronan himself and two by Sean Keller and Carlos Jimenez

respectively) and an interview to Ronan by Clare Lyster. It is therefore an easy and pleasant read with the text broken down into these short chapters on various themes and through different perspectives, while still offering much food for thought on how to approach and conduct (and succeed with) a reflective practice of this kind. A small practice, in fact, of never more than twenty people, which Ronan has kept as such purposefully so in order to both maintain control on the design process and remain “nimble and responsive,” which are qualities regarded by Ronan as necessary “to establish the very close client relationships [that only can afford] high quality work.”¹

The intention to keep control on the design process is already an indicator of Ronan’s *modus operandi*. From conceptual sketches to construction details, Ronan exercises the most profound and thorough application of design thinking at the various scales of design and vis-a-vis the different challenges (contextual, esthetic, functional, tectonic, environmental) that an architectural project inevitably poses. Carlos Jimenez in his essay has aptly commented:

Ronan sees architecture as an ethical, transformative endeavor committed to the larger construction of the city. Architecture is not a pageant of instantaneity for the whims of the market or a stage for the vanities of architects. Architecture is a site where optimism prevails, not only in the eloquence of its details, its materiality, its forms, its social contract, but also in its understanding of time as a radical construction.²

Such an approach is clearly displayed and made evident throughout the rich and articulated sequence of built works featured in the book: from the Gary Comer Youth Center (2004-06), to the Poetry Foundation (2007-11), the Chicago Loop office tower (2012-18), the Kaplan Center at IIT (2014-18), the Independence Library and Apartments (2017-19), to the recently inaugurated Chicago Park District Headquarters (2019-22) – all in Chicago (more on that later). Consistently so, the same thoughtful approach can be appreciated across some unbuilt projects featured in the book, such as: the intriguing refurbishment of the Old Post Office into a cemetery, or a municipal mausoleum (2003); the seminal competition entry for the Perth Amboy High School (2003-04) in New Jersey, which, in Ronan’s own words, put the firm “on the map” and indeed fed with design ideas later projects; the Obama Presidential Center (2016), unfortunately not chosen as the winning competition entry (the quality of the selected project by Williams and Tsien notwithstanding); and the sensitive museum addition to the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio complex (2018-22) in Oak Park, one of the suburbs of Chicago.

The graphic quality of the illustrations, in its well-balanced mix of sketches, diagrams, drawings and pictures of built works, does an excellent job

at unfolding the narrative of an architecture of absolute clarity as well as of formal and tectonic richness. Italian modernist architect and theorist Ernesto N. Rogers has famously elaborated on his view of architecture as “a function of utility and beauty.”³ Rarely, in recent times, we have had the fortune of appreciating the demonstration of that “formula” (which Rogers used to whimsically call “the magic formula of architecture”⁴) at the level displayed by Ronan’s architecture. The same level, one may surmise, offered by the “paper clip” (the *trombone*), an object that Ronan confesses he would have liked to have designed:

For me, this object embodies the essence of good design: it is a response to a functional need in which all the unnecessary elements have been stripped away, leaving only its essential parts in critical dialogue. ... Its elegant simplicity is the result of thoughtful, meaningful decisions executed with precision. It feels intuitively correct for its purpose and there is nothing casual or arbitrary about it. It neither strives to be noticed nor is it about self-expression, and it does not reference its author. ... The paper clip is the benchmark I use for good design, and its qualities and character are those that I strive to engender in my work.⁵



John Ronan Architects, The Poetry Foundation, Chicago (2007-11).

The qualities of the paper clip (including sheer beauty, by the way) are the same qualities, Ronan continues, that one, at the urban scale, is able to observe in Chicago, his city of election, where he decided to work as a practitioner and educator (at IIT) since 1992. Not surprisingly so, as Ronan's value system does align, in his own words, with Chicago's "cultural DNA" (or *ethos*, as I would call it). As Ronan acknowledges, "the architects who succeed here are those who 'crack the code' of this DNA and address the pragmatic but at the same time transcend it – like Mies van der Rohe, for example. (...) In a city as established as Chicago, the cultural context within which you work has a greater impact on you than you have on it." ⁶ The Midwestern pragmatism, no-nonsense attitude, matter-of-factness, a *penchant* for innovation, and the quintessentially modern *ethos* of Chicago has offered the right *milieu* to Ronan to develop his poetics: "I see Chicago as a laboratory in which the commonplace is transformed into the special, and the extraordinary is extracted from the ordinary. This is the architectural legacy and lineage I am honored to be a part of and the lens through which I view my work, searching for the transcendent within the ordinary. Occasionally, I succeed." ⁷ And succeed he does.

The design narrative mentioned above, displayed through a comprehensive set of images, is also complemented and made more robust in the book by Ronan's short commentaries introducing each project. One cannot avoid to remember Aldo Rossi's similar habit of accompanying the publication of his projects with short "project reports," which, indeed, were short essays on the art of architecture, clarifying, in the truest Modern spirit, the reasons behind each important design ideas.⁸ Rossi was obviously influenced by his mentor Ernesto N. Rogers, who famously wrote a short commentary on the Torre Velasca in Milan (designed with his partners at the BBPR) that remains one of the most poignant commentaries written by an architect on his own work.

Ronan's commentaries on his own projects are beautiful and most interesting insights into his design process and how he responded to the diverse challenges posed by each commission or design competition. They also help understand Ronan's cultural ethics: how he "reframes the question from 'what can I do?' to 'what should I do?'" ⁹ Posing that fundamental question is extremely important for every architect and designer, especially now, at a time when design tools and resources have expanded exponentially (including recent AI breakthroughs) the architect's creative capacity. That question, in my view, ties Ronan further to the legacy of Mies van der Rohe, another architect who found in Chicago the best *milieu* to develop his own poetics, who famously stated: "I don't want to be interesting, I want to be right." What emerges from this book is in the end the position of an architect who proposes a "thoughtful architecture with an intellectual grounding." ¹⁰ A position that, more than ever, we need to see, appreciate and celebrate.

Notes

1. John Ronan, "In Conversation," interview by Clare Lyster, in Ronan, *Out of the Ordinary*, 338-349 (345).
2. Carlos Jimenez, "Reflections on the Work of John Ronan," in Ronan, *Out of the Ordinary*, 250-254 (254).
3. Cfr. my recent book *Ernesto Nathan Rogers. The Modern Architect as Public Intellectual* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
4. *Ibid.*, 160.
5. John Ronan, "Out of the Ordinary," in Ronan, *Out of the Ordinary*, 4-7 (5).
6. Ronan, "In Conversation," 339.
7. Ronan, "Out of the Ordinary," 7.
8. Rossi's "project reports" were so intriguing, profound and fascinating, that they have been collected into a book on the occasion of a major retrospective of his works (*Aldo Rossi. L'architetto e le città*) held at the MAXXI museum in Rome in 2021: Aldo Rossi, *I miei progetti raccontati* [My projects narrated], ed. Alberto Ferlenga (Milan: Electa, 2020).
9. Ronan, "In Conversation," 344.
10. *Ibid.*, 346.



John Ronan Architects, Chicago Park District Headquarters, Chicago (2019-22).