**Interview with Eric Parry**

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**Abstract**

Eric Parry (RIBA, RA) gave a keynote at the “Architecture, Festival and the City”conference in November 2017. The following interview with Professor Christian Frost, co-organizer of the conference, is from February 2018. It develops some of the themes from Parry’s talk relating to practice, education and communicative space, but also explores other ideas and experiences that have shaped his architectural and intellectual practice.

**Key Words**

**architectural education, communicative space, festive space, materiality**

**Biographies**

**Eric Parry** studied architecture at the University of Newcastle, the Royal College of Art, and the Architectural Association as well as studying nomadic settlement in Iran. He established Eric Parry Architects 1983, the year Eric was appointed as a lecturer in architecture at the University of Cambridge, where he taught until 1997. In 2006 Eric Parry was elected Royal Academician (RA), one of the highest accolades for a practising architect or artist in the UK. His ability to work across many building types is underpinned by the intellectual rigour with which every project is approached. From the foundation of the practice Eric has been responsible for the design of all projects carried out by the office and is fully involved in every aspect of the practice’s work at all stages, leading the inception and development of the design and detailing of projects, and the direction of the project teams through the design development and delivery and under his leadership the practice has developed a reputation for delivering beautifully crafted and well-considered buildings. In addition to his work in architectural practice, Eric has held a number of eminent posts including President of the Architectural Association. He also currently serves on the Royal Academy Architecture Committee, the RIBA Library Committee, the Kettles Yard Committee and the Mayor’s Design Advisory Panel. He has in the past served on the Arts Council of England’s Visual Arts and Architecture panel and the RIBA Awards Group. His contribution to academia includes fourteen years as Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Cambridge and lectureships at the Graduate Design School, Harvard University and the Tokyo Institute of Technology. These periods of university work around the world have also resulted in several publications, most recently his book entitled Context: Architecture and Genius of Place where he uses lived examples of cities and architecture throughout the world to describe some of the most concrete aspects of urbanity and architecture: pavements, horizon, simultaneity, kinetics, and artifice.

**Christian Frost** qualified as an architect in 1990 following the completion of his studies at the University of Cambridge and has practiced in Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom. In 2009 he published *Time, Space and Order: The Making of Medieval Salisbury* (Peter Lang), and in 2014 was joint editor of *Bishop Robert* *Grosseteste and Lincoln Cathedral* (Ashgate). He is currently the Oscar Naddermier Professor of Architecture at the Birmingham School of Architecture and Design

***Figure captions:***

**Figure 1. 148 Bhuleshwar Road, Mumbai, 1986 (Photography by Martin Charles)**

**Figure 2. Eric Parry Architects, Fen Court, 2018 (Photography by Dirk Lindner)**

**Figure 3. Piazza della Minerva, Rome, 2014 (Photography by Dirk Lindner)**

**Christian Frost:** In a recent interview you discussed the year-long anthropological study in Iran you undertook before your RIBA Part 2. Do you see a link between your studies into how nomadic settlements create and re-appropriate space and contemporary performative arts, where space is used in different ways than originally intended?

**Eric Parry:** Yes, I think there’s no doubt that there are a number of overlaps, but I think it’s also worth stressing some of the differences too. It’s worth mentioning that soon after returning from that year abroad (1974-75), I became quite consumed by the work of theatre director Peter Brook who brought *The Ik* to the Roundhouse in London. It wasn’t just the re-appropriation of space but the intensification of the meaning of space and ritual that was shocking and wonderfully powerful. There were a number of performance arts groups who were around at the same time – the Inter-Action Centre by Cedric Price of course, but also one that I was involved in, a group called ActionSpace, and they led to a series of other groups. The groups were provocative in terms of performance in context and different territories and it was that awakening, and awakening from the assumptions of the everyday, that transformed what could be called normative space; I think that’s something that has continued to be interesting to me.

I think there is a relationship, but at the same time one has to remember that nomadic settlement is not a rudderless voyage but a seasonal metamorphosis of change. For instance, with the Iranian nomadic tribes it’s the journey between winter lowlands and summer uplands which determines a sense of place, and will be full of chance encounters (where a tent may be pitched, for example), but it’s the passage in search of animal husbandry and grass which determines why one moves. At the same time the changing nature of the relationship between indoor and outdoor is fascinating because it’s where the artefacts of living become the permanent fixtures and not the building, which puts greater emphasis on ritual. There’s something raw and illuminating in the way in which rituals, which may be to do with community, or seduction, or war, or trial, or the everyday such as weaving, are given a greater focus in the nomadic condition than in the permanent settlement.

When I took a group of Cambridge graduates to Mumbai to make a close survey and study of two urban settings, it was the physical and visceral nature of purificatory rites and the animate power that material holds that was like a punch to the emotional gut. It’s not something we are now used to in the west, where materiality has lost this direct intensity of meaning and presence.

<insert Figure 1 Mumbai image here>

**CF:** Were there any anthropologists you were particularly interested in during this period as well?

**EP:** Yes. I should emphasize that the two of us [architecture students] on the trip were ancillary to the anthropological studies that others were carrying out at the University of Shiraz*.* Yes, there were very important pieces of anthropological writing and figures in the study. In a more theoretical way than field studies involved in Shiraz and the Qashqai – the tribe we were with – there was an interest in Lévi-Strauss, Douglas and a series of figures who were working between the world of anthropology and social studies and were very important to me at that time.

**CF:** I believe your father spent quite some time as a doctor in that part of the world whilst you were growing up. Do you think you had experiences, in relation to some of these cities, as a child which mean you see cities in a different way to those who hadn’t had these experiences at a young age?

**EP:** That’s an interesting question. Undoubtedly. As a child going to the *souk* everyday, and having just outside our home the building of dhows from which, every year, pearl divers went out into the Persian Gulf and would carry out the extraordinary ritual of submerging into the water with rocks tied to their feet and spending minutes underwater … The medical issues stemmed from environmental stress; and particularly for the Bedouin, who had problems with diseases including lung and eye infections. These were some of issues he faced while establishing a complete Health Service. For me the distinguished figure of a Bedouin on a horse or camel with a gun and hawk began a deep-rooted interest in how their camps functioned and how people can deal with environmental extremes, with the perceived inhospitably of the desert and sea terrain.

Wherever I’m working, I find myself immediately heading towards the anthropology or ethnography museum – for example, the Peabody Museum in Harvard, where I’m currently teaching, has a fantastic collection of Native American artefacts. I find the tribal and native experience of the world incredibly precious and increasingly marginalized. I’ve always had an intense interest in the aspect of survival and a huge respect for their sophisticated understanding of dealing with nature and the sense of being in a territory that is far more fragile and more in touch with environmental issues. I indeed find that inspiring.

**CF:** During your architectural education you were close to the arts and landscape departments at Newcastle University and gained experience in different creative industries. … Do you feel this connection influences the way you approach design and clients you work with now? When you went to university was there another layer added to this anthropological tribal interest that you grew up with?

**EP:** Yes, definitely. Partly the chance of finding myself where I was, but partly by choice. I think there are many conditions for an architecture school to find itself in and many for it to thrive in. I do think the potential overlaps that come from having an architecture school and art school close to each other can be deeply resonant. For me, at Newcastle, the closeness to landscape as a subject in the School was not as strong an influence as the primal nature of the landscape itself that surrounds the city. The landscape was phenomenally informative and inspirational – be that the east coast, the shipbuilding world, the Tyne valley or the inner country landscapes.

At the same time, the art school was a powerful influence. My first encounter with Kurt Schwitters was his Merz Barn, which had been salvaged from decay and brought to the School of Art in Newcastle. You get a cycle of extraordinary teaching going on, from traditions such as lettering and stained glass to Richard Hamilton’s copy of Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*, which lead to overlaps and a richness that was available to the students. Alongside this, the chance for student friendships amidst the rebelliousness of the 1970s – where the frustrated art student was perhaps more prone to explosion that the architecture student – came together in what was sometimes a lively but hostile environment. I would also say I associate the liberal set of possibilities for free thinking and roaming with the art school.

**CF:** It’s interesting to look at the chapter headings for your recent book, *Context*; the titles – pavement, horizon, simultaneity, kinetic, artifice – all seem to imply that the way you are looking is based on the interaction between man and the landscape.[[1]](#endnote-1) Even the way you describe the landscape around Newcastle is resonant with the “leftovers” of what’s happened to the landscape through creation. Is there something in the way you look at a site or when you see architecture whereby you’re always intrigued by this interaction between the way it’s made and how it’s constantly remade by man’s activity in relation to it?

**EP:** I think that’s true. It’s fair to say that because of the way we have practiced and had a focus – in London in particular – it’s impossible to come to a site as a *tabula rasa*. We haven’t generally been involved in new town planning, but when we have undertaken that kind of work, and even in a landscape such as Granta Park in south Cambridgeshire, one would have to say that – although you assume you’re dealing with nature and something that is unpolluted – it was quite revealing to find how farming had left its mark in a very harmful way on aspects of the landscape. Indeed, you don’t have to go very much further back to discover the famous English landscape tradition knocking on the door, so even there there are residues of layers.

I think that idea of a stratigraphy is rather extraordinary, perhaps more so to the Australian and American mind, but it’s very much part of the European tradition of working and reworking a landscape. There is always a reflection or transformation of rebalancing and renewal to existing buildings and existing sites that provides a fertile ground for imaginative works. One can think of the successive campaigns of English cathedrals as a good example, or even a case study like Wimpole Hall – Soane’s intervention in particular, which was radical yet in some ways becomes part of the fabric. Alongside these, Nicholas Hawksmoor in various places, not least Westminster Abbey, and the work of David Chipperfield in Berlin, come to mind. This sense of rework and re-tilling a land or site is an interesting part of practice.

**CF:** I suppose this leads onto my next question: iteration and past experience are noted as key to your designs. Can you describe the processes undertaken when working with spaces that have *more* existing meaning / significance (such as St Martin-in-the-Fields)? How does this differ from the process when designing new buildings (such as 1 Undershaft) where there’s not so much context to work with. Or maybe it’s a different context, actually. I suppose I’m trying to tease out if there’s a difference in the way you approach the two projects or in fact if it’s just the information that emerges that is different?

**EP:** The needs are different in subtle ways. The archaeological work at St Martin-in-the-Fields casts the age of the site as of historic, sacred use, many centuries earlier than had been assumed, back to the 5th century AD. It was extraordinary to realize how explicit the roots were in areas. One then has to imagine it “in the fields” as a place which is suitably far from Whitehall, as a place appropriate for the burial of victims of the plague – making it a double-edged sword in terms of its positioning. As a Tudor building, it had a certain set of characteristics, and then was in disarray before the parish work of Gibbs. The thought of a huge Portland stone white temple set in the medieval fabric, albeit with a royal mews to one side, is a shock of the new that is refreshing, and people need reminding of it. In these iterations change is inevitable and not necessarily bad; you have the next “casting”by Nash and then our own interventions, and how they bring new perspective.

I think this comes with the question of use of space, the question of redefining the neighborly activity of things sometimes needs a radical readdressing which is both a social issue and an issue of program. If one thinks of Nash’s schools and the philanthropic gestured community, which had obviously become outdated, then becoming the home for “The Connection” at St Martin’s, it makes the role of the architect very interesting – making the change of certain social aspects of a project possible.

There were two homeless activities on the site; … the church dealt with the aged and youth populations of homeless by bringing them together into a new whole. The intention was always for a space underground linking all those parts, which created a new forum for the community, and shows exactly what possibilities can be conjured in the vocabulary of the architect and brought to the table. The ability to make things which might be unpalatable palatable, in terms of creating grounds for a future, is a very interesting case study of different uses being drawn together, making each part of the community speak for itself in a very important way.

# CF: What you are talking about here is interesting as part of the idea of the festival. The festival itself over a period of time displays the broader sense of the community coming together. My understanding of festival is that it’s a place of possibility, and in a sense that is what you are describing at St Martin-in-the-Fields. You make an opportunity for things to happen but can’t determine what they will be … and in a sense that’s what festival does as well.

If we shift this attitude over to the work in the City of London, have you discovered aspects of this in the work on the ground where most of that type of activity can happen, for example in the reopening of the street at 5 Aldermanbury Square – or 1 Undershaft, where both the ground and sky are open to more negotiable territories? Have you noticed a difference in the possibility to do this in the City when compared with St Martin-in-the-Fields?

**EP:** Over the short period of our practice there, I think one can say that the City is a fascinating urban condition because its apparent demand for space has led to a radical densification in the eastern cluster, which in itself is a curious landscape conception. I wonder what the ramifications of that are. When we started out with Aldermanbury Square there was interest in the interconnection [between Aldermanbury Square and Wood Street], and whether the building should conform … to the street or could be higher – … the other side of Wood Street is built to a regular cornice level. The conversation with the planners has always been interesting because there is a need to consider both density and also its consequent qualities for the public realm that is urgently understood to be necessary – especially places for relaxation – and that’s challenged by height, wind, air quality and light. There is the sense of a growing need and real possibility of creating public accessibility to upper levels [of commercial office buildings], and not just for “viewing.”

<Insert Figure 2 Fen Court Image Here>

The one-and-a-half year conversation as to the nature of the project which is now being completed at 10 Fenchurch Avenue, is similar. It originally started as a tower and a plaza, and it was then decided by the planners that it had to be an urban block building; … it was then a question of designing the horizons, and then thinking about penetrability and scaling of the block. The building at Aldermanbury Square was approaching eighteen storeys and the prospect of looking down at the sad sight of the roofscape of the City, which was purely air conditioning units – an arid landscape – was the light-bulb moment for suggesting the public gardens at Fenchurch Avenue which, when complete, will be public space on a new horizon at the mid-level between the street and the tall buildings. It’s a roofscape that will be looked down on by the tall buildings, but used by people from the street. I’m optimistic that both the demand for space and public realm are good examples of how an architect can seize the opportunity to row in the right direction for the public good with buildings that are assumed to have little room for interpretation in the developers brief, as is often the case with commercial buildings. I think using that opportunity is important, as every building has its site and contributes to the City. The City of London is fascinating – very different to the way in which taller buildings are happening in places like Frankfurt, where they work outside the constraints of the enshrining walls, and the axiality of La Défense, where everything happens in terms of horizons at heroic distances as a sequence of tall buildings along an axis. Those three places are so different in terms of their conception, let alone their urban vision, that they provide very different grounds for successful interventions in terms of the public realm.

**CF:** Your work is described as heavily context driven. Are there cases where the cultural context has been more of an influence than the physical surroundings, or are they equal drivers?

**EP:** Yes, in my view I find it very difficult to separate those two because it seems that context is associated with both a social-cultural and a physical condition. If one goes back to that idea of performance and criticality in architecture in whatever form it takes, context is a framework for social engagement which I think is an absolute. It’s impossible to divide one aspect or the other from the idea of context.

**CF:** I think that's interesting because it relates back to your earlier comment in the conversation about anthropological museums where the relationship between the indigenous populations, the culture and ritual is all a part of the same process – you can't understand the landscape without this knowledge, or vice versa. There appears to be a critical relationship between the anthropological, the cultural, and the physical landscape which all combine to form the setting. There's a continuity there that is perhaps very different to the way other architects choose to work, where a separation is perhaps more easily made.

I was reflecting on your description of Siza's work, the remaking of the “Carpet of the City” after the burning Lisbon, but I am also very aware that in Siza's work, whilst there are moments in which there is quite a striking materiality, there are also other moments where there is almost none. And that the carpet which you talk about in this work often only goes up to dado height and then it disappears into a world of form. Is that something that you are aware of in writing your piece about Siza, because I think it relates to this understanding of at what point, if at all, does your architectural sense separate the ideas already discussed from issues of materiality?[[2]](#endnote-2) Do you think that they can be considered separately?

**EP:** In the case of the “shadow” in Lisbon, there's probably a question which hasn't been answered about Siza's work more broadly – and that is its relationship with the landscape – and I think that there's something still to be unlocked: the instinct with the shadow to discover the locked-up passages that were there when he sketched the rubble following the earthquake. The reworking of the shadows was about finding a way through the debris and then proposing the rebuilding of the buildings in a way that was more porous than it had been before. He took incredible pains to reinstate the language of the historical fabric of the city to get the windows right for the projects he oversaw. I found that this process was different, and deferential. For Siza, it was the negative spaces rather than the architecture that was the most important thing. I think shadow stands out as a different sort of task than in many of his other projects, and one that I felt had not been broadcasted as much as it might’ve been.

**CF:** I suppose the issue is that one of the differences between a lot of your work and Siza's work is the material quality. Your work explores the materiality as well as the things which Siza is talking about in terms of landscaping and setting. I want to try and get your thoughts on how that process comes about. Is it something that comes out naturally in the process of discussing a project?

**EP:** No, it’s a bit more willful. When we were doing Antony Gormley's studio, for example, he was experimenting with the scale of the studio he had. On one hand, he had a project called “Tree,” to do with the branches blown down in one of the storms in the late 80s, which showed the figure with an extraordinary extended element that touched the edges of the new space. And then he started “Field,” which was the vast space of tiny terracotta figures. This meant that suddenly you have the juxtaposition of something like the full-size maquette of the knee of the “Angel of the North,” protruding between inside and outside of the studio space through doors we designed as large as we could, with elements figures of about 400mm high. You see with any of these artists that level of experimentation with making and scale which I find quite fascinating. It’s the work of the surfaces once seen that, I think, in some way, gets reimagined and understood at an architectural scale – whether it happens to be ceramics or metals or indeed stones. So I think there's something about scaling and sculpture, particularly sculptors working at a scale that is larger than human. Doors offer similar possibilities for architecture in the way they are conceived in terms of urban presence. I do find that very interesting. Each material comes with a set of interests and one completes a building in one set of tectonics and materials and then sees the possibilities of another.

**CF:** I wonder if we can relate that to what we were talking about in relation to your time at Newcastle, close to an art school where there was a sort of rebellion. As well as conforming, there was a rebelliousness, and the two go hand in hand – like in a festival. Maybe your work operates in a similar way. There’s a contextual clarity but also a challenge in the way that you use materials.

**EP:** I would hope that there is a time for the festive and there’s a time for the sober. I think it would be very impolite to be too festive or badly behaved in St. James’s Square, but Piccadilly is something different. Within the bounds of sanity, I think it’s possible to interrupt and reflect on where the appropriate use of materials may evoke a different emotion; and I think that it’s tricky territory because places change their identity. The West End and Westminster are completely different – intriguingly so – from the City of London. It is clear that shape, material and color can get completely out of hand, so I think it needs to be carefully defined. It’s when conversations with planners, communities in consultations all become rather important.

**CF:** Do you think your time as a teacher has affected who you are as a practitioner?

**EP:** Completely. The whole way in which the question of understanding what the “urban” means as a square or a street is founded upon the idea of what lies behind it or adjacent to it, and the simultaneity of the past – politically and culturally – that makes up conditions in the city. So the programmatic and social thinking that goes into an understanding of the narratives of the city is very important, and central to thinking in architectural education. The rehearsal offered in the studio through visiting and understanding different cultures, contexts and cities in terms of the debate about the meaning of space and what lies behind it, seems to me to be fundamental. My notes that I still have from back in 1977, from eight or so two-hour lectures that Kenneth Frampton gave on the European City, I still look back to as the most wonderful opening into a world of possibilities … I can’t think of a better way of bridging the gap between the two – practice and education – than with history and theory of great consequence. In my mind, this would be the ideal bridge between the world of school and practice.

**CF:** I understand that you’re teaching at Harvard now, but you’ve continued to write and that is obviously an important part of your work. At the conference in Birmingham your lecture was accompanied by a series of photographs by Dirk Lindner that come from your most recent book, *Context.* I’m interested in finding out how working with a photographer has helped frame or change some of the ways you’ve been thinking about things. Leading on from that I think both of you said that seeing the work on cities – particularly in relation to moving images [that were also presented at the conference] – had affected the[way you think about the work you’d both done so far. So, there’s a couple of questions there that primarily relate to the relationship you have with Dirk Lindner now and how that’s developing a strain of research to do with public space and activities to do with public space in the city.

**EP:** I couldn’t say what significance it has. It’s just the simple business of observing that is incredibly important, I think – to my own practice, anyway. For a long time, I kept sketchbooks which are about observation and travels. Observations of the everyday rather than the monumental seem to me to be interesting. The act of observation is important when you start to think about design because somewhere in that, thinking about how you inhabit space is very much a sense of scaling and thinking about appropriateness. The act of observing is important and, in writing, trying to articulate difference. I found it necessary to illustrate, and not just to make it a word picture, but to record that which is tangible. The tuned photographer’s eye can pick up so much in a frame! So it has been that, as an extension of the idea of observation, which has led to the work with Dirk. And there is a lot that hasn’t yet been processed.

<insert Figure 3. Piazza della Minerva Here>

**CF:** At the beginning of your keynote you used the term “communicative space” in terms of the full depth of how you look at space. Perhaps you could begin to sum up what you mean by that.

**EP:** I’m really thinking of it as the festival of the everyday rather than something which is then ritualized into moments in a season or a year … I’m fascinated by that – it is what makes a space, one that engages in dialogue, whether internalized or shared, or not … just the fantastic pleasure of the diurnal changes, seasonal changes of a space, which become a receptacle for community in some way, and a community that is very diverse! The more diverse, the better, but I think one must turn to great examples in those climates that are blessed with the warmth of evenings and where life goes on in the public realm. It’s ultimately to do with the representation of a political and cultural existence in different cities … When one thinks of the shades of formality and informality, that can’t be encapsulated in just one space. So probably there’s a sequence of spaces … within a city of merit, a convivial place where you will inevitably have some play-off between a secular and sacred, and political and individual world. Like a gallery space, [a public space] can become something which is too big (too big to accommodate paintings on walls either side). There’s a human scale to public space that is important, and what that is obviously dependent on the rituals it frames. There’s something about scaling, a modesty without being too monumental and that’s going to allow enough participants to play around in a space to make it communicative. There’s a magic in the divining of the scales of space, the task of making cities and towns rather than just architecture.

**CF:** That’s interesting because when you started talking you referred to the festival of everyday life rather apologetically; but I think that this is also a part of the festival. The “Architecture, Festival and the City”conference was set up to try and understand what festival is, how festivals are recognized, and when they come closer to the sense of ritual you have also referred to. I think the understanding of festival I’m coming to – partly because of many of the discussions which were had at the conference – is that the festival is always the festival of everyday life, it’s just heightened normality. And it’s this reality which is both confirmed and often challenged within the festival. The prevailing order is often inverted not for its own sake but rather to allow the proper order to return. I think this has some resonance with the communicative space you were discussing because it suggests that you could have a space that hosts the festival, and is, therefore, communicative of the festival but also communicative of the absence of the festival when it is not there. It talks about the absence and presence of the festival resulting in an extraordinary tension you feel in a great public space. So, I think it’s interesting that one could associate your use of communicative space with festive space. Do you think communicative space could also be labelled festive space?

EP: I think it could.

1. Eric Parry, *Context* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Parry, 17–31. The section of Chapter 1: Pavements, cited here introduces the themes discussed by Eric Parry, such as ‘shadows’ in relation to Siza’s project following the earthquake in Lisbon. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)