

THE RIAI + ARCHITECTURE IRELAND FUTURE AWARD

Stephen Foley Architects

Emma Gilleece interviews Stephen Foley, the winner of the RIAI and AI Future Award 2017.



Winner of the RIAI and
AI Future Award 2017

Stephen, congratulations on your success.

What is architectural practice for you?

It's a dynamic relationship between the architect and the social and economic structures in which he/she works. It's a kind of conversation with physical and cultural contexts.

What are the main differences and similarities between practising architecture in Ireland and in Spain?

I think the first thing I noticed in Spain was that architectural offices, even well-known ones, were much smaller than I expected, even though they built very large projects. In Spain there are far too many architects for the amount of work that needs to be done so the fees and wages are very low. It's incredibly competitive both in academic circles and professional practice.

Many of your cultural projects feature ephemeral architecture. What draws you to the challenge of designing temporary structures?

I think pavilions and public space interventions are types of projects that young studios starting out have access to. During the recession there were a lot of empty building sites all over Spain, and not a lot of money, so in order for people to continue enjoying the city, temporary, low-budget projects were designed by young offices like ourselves as a consequence.

Again your master's thesis touches on the topic of the validity of buildings with your focus on unfinished works. Is interrogating people's idea of what architecture is a big part of your research?

I really just wanted to write about these unfinished buildings that I started seeing all over the place, even in the city centre. I worked straight through the recession but it did affect me in a big way and these structures were huge physical manifestations of it. In Robert Smithson's *Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, he describes construction sites as 'Ruins in Reverse'; I found that very interesting. All of these construction sites in 2008/9 stopped and became instant ruins and I took that as a starting point for what I wanted to write about.

You titled your entry for the RIAI Future Award *Identity, Technology, Collaboration*. Explain how these words relate to your practice.

Identity - Like most offices, we try to find the thing that makes each project special and enhance that quality to give the project an identity. In my previous office I worked on a series of cultural centres and religious buildings where a strong cultural identity was embedded in each building.

Technology - Apart from practical issues and communication, technology has played a big part in the realisation and assembly of our projects. For example, in Avondale, to create the twisting joint for the wood panelling along a conical surface, we needed to create a parametric model to produce 2d drawings we could give to the cladding subcontractor. In Eastbourne each structural node is unique, but we were able to output the coordinates of each diagonal brace from the 3d model, punching and numbering each structural element using a CNC router.

Collaboration - Again, collaboration makes the practice possible. My own main built experience is in public buildings and, as a practice, we aspire to continue working on these projects. This makes collaboration with other offices and consultants essential.

What is your favourite project to date?

I'm not sure it counts as a project but I think the Architectural Association Visiting School in Barcelona has definitely been the most enjoyable to be involved in.

How would you like to see your practice evolve?

At the moment we have two joint ventures with very talented young offices. I would like to take that to the next stage and develop a small practice network to be able to evolve and keep working on the things we enjoy.

Year SFAA was Founded | 2013

Education | BArch from DIT in 2006, Masters from School of Architecture Madrid (ETSAM) 2013

Design heroes | Enric Miralles. His work is the main reason why I moved to Spain in 2007.